

## Longfellow reads for Longfellow Bicentennial

By Carole LaMond  
GateHouse Media

"We are here tonight to honor a man who was called the 'Poet of the People,'" said Layne Longfellow, a distant relative of the poet. "He was the most popular poet in the world."

In his time, poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow achieved such popular success, both in the United States and abroad, that by the end of his life his birthday was even being celebrated in schools.

On Feb. 27, the 200th anniversary of Longfellow's birth, the Wayside Inn, the Friends of the Longfellow House in Cambridge and the Friends of the Houghton Library at Harvard hosted a birthday party for America's most beloved poet.

The Wayside Inn was closed to the public for a private party for the first time in its recent history, according to Fred Pryor, president of the inn's board of trustees, for the dinner which featured music, poetry, historical interpreters and tributes to Longfellow.

Generations who memorized his poems as schoolchildren, or eagerly anticipated each new work, recited those same verses fondly for years to come.

Two years after his death in 1882, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow became the first American poet whose bust was placed in the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey in London, England where his books also set publishing records.



Layne Longfellow

**Layne Longfellow, whose CD of 18 of Longfellow's poems with musical accompaniment is one of the best-selling items in the inn gift shop, read poems throughout the evening, from the poet's humorous writings - including a discourse on**

**wine and another on the merits of bread and butter - to "The Fire of Drift-Wood" and "The Children's Hour."**

"So many of his phrases became part of the lexicon: 'ships that pass in the night,' 'the patter of little feet,' 'into each life some rain must fall' are all from his poems," said Layne Longfellow. "He was conversant in 12 languages, and was the first American translator of Dante's 'Divine Comedy.'"

Longfellow was born in Portland, Maine on Feb. 27, 1807, attended Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine and eventually accepted a Modern Languages professorship at Harvard University. One of the most popular and commercially successful poets of his time, some of his longer works are "Hiawatha," "Evangeline" and "Tales of a Wayside Inn" which includes the well-known "Midnight Ride of Paul Revere."

Longfellow visited the Wayside Inn in 1862, still grieving the death of his beloved wife, Fanny, who died when her dress caught fire at their Cambridge home a year earlier. Three of Longfellow's friends had been summer guests at the inn and he used their recollections of the inn's "stairways worn, and crazy doors, and creaking and uneven floors, and chimneys huge, and tiled and tall" as the setting for their tales told before a roaring fire.

The inn had closed in 1861, but Longfellow's verse was so popular it helped to revitalize the inn, which has been known as Longfellow's Wayside Inn ever since.

It was Marian Carlson, co-chairman of the Longfellow Bicentennial Committee, who first suggested to Pryor that the Wayside Inn host a dinner as part of a series of events planned to celebrate Longfellow's 200th birthday in 2007.

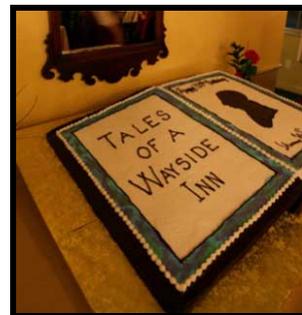
Rebekah Kaufman, another member of the Cambridge-based Longfellow Bicentennial Committee, which is affiliated with the Friends of the Longfellow House and the Longfellow National Historic Site, brought a display to the inn which included a letter from President George W. Bush and letters from governors of more than two dozen states proclaiming Feb. 27, 2007 their state's Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Day.

Houghton Library at Harvard, where Wayside Inn trustee Leslie Morris is the Curator of Modern Books and Manu-

scripts, is also sponsoring a bicentennial exhibit, "Public Poet, Private Man: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow at 200."

Wayside Inn trustee Lily Gordon, who did much of the planning of the event with the inn's staff, said she wanted a birthday party that was "light-hearted and fun."

In addition to the readings by Layne Longfellow, historical interpreters portraying Henry David Thoreau and 19th century lawyer Christopher Columbus Baldwin mingled with the guests peppering their conversation to references to Longfellow and his contemporaries. A harpist, and a fiddler based on a character in "Tales of a Wayside Inn," also entertained the guests.



Dessert, a gingerbread birthday cake with butter cream frosting, a popular Victorian treat, was in the shape of a book.

Each of the inn's trustees made a toast at the dinner, including a tribute to the first innkeeper David How, who opened the tavern in 1716, and current innkeeper Bob Purrington and his wife Carolyn.

Longfellow's bicentennial marks a milestone in the inn's history, and a renewed effort to preserve the 125 acre parcel containing eight historically significant buildings that is a national historic site.

Longfellow's visit to the Wayside Inn deserves "full credit for the inn's continued operation to this day," said Pryor, because it attracted visitors to the inn from around the world and eventually to automobile magnate Henry Ford's purchase of the property in 1923.

"We would like to hold more events like this," said Pryor who noted the inn is a non-profit with an educational mission. "It raises public attention to the inn and that's really what we want to do. We especially want to get younger people involved with the inn."