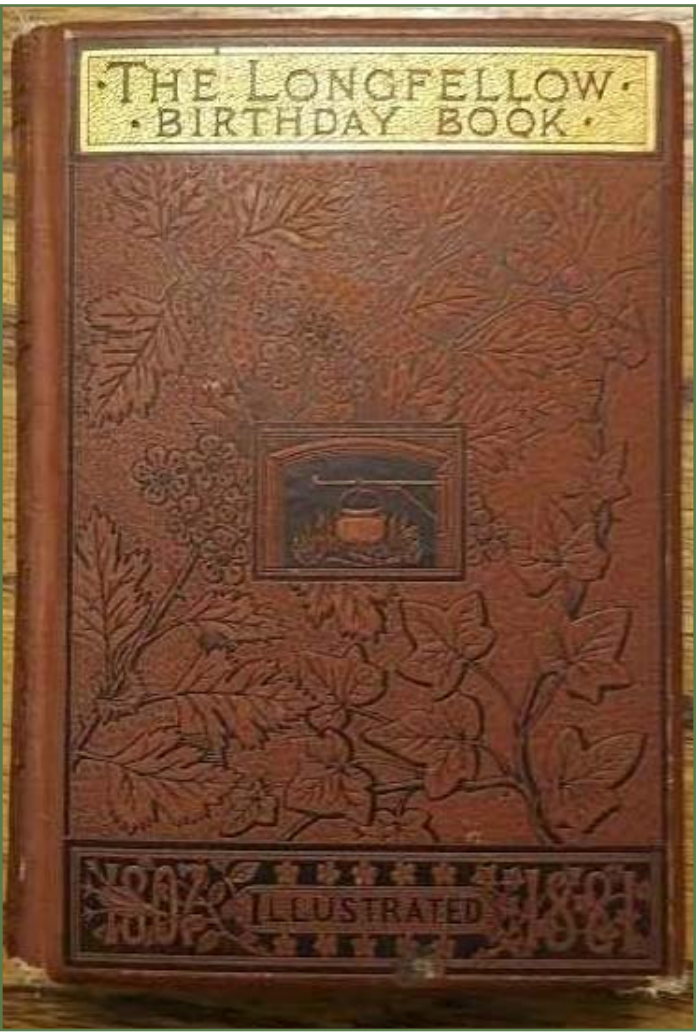
For What is Time?

