



Charley Longfellow: Coming of Age in a Time of Turbulence

Unit Overview

In this unit, 8th grade students learn how to "read" an historic house by drawing inferences from primary sources to learn about the people associated with the house and their role in the broader social and cultural context.

**Longfellow House-
Washington's
Headquarters NHS**

UNIT OVERVIEW

In this unit, 8th grade students learn how to “read” an historic house by drawing inferences from primary sources to learn about the people associated with the house and their role in the broader social and cultural context. Using the historic home of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, students explore architecture, collections, poems, and transcriptions of archival documents, with an eye toward developing an historical understanding of the forces at play in antebellum America.

The content of the unit focuses on Charley Longfellow (the nonconforming son of a famous father), and how he navigated his way through adolescence in the shadows of a profound family tragedy, a larger-than-life father, and a nation at war. Lessons ignite students’ historical imaginations, and push them to shape factual content into humanistic stories that give meaning to the past.

The lessons can be used together, in order, as a cohesive chronological unit or used separately as needed. Teachers are welcome to download the PDFs and print as needed.

All images are courtesy Longfellow House-Washington’s Headquarters National Historic Site, unless otherwise noted.

A Historic House Explorers Program

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LESSON 1: Meet the Longfellow Family (1843-1854)

Students critically analyze a variety of primary sources, including architecture, landscape, documents and artifacts. Sources reveal contextual information critical for understanding the evolving personalities of the unit's key figures: Henry and Charley Longfellow.

LESSON 2: Antebellum Issues (1842 - 1861)

Students interpret poetry and prose that shed light on Henry and Fanny Longfellow's thoughts on slavery, abolition, politics, and the pending war. Private letters give students a sense of the atmosphere of the Longfellow House in the years leading up to the Civil War. A culminating activity asks students to imagine how Mr. and Mrs. Longfellow's stance on antebellum politics, slavery, and war might have influenced their oldest son Charley.

LESSON 3: Family Tragedy (1861)

Letters, journal entries, news accounts, and personal effects challenge students to imagine how the tragic and unexpected death of Mrs. Longfellow affected the Longfellow family, and to consider how a researcher's personal experiences and biases can influence the interpretation of source material. Students process their findings by writing a poem that expresses their thoughts on how Fanny's death affected Henry Longfellow and the Longfellow family.

LESSON 4: Charley's Quest for Independence (1861-1863)

Students investigate Charley's 1862 voyage to Mississippi's Gulf Coast and his clandestine entry into the Civil War. They consider the role major political events had on Charley and his father, and think about the extent to which Charley was in charge of his destiny, and the degree to which family and friends shaped the course and texture of his experiences.

LESSON 5: Lieutenant Longfellow's Wartime Experiences (1863)

Using 19th century maps, official war records, letters, photographs, journal entries, and artifacts, students enter the Civil War in the guise of Charley. They discover what life was like for Lieutenant Longfellow during his time at war, and consider the extent to which his relationship with his father influenced his wartime experiences. By locating "war" as meaningful in the lives of real people, students develop an imaginative sense of war's meaning and relevance today.

LESSON 6: Personal Decision-Making (1864)

Students use what they have learned about Charley Longfellow to speculate on what Charley will do next. They must consider the extent to which Charley's relationship with his father will influence the choices he makes and his articulation of those choices.