

HOMER TO HENRY

How Ancient and Classical Civilizations Inspired and Influenced the Longfells

Examples from the Longfellow Family Collections

July/August 2008



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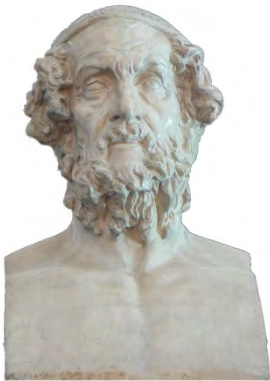
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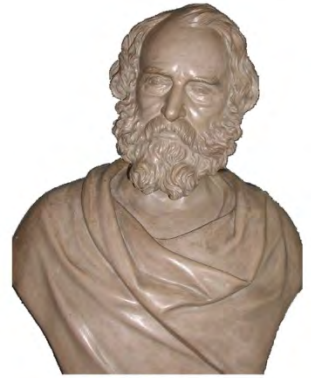


The Arch of Titus by G.P.A. Healy, Frederic Edwin Church and Jervis McEntee, showing Longfellow and daughter Edith under the Arch, 1871, Courtesy Newark Museum



From Homer to Henry

How Ancient and Classical Civilizations Inspired and Influenced the Longfellows



Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had a lifelong association with the classical world. He began his studies of Greek and Latin as a young boy at the Portland Academy in Maine before enrolling in Bowdoin College in 1821. As a pioneer in the teaching of modern languages at Harvard University, he owed much to the foundation laid by ancient Greek and Roman language and culture. Henry had an appreciation for classically themed art and architecture, choosing busts of ancient Greek playwrights and other sculpture and artwork to decorate his Cambridge home. He traveled to Italy several times, and marveled at the accomplishments of the ancient Romans. References to classical figures and places, both historical and mythological, can be found throughout his work.

An interest in ancient civilizations and things classical was a trait possessed by many members of the extended Longfellow family. Henry's second wife Fanny made accomplished drawings of ancient Roman ruins, his elder son Charley climbed a pyramid in Egypt, and younger son Ernest painted scenes of Egyptian ruins along the Nile. Thomas Gold Appleton, Henry's brother-in-law, traveled extensively in Rome, Greece and the Near East, chronicling his experiences in journals, and Henry's niece Mary King Longfellow painted scenes of ancient sites in her sketchbooks. All of them found inspiration, artistic, spiritual or otherwise, in the works of ancient authors, poets, sculptors and builders, and used it to fuel their own work.



You can imagine nothing equal to the ruins of Rome. The Forum and the Coliseum are beyond all I had ever fancied them; and the ruined temples and the mouldering aqueducts which are scattered in every direction over the immense plain which surrounds the city give you an idea of the ancient grandeur, and produce in your mind ideas which cannot be easily defined or communicated.

Letter from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to his brother Stephen, June 28, 1828

A stereograph card showing a view of the Roman Forum with the Temple of Hercules Victor on the left (incorrectly identified on the back of the card as the Temple of Vesta), and the Temple of Portunus on the right.



O Cæsar, we who are about to die Salute you!" was the gladiators' cry In the arena, standing face to face With death and with the Roman populace.

Morituri Salutamus,
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1875

Stereograph of the Colosseum in Rome. For nineteenth century travelers, the stereograph was akin to the modern postcard; an affordable and easily transported souvenir that provided an easy way for memories and experiences of their trips to be preserved.



I remember what a Roman lady once said to me, as we sat together at evening among the ruins of Caesar's palace and saw the sun set, with the coliseum before us, - 'How can anyone live out of Rome? I should wish once a year to behold this scene; else I should die.'

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in a letter to "M", (part of letter to George Washington Greene), October 23, 1838.

Drawing of the Coliseum, Rome, by Frances Elizabeth Appleton (Fanny Longfellow). Like other members of the extended Longfellow family, Fanny kept a travel journal of sorts by drawing or painting in a sketchbook many of the sites she visited. During a trip to Rome in 1836, she drew this scene, as viewed from "the Caesars' Palace".



*Further still and furthestmost
On the dim discovered coast
Paestum with its ruins lies,
And its roses all in bloom
Seem to tinge the fatal skies
Of that lonely land of doom.*

Amalfi,
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1875

Temple ruins at Paestum, sketched by Mary King Longfellow, the poet's niece, in 1910. Originally a Greek colony founded in Italy in the late seventh century BC named Poseidonia, the ancient city of Paestum was absorbed by expanding Roman influence in the third century BC.