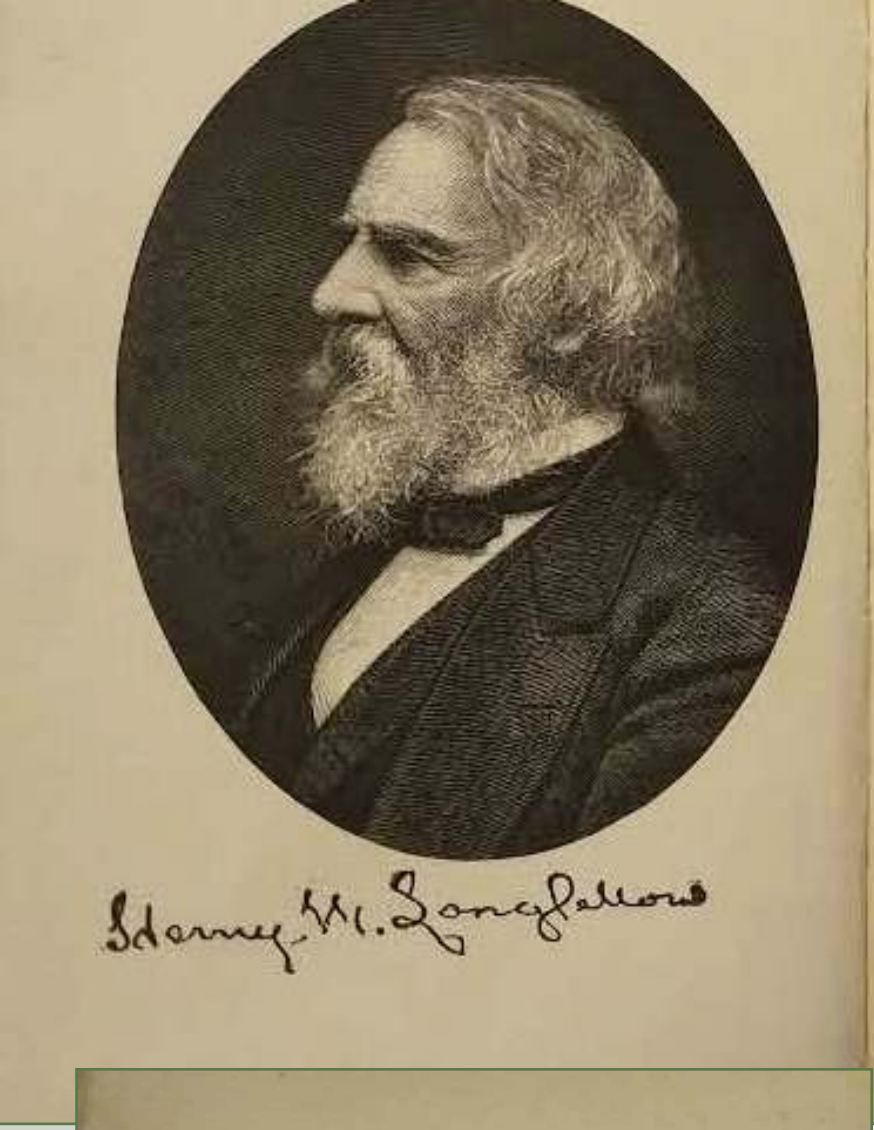
Time waits for no one. Time is fleeting. Time is money. Time flies when you're having fun. Those well-worn nuggets are just a small sample of our musings about the ticking clock that punctuates our daily lives. How often do we check the time during a typical day or count the days until a vacation or other event? When it comes to genealogy research, time is also front and center. As we rediscover and chart generations, we create a family history timeline that becomes the basis for telling the story that connects us to those whose lives made our own possible. Now that's *time* travel!

Talking about the olden days, I recently had the honor of being inducted into my high school "hall of fame." This came at a time when I had also been helping with the planning of my 50th high school reunion so it's no surprise that, of late, I have spent a good bit of time recalling and reliving the memories of the past five decades. As I tried to put together the remarks I would make at the induction dinner, I kept coming back to *time* as a topic: time as a precious commodity (like money), the investment of time in all its forms, and the question invariably asked by older people as they look back at their lives: *Where has the time gone?* A week before the dinner, I took a ride to the Golden Nugget Antiques Market in Lambertville where I happened upon a small 1881 book titled: *The Longfellow Birthday Book.* I'm not sure why I picked it up but when I opened it I saw the original owner's inscription and, in flipping through the pages I saw that someone had written genealogical information on some of the pages where there had been blank space. There were also several old newspaper clippings tucked in between the pages including a 19th century obituary. That was more than enough to get me to open my wallet.



It turned out that the little book (3.5 by 5.5 inches with a hefty 400 pages) was actually a datebook of sorts. For each day of the year there were entries of poetry, quotations, or simply the name of a notable person born on a specific day. At the back of the book were extra pages where the owner could enter birthdays of personal significance. The Victorians really knew how to elegantly blend form and function.

