

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow portrait by C. G. Thompson, 1840.
Left: The Longfellow house today.

The Vassall-Craigie-Longfellow House

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once wrote that “all houses wherein men have lived and died are haunted houses. . . .” If we could summon the ghosts of the Vassall-Craigie-Longfellow House, we would see men and women who have given shape and substance to our world. For two centuries this was a family home, but it was also a celebrated gathering place for singers and soldiers, politicians and poets. Its story encompasses America’s fight for independence, the efforts to create a national identity through literature, and the endeavors by one family to preserve and share the treasures of many nations.

In 1843, when Longfellow and his bride Fanny Appleton became the owners of 105 Brattle Street in Cambridge, they were already well-acquainted with its illustrious history. The Georgian-style mansion overlooking the Charles River was built in 1759 for John Vassall, a merchant and ardent loyalist. The house stood among other magnificent estates belonging to British sympathizers, and the Vassalls enjoyed its comforts until they were forced to flee to England in 1774 on the eve of the American Revolution.

In July 1775 General George Washington arrived in Cambridge to take command of the fledgling Continental Army, which was laying siege to British-occupied Boston. He chose the large and strategically located Vassall house as his headquarters. Here Washington welcomed his wife Martha to their first wartime home, received dignitaries and fellow patriots, plotted strategy with his generals, and celebrated the evacuation of the British army from Boston in March 1776.

Andrew Craigie, the nation’s first Apothecary General, and his wife Elizabeth bought the house in 1791 and set about increasing its size

and grandeur. Lavish living at “Castle Craigie,” as it was known, plunged the couple into debt, and Elizabeth was forced to take in boarders after her husband died. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a young Harvard professor and up-and-coming poet, began renting two rooms in 1837. “They were once George Washington’s chambers,” he marveled to a friend. The house again became a social center, this time for Longfellow’s circle of friends and colleagues.

In July 1843 Longfellow married Fanny Appleton. Her father Nathan Appleton, a wealthy textile manufacturer, presented Castle Craigie to the couple as a wedding gift. The Longfellows thrived in the stimulating environment of Cambridge. Henry left his teaching



The parlor is the most elegant room in the house and was used as a drawing room by both Martha Washington and Fanny Longfellow.



“Lady Washington’s Arrival at Headquarters, Cambridge” by Howard Pyle, 1896.

position at Harvard to devote full time to writing and scholarship. Fanny was a gracious hostess and perceptive critic of art and literature who shared in her husband’s many activities. Throughout their lives the Longfellows and their five children—Charles, Ernest, Alice, Edith, and Anne—cherished their piece of tangible history. They filled their days with learning and their home with evidence of travels, personal interests, and intellectual pursuits.

In 1913 the Longfellow House Trust was established by the children of Henry and Fanny Longfellow to preserve their family home and open it to the public. The site was donated to the National Park Service in 1972. We invite you to explore this extraordinary house and to meet the people whose indelible spirits remain.

*Once, ah, once, within these walls,
One whom memory oft recalls,
The Father of his Country, dwelt.
And yonder meadows broad and damp
The fires of the besieging camp
Encircled with a burning belt.*

—from *To a Child* by Henry W. Longfellow, 1845

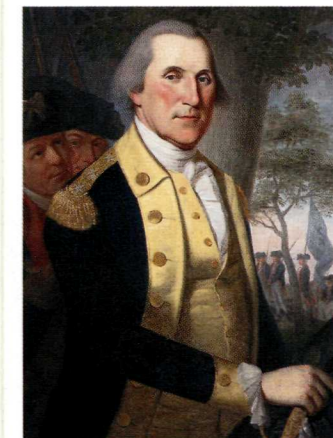
Washington’s Home and Headquarters

Even at the height of his fame, Longfellow never felt slighted when visitors came to his door asking to see “Washington’s Headquarters.” He took pride in the legendary status of his house. Decisions and alliances were made here that would ultimately lead to freedom from Great Britain and the beginnings of the new nation.

George Washington took command of the Continental Army in July 1775, shortly after the first shots of the Revolution were fired. When he arrived in Cambridge to set up his headquarters, he faced a bleak prospect. The mostly young and inexperienced army of nearly 20,000 officers and militiamen had no tents, blankets, or gunpowder, and lacked many other necessary

supplies. Smallpox and dysentery raged through the encampment. Winter brought New England’s bitter cold. “The reflection on my situation and that of my army produces many an unhappy hour when all around me are wrapped in sleep,” Washington wrote. “I have often thought how much happier I should have been if . . . I had taken my musket upon my shoulder and entered the ranks.”

