America’s Most Beloved Poet
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born on February 27, 1807 in Portland, Maine to Stephen and Zilpah Longfellow. He was their second child in what was soon to be a family of eight children.

All who knew him found Henry to have a “lively imagination,” as well as a thirst for learning. At the young age of three years old he was already well on his way to learning his alphabet. When he was five years old, his parents sent him to the Portland Academy, the private institution where his older brother, Stephen, enrolled also. As was the custom for the time, the two brothers focused most of their studies on languages and literature. Always a writer at heart, when Henry wasn’t in school he would plan elaborate writing projects with his childhood friend, William Browne.

At the age of fourteen, Henry passed the entrance exam for Maine’s first college, Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. He and his brother Stephen enrolled at the same time, although due to Henry’s young age they both remained in Portland for their first year. Henry loved studying at Bowdoin. One of the greatest opportunities that the college offered him was their literary club which he belonged to. The club exposed him to several people who had the same love for literature as he himself had.

One person in Henry’s life who was not so enthusiastic about a career in literature was his father, a prominent Portland lawyer. Stephen made it known that he would be most pleased if Henry abandoned his whimsical dreams and pursued his father’s footsteps in law, and throughout Henry’s life this would be a point of friction between the two. Upon graduating from Bowdoin College in the famous class of 1825, Henry was offered a professorship in the brand new modern languages department at Bowdoin. Henry accepted the offer, finding a way to make a profitable career out of his love for languages. In some ways, however, Henry accepted the job more to appease his father than to please himself, and this would come back to haunt him as he tried year after year to like teaching.

Henry, being only eighteen years old, was not yet qualified for the job, and the college required him to travel around Europe to study languages for a few years. Henry greatly enjoyed his travels, and he returned to Bowdoin in 1839, ready to begin his professorship.

Shortly after returning, he met Mary Storer Potter, whom he began courting and soon married in 1831. He and Mary were quite happy together, although Henry was
growing impatient with other aspects of his life. He felt that Bowdoin was not allowing him to make use of all that he learned in his four years spent overseas, and so when Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, offered him a similar, but higher paying job, he accepted it immediately.

Again, he was required to travel in Europe to enhance his knowledge of languages, and, despite her reluctance, he brought his wife with him. Tragically, Mary suffered a miscarriage during their travels. She fell very ill, and never recovered, eventually dying in Rotterdam.

Broken-hearted, Henry continued to trudge through Europe in order to fulfill his duty to Harvard. A few months later, while in Switzerland, Henry met Frances (“Fanny”) Appleton, a woman from Boston who was traveling with her family. He only spent a short time with her, but her spirit was instantly burned into his memory, and he returned to Cambridge thinking of when she would also return to Boston.

In 1830, Henry began his career at Harvard University. He was instantly well liked, and was in “the Five of Clubs,” a small group of academic colleagues including Charles Sumner, the abolitionist who soon became Henry’s dear, life-long friend.

While he was living in Cambridge, Henry rented rooms in a beautiful mansion known as the Craigie house. Soon after he began teaching, the Appletons returned, and Henry attempted to court the young woman he had fallen in love with overseas. Fanny, however, who was turned off by his forward and blunt manner of courting, remained cold towards Henry for years. Meanwhile, his writing career was beginning to flourish. He was publishing several works and critics were beginning to notice the man who would become so famous.

None of this could make Henry happy, however, if the woman he loved did not feel the same for him. Without much warning, Henry received a letter on May 10, 1843 from Fanny with her consent to marry the man who had been courting her for so long. Henry was ecstatic, and they were married on July 13 that same year.

As a wedding present, Fanny’s father bought the Craigie house for Henry and Fanny to live in. The couple loved the elaborate house, and no later than June 9, 1844, a newborn son arrived to make it feel even more like home. His name was Charles, and he would grow up to have one brother, Ernest, and four sisters, Fanny (who died in infancy), Alice, Edith, and Anne Allegra. Henry loved his children very much, and they would come to be the most important part of his life.

Despite his apparent happiness at home, Henry was struggling yet again with his career. He was having a hard time writing much of anything, and he had little patience for his professorship. Finally, in 1854, he resigned from Harvard University to fully devote his time to writing. He was so established at that point that it was a feasible option, even with five children to support.

Sadly, Henry’s happy life writing at home was soon to be tragically altered by the sudden death of his beloved wife, Fanny. One hot summer day in 1861, while she was sealing little packages containing locks of their children’s hair with sealing wax, Fanny’s dress caught on fire. She ran into the next room where Henry was, and although he tried desperately to put out the fire, she died of severe burns early the next morning. Henry himself was so scarred from the burns he received on his face that he could no longer bear to shave and thus grew the beard that we so readily picture him with.

Henry was devastated by his wife’s death and he spent many months in seclusion at the Craigie home. However, in 1862 he began the long process of translating Italian poet Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* into
English, and the epic poem’s tale of salvation and enduring love helped him to go on with his life and his writing. He spent the last years of his life with his family, who always remained most dear to him. When he died at the age of seventy-five years on March 22, 1882, he left behind him the legacy of “America’s Most Beloved Poet.” To this day, Longfellow’s words capture the emotions and aspirations within us all.

**Henry’s Home:**

**The Wadsworth-Longfellow House**

Seated in the middle of bustling downtown Portland, Maine, the Wadsworth-Longfellow House sits as a tribute to one of America’s favorite “fireside poets.” Built in 1785-1786, the house served as a home for three generations of the Wadsworths and the Longfellows until 1901, when it was donated to the Maine Historical Society as a museum. Treasures from the poet’s childhood remain there today.

In 1784, Peleg Wadsworth, Henry’s grandfather, first built a store on his newly acquired land in Portland, and then later built the house in 1785. He made an impressive statement by building the first wholly brick home in Portland. The house was built in a Georgian style of architecture, which accounts for its symmetrical layout.

In 1815, a fire in the chimney burned the roof of the Wadsworth-Longfellow House. By this time, the house was no longer one of the most stately in Portland; larger, more elegant homes were constantly being built. To compensate for its lost grandeur, the family added a third level to the home during the damage repairs. This addition not only provided more space for the growing family, but it also gave the house a much more Federal feel, as was quite fashionable for the period.

The house was soon to go through several more alterations, both in style and function. In order to remain congruous with the new Federal appearance, the window and door moldings were altered to look more Federal. New technological advancements were also appearing in the house, such as a hot air furnace and an intricate bell system that remains in the house today.

Anne Longfellow Pierce, who was born three years after her brother Henry, moved back into the house after her husband’s early death in 1835. It remained her home until, upon her death in 1901, she donated the house to the Maine Historical Society. Anne had preserved her family home, making very few changes to what she always referred to as, “The Old Original. Despite technological advances in home convenience, Anne never modernized the lighting or plumbing systems in the home. She did, however, do some interior decorating, including changing the carpets and the wallpaper.

The house, which is now open for tours by the Maine Historical Society, has been refurbished to represent the house as it looked during the peak of Henry’s career in the mid-nineteenth century. Most of the furnishings are original to the house and the famous family that resided there for so many years. Visiting the house provides an opportunity to learn about one of the greatest American poets as well as life in mid-nineteenth century New England.