The May 1881 inscription at the front of the book was for



Henry W. Longfellow

THE

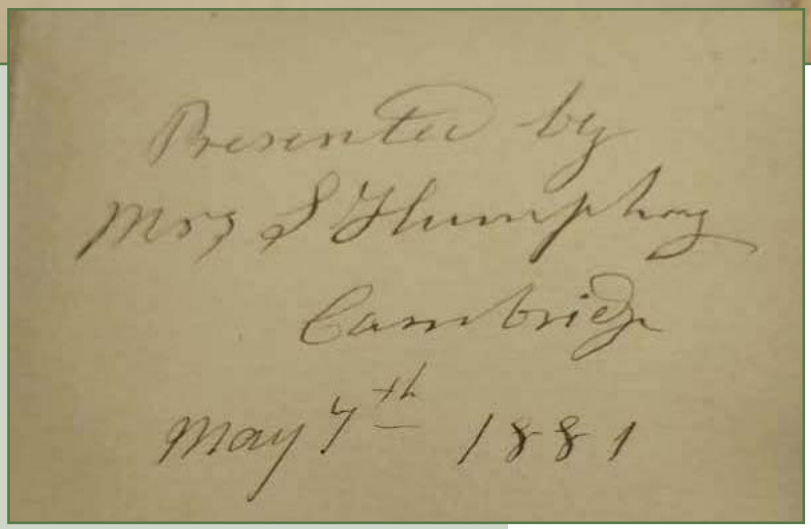
Longfellow Birthday-Book.

ARRANGED BY

CHARLOTTE FISKE BATES.

If any thought of mine, or song or told,
Has ever given delight or consolation,
Ye have repaid me back a thousandfold,
By every friendly sign and salutation.
Dedication to The Seaside and Fireside.

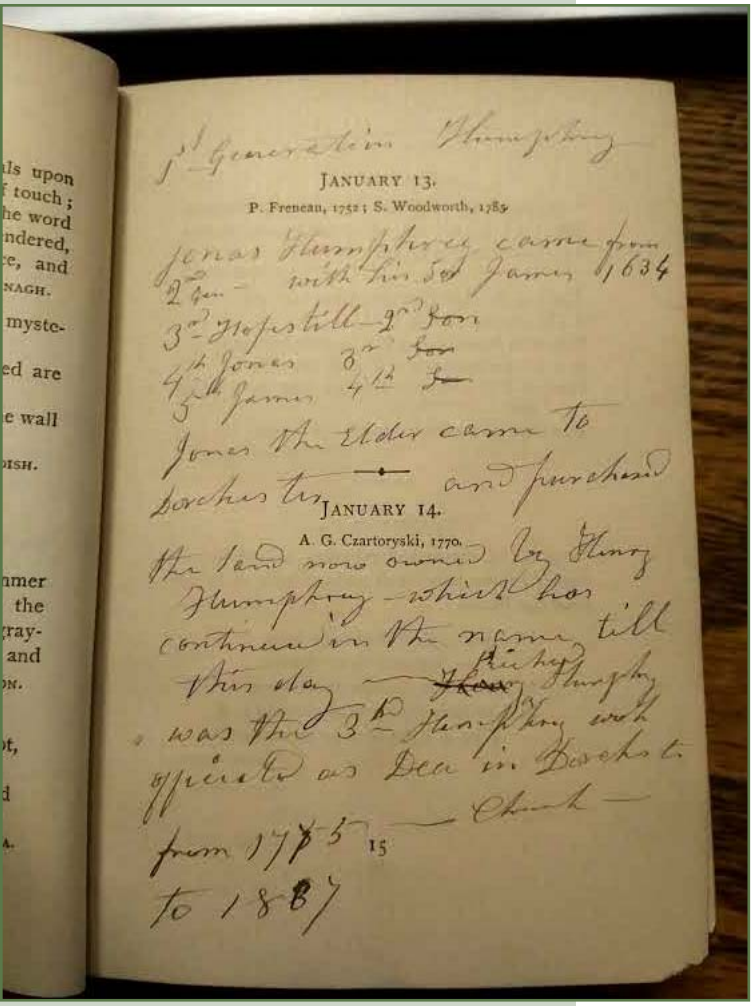
BOSTON:
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY.
The Riverside Press, Cambridge.