*But where are the old Egyptian
Demi-gods and kings?
Nothing left but an inscription
Graven on stones and rings.*

Hermes Trismegistus,
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1882

Photograph of temple ruins at Luxor, Egypt. Charles Longfellow (Charley), the poet's son, probably purchased this image during one of his several trips to Egypt between 1873 and 1890. While in Egypt, Charley recorded viewing the Sphinx and climbing one of the pyramids at Giza in his travel journal.



*Rising from an eminence, and just over
the water, towered the broken pylon
and half-buried columns of a temple –
it could be none other than Kom
Ombos. Mounted on its picturesque
acclivity, with a soft morning light upon
it, we thought it the most beautiful
thing we had yet seen.*

A Nile Journal,
Thomas Gold Appleton, 1876

Ruins of temple at Kom Omba, Egypt, by Ernest Wadsworth Longfellow, 1879. Oil painting of the ruins of an unusual double temple. One side of the temple was dedicated to the god Sobek, the other to Haroeris. The temple was built in the early second century BC by Ptolemy VI, and added to by later Ptolemaic and Roman rulers.



WALLS OF TROY

*As ancient Priam at the Scaean gate
Sat on the walls of Troy in regal state*

Morituri Salutamus,
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1875

Postcard depicting the ruins of Troy, late nineteenth - early twentieth century. The Longfellows accumulated hundreds of postcards from their travels, often sending them to other family members as souvenirs of places visited.



*We saw still with the bloom of an
immortal youth, upon that façade
which Time and War mutilate but
cannot destroy, the sweet harmony of
lines which refuse to be austere, the
same Parthenon standing yet, an
enduring beacon light of freedom and
of beauty for all the world.*

Syrian Sunshine,
Thomas Gold Appleton, 1877

Watercolor sketch of temple ruins in Greece by Tom Appleton, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's brother-in-law. Tom was a wealthy bachelor known around Boston as a congenial man of leisure. He spent much of his time in Europe pursuing an art career, and often sketched the places he visited during his travels. Shown here is a vivid watercolor of the ruins of a Greek temple. Tom's interest in antiquities is further evidenced by his donation of many ancient Greek and Roman artifacts to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

*For him, in my feeble age,
I dared the battle's rage,
To save Byzantium's state,
When the tents of Zabergan,
Like snow-drifts overran
The road to the Golden Gate.*

Belisarius,
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1875

1880 printing of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *Belisarius* (first six stanzas shown), illustrated by A. Fredericks, published by Houghton, Mifflin and Company.

The foremost general for much of the reign of Byzantine Emperor Justinian I during the sixth century, Belisarius reconquered parts of the previously lost Western Roman Empire. Many regard him as the last recipient of a Roman triumph, given after his defeat of the Vandals in North Africa in 534 AD.

For his poem, Longfellow drew on the legend that Belisarius was blinded and impoverished by Justinian I after years of faithful service. Although it was a popular theme for painters in the eighteenth century, the story of Belisarius as a blind beggar is probably untrue.

The early Byzantine period during which Belisarius lived marks a dividing point between the world of Antiquity, and that of the Middle Ages, another era in which Henry Wadsworth Longfellow found much inspiration for his work.

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW.

371

BELISARIUS.

I AM poor and old and blind;
The sun burns me, and the wind
Blows through the city gate,
And covers me with dust
From the wheels of the august
Justinian the Great.

It was for him I chased
The Persians o'er wild and waste,
As General of the East;
Night after night I lay
In their camps of yesterday;
Their forage was my feast.

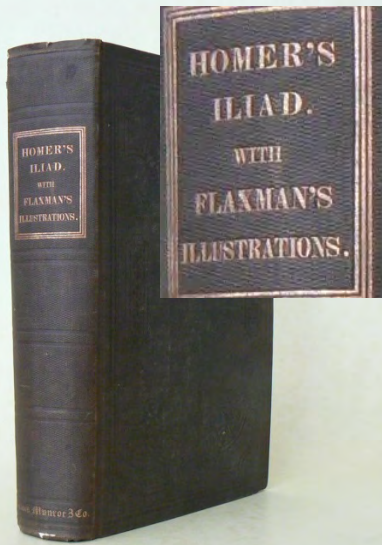
For him, with sails of red,
And torches at mast-head,
Floving the great fleet,
I swept the Afric coasts
And scattered the Vandal hosts,
Like dust in a windy street.

For him I won again
The Asonian realm and reign,
Rome and Parthenope;
And all the land was mine
From the summits of Apennine
To the shores of either sea.

For him, in my feeble age,
I dared the battle's rage,
To save Byzantium's state,
When the tents of Zabergan
Like snow-drifts overran
The road to the Golden Gate.

And for this, for this, behold!
Infirm and blind and old,
With gray, uncovered head,
Beneath the very arch
Of my triumphal march,
I stand and beg my bread!