Washington and his officers were determined to get matters on course and met frequently in the room that later became Longfellow’s study. Washington was also busy consulting with a long list of friends and dignitaries including Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Benedict Arnold, and the chiefs of several American Indian tribes. Celebrated African American poet Phillis Wheatley was invited to visit after Washington received inspiring verse from her.



George Washington portrait by James Peale, ca. 1787–1790.

In December 1775 Martha Washington joined her husband after a grueling trip from their home at Mount Vernon. Her arrival with her son, daughter-in-law, and a large domestic staff helped to soften the harshness of life at headquarters. The Washingtons celebrated their 17th wedding anniversary here with a gala party in the handsomely appointed parlor.

The House through the Years

1759 Built in Georgian style for Maj. John Vassall Jr. Vassall family occupies house until 1774.

1775–76 Home and headquarters of Gen. George Washington, commander of the Continental Army.

1791–1819 Estate of Andrew and Elizabeth Craigie. Andrew dies in 1819.

1819–41 Boarding house owned by Elizabeth Craigie; Henry W. Longfellow rents rooms 1837–43.

1843–1882 Home of Henry and Fanny Longfellow and family. Fanny dies in 1861; Henry in 1882.

1882–1950 House continues to be occupied by daughter Alice Longfellow and other family members.

1883 Longfellow Park is created on family property as a public park and memorial to Henry W. Longfellow.

1913 Longfellow House Trust is established by surviving children. House opens to public in the 1920s.

1972 Longfellow National Historic Site is established as an area of the National Park System.

All that is best in the great poets of all countries is not what is national in them, but what is universal.

—Henry W. Longfellow, 1849

Longfellow in his study, ca. 1876.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Poet and Scholar

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow achieved much in his long life, but he was first and foremost a writer. “I most eagerly aspire after future eminence in literature,” he told his father in 1824, “my whole soul burns most ardently for it. . . .” Longfellow went on to be one of America’s most celebrated poets, offering the young nation heroes and stories of mythic shape and dimension.

Longfellow was born in 1807 in Portland, Maine, the second son of a prominent lawyer and grandson of Gen. Peleg Wadsworth, a hero of the American Revolution. After graduating from Bowdoin College he traveled in Europe immersing himself in its languages, literature, and history. “To my youthful imagination,” he said, “the Old World was a kind of Holy Land.” A speaker of eight languages, Henry spent his early career teaching language and literature at Bowdoin and Harvard colleges. In 1839 his first collection of poetry was published. The popular *Voices of the Night* included “A Psalm of Life” reprinted in newspapers across America.

Henry’s congenial marriage and social life in Cambridge allowed his creativity to flourish. He retired from teaching in 1854 to devote himself fully to writing and was soon enormously successful. Longfellow was the nation’s first professional poet and gained an international reputation. His poetry collections were translated into dozens of languages and became instant bestsellers at home and abroad—enjoyed by laborers and scholars alike. Longfellow received honorary degrees from Oxford and Cambridge universities in

England and was honored in Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey. Composers Franz Liszt and Felix Mendelssohn set his works to music.

As a teacher and scholar Longfellow was familiar with heroic themes in classical literature. His own characters and stories in epic poems like “Evangeline” and “The Song of Hiawatha” were larger than life and have been thoroughly absorbed in American culture. In “Paul Revere’s Ride” the poet turns a virtually unknown Boston silversmith into an icon on par with the founding fathers. After his wife’s death in a household fire in 1861, Longfellow

took on the monumental task of translating Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. He found consolation in this epic tale of salvation and enduring love. With friends and colleagues he founded the Dante Club, which met Wednesday evenings in his study for conversation and supper.

“I should have to think long if I were ask’d to name the man who has done more . . . for America,” said poet Walt Whitman after learning of Longfellow’s death in 1882. It was a fitting tribute to the man who moved the world with words and spoke the language of his country’s heart and history.

*All are architects of Fate,
Working in these walls of Time;
Some with massive deeds and great,
Some with ornaments of rhyme.*

—from “The Builders” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1849



The spacious library held musical performances and other social gatherings.

The World Within This House

Henry and Fanny Longfellow’s cosmopolitan and hospitable style made their home a vibrant place. They enjoyed formal meals with friends and family, good conversation, and the occasional musical performance in the library. Henry’s growing fame brought a widening range of visitors to his door, from perfect strangers to the famous—and infamous.