Presented by
Mrs S Humphrey
Cambridge
May 4th 1881

a Mrs. S. Humphrey of Cambridge. Newspaper clippings tucked inside the book recounted the 1634 arrival (from England) of Jonas Humphrey(s) and his son James in Dorchester, Massachusetts, their purchase of land there and the seven-generation descent of the property to one Deacon Humphrey. My subsequent research revealed that the Deacon was Henry Humphrey(s), a wealthy farmer who was first married to Sarah Blake Clapp and later to her sister Catherine Clapp, both belonging to one of Dorchester's leading families. The Clapp sisters were the granddaughters of Captain Lemuel Clapp (1735–1819), a Revolutionary War officer and company commander.

Further research turned up an 1890s application for membership in the Sons of the American Revolution submitted by Richard Clapp Humphreys born in 1836 in Dorchester and the son of Deacon Henry Humphrey and his first wife Sarah Blake Clapp. Richard's application set out his lineage and

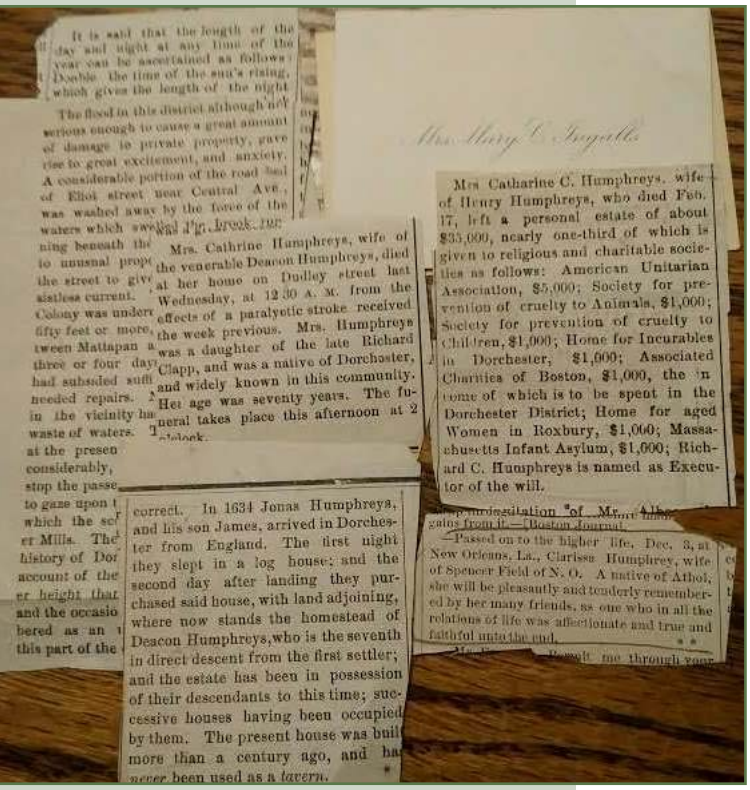


JANUARY 13.

P. Freneau, 1752; S. Woodworth, 1785.

JANUARY 14.

A. G. Czartoryski, 1770.



provided detail describing the Revolutionary War military service of his ancestor James Humphreys, a first sergeant in Captain Lemuel Clapp's Company beginning in 1775.

According to the application, James Humphreys served in multiple locations until 1780 including Providence (Rhode Island), Fairfield (Connecticut), White Plains and Tarrytown (New York), as Quartermaster at Fort Independence (Boston), and . . . wait for it . . . Morristown, New Jersey in early 1777. James Humphreys, then about 24-years-old, would have been at Morristown at the very time that General George Washington maintained his headquarters there. Washington, following his victories at the Battles of Trenton and Princeton in December 1776 and January 1777, led his troops to Morristown where they remained camped for several months.