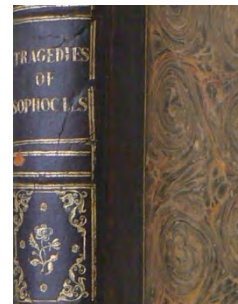
*Achilles in his armor dressed,
Alcides with the Cretan bull,
And Aphrodite with her boy,
Or lovely Helena of Troy*

Keramos,
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1878

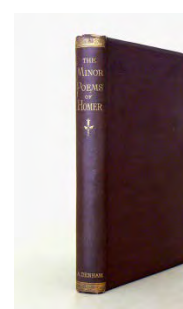
An 1847 edition of the *Iliad* by Homer, from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's library. His friend Cornelius Felton gave this volume to Henry. Before becoming president of Harvard in 1860, Felton was a professor of Greek and Greek literature and edited many classical texts, including the version of the *Iliad* shown here.

*I have taken to the Greek poets again,
and mean to devote one hour every
morning to them. Began to-day with
Anacreon. What exquisite language!*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow,
Journal, September 11, 1839



The Tragedies of Sophocles, Franklin
Thomas, translator, 1758, acquired by
Longfellow in 1849.



The Minor Poems of Homer, attributed
to Herodotus, published by A. Denham
Co., 1872, from Longfellow's library.



Songs of triumph, and ascriptions,
Such as reached the swart Egyptians
When upon the Red Sea coast
Perished Pharaoh and his host.”

“The Slave Singing at Midnight,”
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1842

Manual of Egyptian Archaeology and Guide to the Study of Antiquities in Egypt. This 1902 volume belonged to Alice Longfellow, and discusses archaeological discoveries concerning Egyptian art, architecture, and culture.

***Many a perilous age hath gone,
Since the walls of Babylon
Chained the broad Euphrates' tide***

“Babylon,” Bryan Waller Procter, from *Poems of Places*, edited by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1878



Impression in clay from a Mesopotamian cylinder seal. A member of the Longfellow family might have made the impression, but the seal used to create the image dates to roughly 2250 BC and is from the Akkadian culture. It is unknown if the Longfellows owned any ancient cylinder seals, or if this impression was made during a visit to an institution that had some in its collection, such as the British Museum, or the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Cuneiform, a method of writing using wedge-shaped impressions made in clay tablets, dates as far back as the fourth millennium BC. Developed by the Sumerians in southern Mesopotamia (present day Iraq), cuneiform was adopted by Ancient Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Persian cultures before falling out of use around the sixth century BC.

***Behold! once more
The pitying gods to earth restore
Theocritus of Syracuse!***

Tales of a Wayside Inn,
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1863



Bronze coin from ancient Syracuse, Sicily, c. 275 BC. The head of Syracusan Tyrant Hiero II on the obverse, and a trident flanked by dolphins on the reverse. Accompanying the coin was a handwritten note by Harry Dana, grandson of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, outlining important dates in the life of Hiero II. Dated April 18, 1907, the note records that the coin was given to him “by father”, Richard Henry Dana III.

A postcard dated 1907 sent to Harry Dana from Syracuse, showing the ruins of an ancient Greek theatre. Syracuse was founded by settlers from Corinth in 734 BC, and quickly became one of the most powerful cities of the ancient Mediterranean.



***Lamps that perchance their night-
watch kept
O'er Cleopatra while she slept***

Keramos,
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1878

A Roman oil lamp, c. 1st century AD, made of terracotta and decorated with a vine motif. This type of lamp was a common household item and was fueled with olive oil. Wicks of linen were inserted into the lamp's spout. The centrally located hole was for filling the lamp's reservoir with oil. Many lamps, including this one, had the maker's name impressed in the terracotta on the bottom.

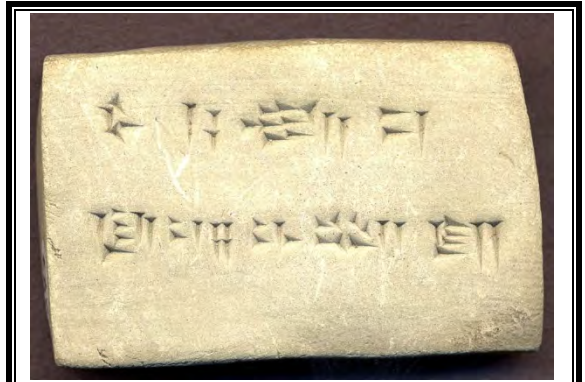


“Mr. Nesmith, having realized thanks to Mr. Jewett, that Miss Fanny Appleton desired to have a souvenir of Tusculum is glad if you will accept this piece of marble which was taken from a column of Cicero’s villa ...”

