

HAPPY 200TH BIRTHDAY, HENRY

Looking For Portland's Past

by Martha White

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Don't look in Longfellow Square for the childhood home of Portland's most famous poet. Look instead near Monument Square, formerly Market Square, for the Wadsworth Longfellow House, located at 485 Congress Street. It is also the home of the Maine Historical Society and has been since the beginning of this century, when Anne Longfellow Pierce, one of the poet's sisters, bequeathed the house to them when she died in 1901. The gift came with the conditions the Historical Society build a library on the premises, remain there for at least 50 years, and keep the lower front rooms furnished with Wadsworth-Longfellow belongings. All this, and more, they have done.

The parlor of the Wadsworth Longfellow House near Portland's Monument Square tells the tale. Six Longfellows, including Anne, were born here; five (also including Anne) died here; two were engaged here, but died before they were married; and two were married here. The biggest parlor in the city when the house was first built in 1785, the room contains one of eight open fireplaces and held the city's first spinet. Here Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's father, Stephen Longfellow, cast his first courtly glances not at the poet's mother, Zilpah, but at her sister, Elizabeth Wadsworth, to whom he became engaged. Elizabeth died of consumption, as her older sister Zilpah and Stephen Longfellow sat at her side. During the illness, her bed was moved into the parlor.

If not for Elizabeth's tuberculosis, Zilpah and Stephen might not have had their eight children, including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and we might never have had *The Song of Hiawatha* or *Paul Revere's Ride* or *The Courtship of Miles Standish*. Generations of young children would have missed *The Children's Hour* and

I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where

as well as,

There was a little girl,
Who had a little curl,
Right in the middle of her
forehead...

And winter carolers everywhere would not have sung the words to the hymn, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," written by Henry W. Longfellow during the Civil War and promising, "The wrong shall fail, The right shall prevail, with peace on earth, and good will to men."



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Responding to Longfellow is a partnership of the Maine Historical Society; Maine's Poet Laureate; and the Stonecoast MFA Program at the University of Southern Maine. For more information, please visit www.hwlongfellow.org



On New Year's Day in 1804, two years after Elizabeth's death, Stephen Longfellow and Zilpah Wadsworth were married in that same parlor. They lived in the house with her family for a year, then moved out before their first son Stephen was born. On February 27, 1807, Henry was born in another house at the corner of Fore and Hancock Street, that of his father's sister, Abigail, who had married a Capt. Samuel Stephenson. (That house at 161 Fore Street, Longfellow's actual birthplace, was destroyed in 1955 to make way for business expansion.) Before his first birthday, however, Henry was back in the Wadsworth Longfellow House and it was here that he grew up and resided off and on, for about 35 years.

When Henry Longfellow's maternal grandparents, the former Elizabeth Artlett and General Peleg Wadsworth, first came to build their home in Portland, you could stand on Back Street (now Congress Street) and see the harbor in one direction and the White Mountains, beyond Back Cove, in another. The General had come with the Massachusetts militia to fight in the Revolution against the British at Castine in 1779. His troops were soundly rebuffed but Wadsworth remained on the Maine coast, based in Camden. Two years later, he was captured in Camden and imprisoned at Fort George in Castine. He managed to escape within four months. Evidently, the experience didn't sour him on the area; within four years the General was making his home in Portland.

General Wadsworth had bricks brought in from Philadelphia to build the house, the first all-brick building in Portland. A misjudgement in the number of bricks needed stalled construction at the first-floor level until a second load of bricks arrived by sailing ship in 1786. The walls were 16 inches thick and the original building was two stories, with a steep gabled roof. Henry's mother, Zilpah, was about eight when her parents and their six children occupied the house. A sampler she stitched at about that time hangs on one of the walls there today.

The year Henry was born, 1807, turned out to be a difficult year for Portland. The prosperous seaport had grown to handle 39,000 tons of shipping, up dramatically from the 5,000 tons less than two decades earlier. Lumber and barrel stock were shipped in great quantities to the West Indies and huge loads of molasses came back. The Portland Observatory was being built on Munjoy Hill. Wives of sea captains could watch the Observatory tower for the ship's flags to be flown, indicating a homecoming vessel. But then President Jefferson and Congress passed the Embargo Act., forbidding ships to leave U.S. ports in order to prevent further impressment of U.S. seamen during the Napoleonic Wars. As a result, once busy wharves were abandoned, the Portland Bank failed, and soup kitchens sprung up to help the city's needy. Many of the beautiful sea captain's houses that had been built for around \$20,000 had to be vacated and sold for a fifth of that price. It was over a year before the Embargo Act was repealed, but by then the damage to fortunes had been done.

