

This Day in History... December 17, 1807

Birth of John Greenleaf Whittier

John Greenleaf Whittier was born on December 17, 1807, at his family's rural homestead in Haverhill, Massachusetts.

Whittier grew up on his family's farm, which saw frequent visitors over the years. The farm wasn't very profitable and only provided the family with enough to sustain their lives. Whittier suffered from poor health from the time he was a child and never really enjoyed the hard labor of farm life.

Though he received little formal education, Whittier loved to read, and would read his father's six books on Quakerism over and over. This had a major impact on his life as he adopted many of the religion's principles, especially humanitarianism, compassion, and social responsibility.

In 1826, Whittier's sister sent one of his poems to the Newburyport *Free Press* without him knowing. The paper's editor, William Lloyd Garrison, saw his potential and published the poem, "The Exile's Departure" that June. Garrison and another local newspaper editor then pushed Whittier to attend the newly opened Haverhill Academy. To afford tuition, Whittier worked as a shoemaker. He then worked out a deal with the school to pay a portion of his tuition with food grown at his family's farm. Whittier also worked briefly as a teacher to provide for his education.

After just two terms at Haverhill, Whittier graduated and then took a job at Garrison's temperance paper, the *National Philanthropist*. Over the next few years, he worked for several papers, spoke out against President Andrew Jackson, and published his poem, "The Song of the Vermonters, 1779" which was mistakenly attributed to Ethan Allen for 60 years.

Whittier briefly explored a political career, but lost his congressional election and returned home. Then in 1833, Garrison recruited Whittier to join the abolitionist cause. That same year, Whittier published his first antislavery pamphlet, *Justice and Expediency*. The pamphlet ended any further chances he had in politics but began his 20-year crusade. During this time, Whittier helped found the American Anti-Slavery Society and signed the Anti-Slavery Declaration of 1833, an event he believed was the most important of his entire life.

In the coming years, Whittier was a vocal abolitionist. He met with anti-slavery congressmen and recruited them for the cause. He also traveled throughout the North delivering speeches and meeting with politicians. Not all of his experiences were good, however. On some occasions, he was attacked, stoned, and run out of town. But he was committed to the cause. In addition to his travels and lobbying, Whittier continued to write, both for antislavery newspapers and poetry. Most of his poems from this period focused on slavery.

"The Song of the Vermonters, 1779" is also known as "The Green Mountaineer."

As the 1830s grew to a close, Whittier and Garrison no longer saw eye to eye. Garrison refused to participate in American politics, believing that doing so meant supporting the "pro-slavery, war-sanctioning Constitution of the United States," which he called a "covenant with death" and an "agreement with Hell." Whittier believed that legislative change was necessary in order to make real progress, however. So Whittier became a founding member of the Liberty Party and tried, unsuccessfully, to get fellow writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to join him.

In 1845, Whittier wrote an essay, "The Black Man," which included the story of John Fountain, a free African American man who was sent to jail in Virginia after helping slaves escape. Fountain was eventually released and went on a speaking tour where he frequently thanked Whittier for sharing his story.

By this point in his life, Whittier was under immense stress, from his editorial work, failing health, and mob attacks. He decided to return home to Amesbury, marking the end of his active abolition

campaigning. He continued to work for the Liberty Party from home, by encouraging them to advocate other issues, eventually becoming the Free Soil Party. Without the added stresses of travel and attacks, Whittier produced some of his best abolitionist poetry, drawing on emotions rather than logic.

After the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed slavery in 1865, Whittier began to explore other themes in his poetry. He was one of the founding contributors to the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine and published one of his most popular works, *Snow-Bound*, in 1866.

Whittier continued to write throughout his final years, living in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. He enjoyed an exciting 70th birthday celebration in 1877, attended by fellow writers Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Mark Twain. In fact, his birthday that year was described as "without doubt the most notable that has ever been seen in this country within four walls" because of the large number of notable writers present. He

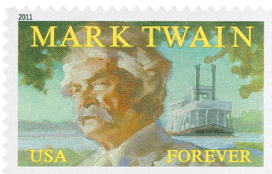
wrote his final poem in 1892, a tribute to Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. before his death on September 7, 1892.



From the Famous American Poets issue



Stamp issued for the 75th anniversary of the 13 Amendment.



At Whittier's 70th birthday celebration, Twain delivered a poorly received story

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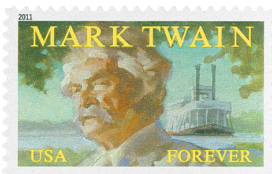
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