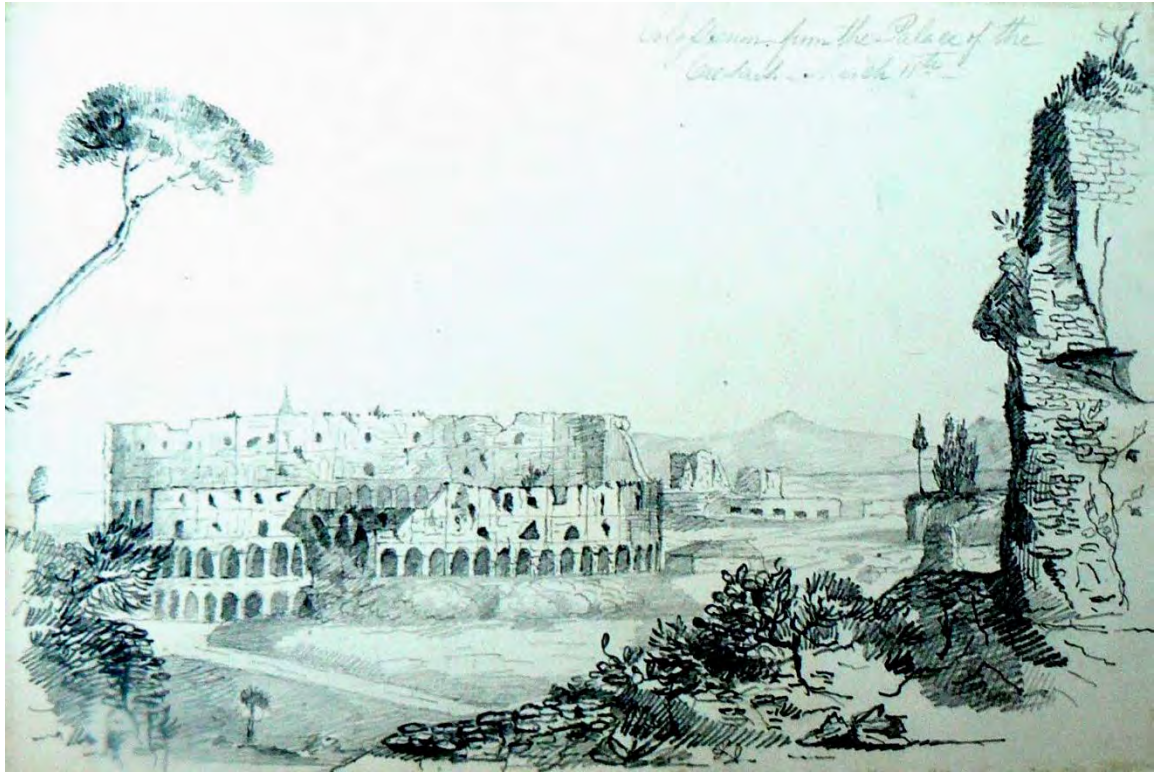
Letter (translated from Italian) written to Frances E. Appleton while in Rome, 1836



A piece of marble cornice taken from Cicero’s villa in Tusculum, Italy and given to Frances E. Appleton (Fanny Longfellow) in 1836. Cicero maintained a villa near Tusculum during the late Roman Republic period (first century BC) and composed his *Tusculan Disputations* there.



A small clay tablet impressed with the phonetic spelling of Alice Longfellow’s name, as written in cuneiform. As written here, Alice’s name would sound like “A-LI-IS LU-UN-PI-IL-LU”.



The Roman Coliseum, 1836, by Fanny Appleton



Ruins at Paestum, 1910 by Mary King Longfellow

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Poems
with ancient and/or classical allusions:

1. Drinking Song
2. Keramos
3. Morituri Salutamus
4. Endymion
5. The Goblet of Life
6. Helen of Tyre
7. Jugurtha
8. The Ladder of St. Augustine
9. Maidenhood
10. Milton
11. The Occultation of Orion
12. Shakespeare
13. The Slave Singing at Midnight
14. The Evening Star
15. The Poet's Calendar
16. The Three Kings
17. To A Child
18. To An Old Danish Songbook
19. Ultima Thule: Dedication to
G.W.G.
20. The Warning
21. Prometheus
22. Amalfi
23. The Descent of the Muses
24. Possibilities
25. Divina Commedia
26. The Galaxy
27. Elegiac



Page 3: Bust of Homer after an ancient
sculpture, Longfellow's Library; Bust of
Longfellow, 1879, by Samuel James
Kitson, LNHS Blue Entry;

Back cover: copy of Giambologna's
Mercury, Longfellow's Library

Right, above: detail of p. 2