Henry's father, Stephen Longfellow, was a prosperous lawyer, however, the son of a judge, and grandson of a Portland schoolmaster. He later became a state senator and, like his father-in-law Peleg, a congressman. If Wadsworth and Longfellow bought their furniture locally, rather than from New York as other prominent Portland families did, it was probably more a statement of their local allegiances rather than a signal of any financial distress.



Above the parlor, in the parlor chamber on the second floor, was Henry's parents bedroom. A canopy bed they purchased in 1808, for twenty-five dollars, thirty-seven and one half cents, still stands there. (In comparison, a receipt from Dr. Shirley Irving, for attending at Henry's birth, billed the Longfellows only five dollars.) Like many of the pieces of furniture original to the house, the master bed was built locally by the Radford Brothers. Other pieces, in birds-eye maple and various ornate and inlaid veneers, also came from the Radfords.

Fire repeatedly plagued the Longfellows. A fire in the kitchen chimney burned the roof of the house in 1814, four years after the poet's sister Anne (donor of the house) was born. Henry's father decided to enlarge and update the house the house by adding a third floor, changing its architectural style from late Colonial to early Federal. The additional rooms became bedrooms occupied by the boys and their Aunt Lucia, Zilpah's sister, who lived with them until she died at the age of 81.

Upstairs, a child's school desk, heavily carved and worn, tells of early writing efforts. A window casing in a third floor room, once bedroom to various boys, is inscribed with bits of poetry marking magnificent sunsets. A very handsom, portable writing desk, hinged to fold closed over the blotter, and complete with brass letter opener and other writing accoutrements, stands by one of the first floor windows.

Henry's first published poem, *The Battle of Lovell's Pond*, was written from this house when he was thirteen. The story was probably told to him by his grandfather, General Wadsworth, who enjoyed recounting tales of the Revolution. It was published in the *Portland Gazette* much to the surprise of his family. The historical nature of the poem foreshadowed Longfellow's later, ardent desire to create a new American literature that would stand apart from more European influences.

Henry also wrote *The Rainy Day* from this house, on one of his return visits in 1841. It is a poem of sadness, memories of the past and dashed hopes. His first wife, a Portland girl named Mary Potter, had died of a miscarriage after only four years of marriage, leaving no heirs. And Henry was several years into a rocky courtship of Frances Appleton of Boston, who had rejected his first offer of marriage.

Frances finally accepted his proposal and they lived in the Craigie House near Harvard College, where he taught. Together, Henry and Frances had six children, a happy time for the poet and one that prompted some of his more reflective poems. In *Children* he concluded of the young ones that:

Ye are better than all the ballads
That were ever sung or said
For ye are living poems
And all the rest are dead.

The great Portland fire of July 4, 1866 just missed the Wadsworth Longfellow House. The fire began, possibly with a firecracker, at a boatyard on Commercial Street. From there it spread to a lumberyard, John Brown's Sugarhouse, and on to Back Cove and Munjoy Hill. Before it was done, it had destroyed over \$6 million in property, a quarter of the city's assessed value. Ten thousand people





were left homeless, but, miraculously, only two lives were lost.

"I've been in Portland since the fire," Longfellow wrote. "Desolation! Desolation! Desolation! It reminds me of Pompeii, the 'sepult' city' ". The visit prompted Henry to give \$200 to its victims who were living in temporary tents and eating from soup kitchens.

Portland's Wadsworth Longfellow House was spared, however, and Henry's sister Anne continued to live at the family home until she died. Her husband, George Washington Pierce, was a friend and Bowdoin classmate of the poet's, and studied law with Anne's father, Stephen Longfellow. George died after only three years of marriage, leaving no children, and it was then that she moved back home. Altogether, she resided there 87 years, all but three years of her life. When she left the house to the Maine Historical Society in 1901, she gave the first permanent quarters to the third oldest historical society in the country and helped prepare the way for its library.

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