Notable guests included writers Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Anthony Trollope, and Julia Ward Howe. At breakfast one morning was Charles Dickens, here on his first trip to the United States. Teacher and scientist Louis Agassiz came often to visit, and Emperor Dom Pedro II of Brazil met both Longfellow and Emerson here while traveling in New England. Singers, actors, and musicians made a pilgrimage to Cambridge, among them the “Swedish Nightingale” Jenny Lind and stage actress Fanny Kemble. One of Henry’s last visitors was playwright Oscar Wilde. “Longfellow was himself a beautiful poem,” recalled the flamboyant Englishman.

Born in the wake of the American Revolution, Longfellow witnessed the momentous events of the 19th century: westward expansion, the social and political turmoil surrounding slavery, and the Civil War. These were subjects for his poetry and conversation.

Charles Sumner, the fiery abolitionist and legislator, was a frequent guest and fanned the flames of Henry’s anti-slavery beliefs. Other members of this influential circle were James Russell Lowell and William Dean

*We have decided to let
Father purchase this
grand old mansion if he
will . . . how noble an inheritance this is where
Washington dwelt in
every room.*

—Fanny Appleton Longfellow to
Thomas Gold Appleton, 1843



Henry and Fanny Longfellow and sons Charles and Ernest, ca. 1849.

Howells—editors of the durable *Atlantic Monthly* founded in 1857 as a platform for public opinion.

Guests sooner or later found themselves immersed in family life. With five children, a large staff of servants, and numerous pets, the Longfellow home was far more than a shrine to the past or scholarly ivory tower. Henry and Fanny’s children were full participants in the world within the house—and grew up to embrace the world at large.

The Legacy Endures

Over the years, the furnishings of the house came to match its splendid history. Every painting, photograph, book, artifact, and piece of furniture seems to tell its own distinctive story—and the diaries and documents of the Longfel-

low family bring these stories to life. Altogether there are 35,000 items of furnishing and decorative arts, a fine arts collection of paintings and sculpture by American and European artists, a 14,000-volume library, and 775,000 archival items, including photographs, journals, and original documents written by George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and others.

Daughter Alice Longfellow lived in the house until her death in 1928 and carried on her family’s interests in history and education. Under her stewardship the house and its furnishings were preserved for future generations to enjoy. The formal garden became known as a work of landscape architecture in the colonial revival style.

Bronze copy of “Mercury” statue by Giovanni de Bologna (ca. 1850).

Planning Your Visit

The house is open seasonally for guided tours from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday. The grounds are open from dawn to dusk year-round. Special events and activities are offered throughout the year. Call or visit the park’s website for current hours of operation and program listings. Tour tickets and publications are available in the house visitor center. An admission fee is charged for persons age 16 and older.

Getting to the Park The park is located at 105 Brattle Street in Cambridge, Mass., within walking distance of Harvard Square. You are strongly encouraged to use public transportation. No on-site parking is available other than handicap spaces. Metered parking spaces may be available nearby; parking garages are located in Harvard Square.

Public transportation: Via the MBTA Subway, take the Red Line to Harvard Square. Exit station on Church Street and follow Church Street to Brattle Street. Turn right onto Brattle Street and go past Mason Street. The house will be on your right.

Accessibility Limited parking is available for visitors with disabilities. The grounds, carriage house, visitor center, and first floor of the Longfellow House are wheelchair-accessible. Watch out for busy traffic on neighborhood streets.

House Built in 1759, the house is a premier example of mid-Georgian architecture. With its preserved view of the Charles

River, it is considered the best of the remaining “Tory Row” (as it was known) mansions on Brattle Street. Items reflecting the Longfellow family’s wide-ranging interests and pursuits—furniture, artworks, books, ceramics, textiles, and archives—are displayed or stored inside.

Grounds The two-acre landscape is the core of the much larger 1759 estate. Many Colonial-era features are still evident. The formal garden with its dramatic pergola was renovated in the early 20th century by landscape architects Martha Brookes Hutcheson and Ellen Biddle Shipman.

Carriage House Longfellow had this structure built in 1844. Carriages, sleighs, and sometimes horses were kept inside. Today it is used as a meeting space for education programs and public lectures and workshops.

For Inquiring Minds The house and its contents, the grounds, and the archives together tell the story of the Vassall-Craigie-Longfellow House. For further exploration and study, research-



Formal garden with pergola.

ers are encouraged to contact the site for information or to schedule an appointment.

More Information Longfellow National Historic Site is one of more than 380 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America’s communities, visit www.nps.gov.

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