After connecting *The Longfellow Birthday Book* to the family that originally owned it, I spent some time reading it. Sprinkled with excerpts from Longfellow's work along with notations of the birthdays of everyone from Joan of Arc (January 6th) to Napoleon Bonaparte (August 15th) and Jane Austen (December 16th), it was a fun read. As I neared the end of the book, I came to the entry for December 1st, an excerpt from Longfellow's early novel, *Hyperion: A Romance.* As soon as I read it, I knew it was an example of the serendipity that genealogical researchers often experience. The subject was *time*—something that had been so much on my mind in the days before I happened upon that little book:

"For what is Time? The shadow on the dial,—the striking of the clock,—the running of the sand,—day and night,—summer and winter,—months, years, centuries. These are but arbitrary and outward signs,—the measure of Time, not Time itself. Time is the life of the Soul."

Genealogists rediscover lost souls every day, reviving their stories and making them timely once again. I suspect that Longfellow would approve.

(NB: I have reached out to the Dorchester Historical Society in the hope of donating the little book to that organization. It's time it made its way home again after so many decades of wandering.)

"Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies."

—Shirley Abbott

Maureen Wlodarczyk

Genealogist, Speaker/Instructor & Author

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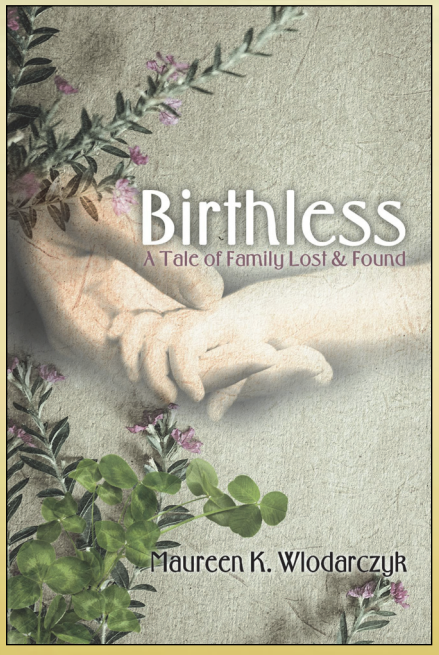

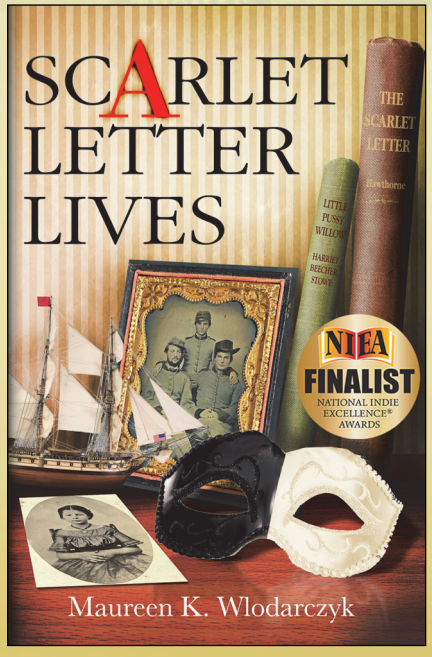

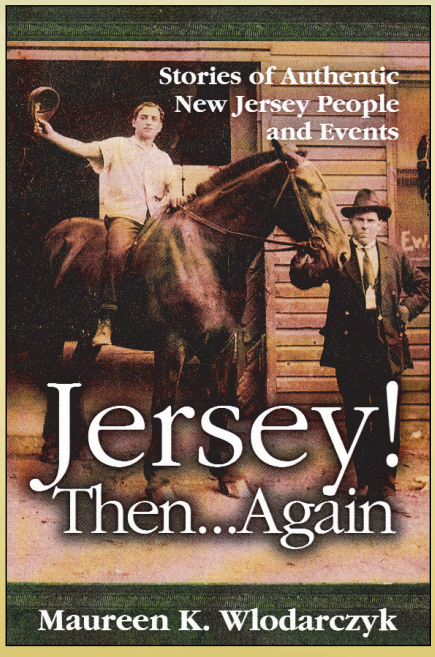

Contact: maureenwlodarczyk@gmail.com or 732-238-5555

Find out more about Maureen at www.past-forward.com