

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR “COUSINS” ...

DEVOUT QUAKER POET AND ABOLITIONIST

**John Greenleaf
Whittier
(1807 – 1892)**

— *Bradley Rymph*

VISITS TO HAVERHILL, MASSACHUSETTS:

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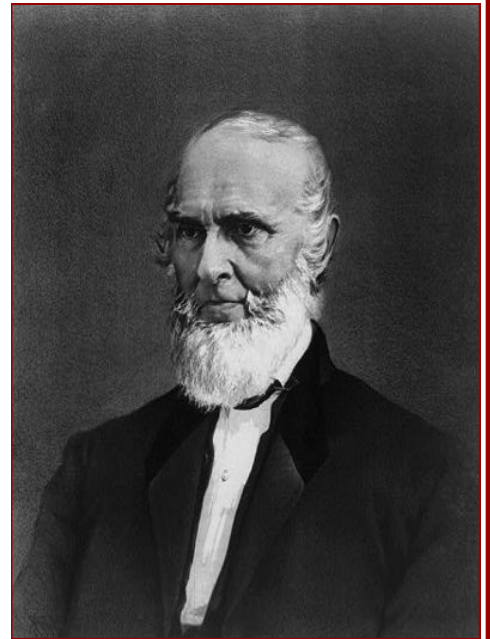
John Greenleaf Whittier was one of the most prominent American poets of the 19th century. A devout Quaker, he was also a strong advocate for the abolition of slavery in the United States.

Whittier was born on a farm near Haverhill, Massachusetts, on December 17, 1807. He was the great-great-grandson of immigrant ancestors Joseph and Mary (Johnson) Peaslee. The Whittier farm was not profitable and the family had only enough money for basic survival. John himself was physically frail and not cut out for farm labor. As a child, he received little formal education but was an avid reader of his father's six books on Quakerism. The readings became the foundation of Whittier's ideology, with a particular stress on humanitarianism, compassion, and social responsibility.

Whittier had his first poem published at the age of 18 when his sister sent “The Exile's Departure” to the Newburyport *Free Press* without his permission. The editor of the *Free Press*, William Lloyd Garrison, and another local editor encouraged Whittier to attend the recently opened Haverhill Academy for a high school education. Whittier initially funded his education by becoming a shoemaker for a time; food from the family farm also helped pay his tuition. By Whittier's second term, he was earning money to cover tuition

by serving as a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in what is now Merrimac, Massachusetts. Whittier completed his high school education in only two terms, finishing at the academy in 1828.

*John
Greenleaf
Whittier*



After finishing school, Whittier became editor of a Boston-based temperance weekly newspaper. He rapidly advanced as editor of other regional publications, and by 1830 was editor of the most influential Whig journal in New England, the *New England Weekly Review* in Hartford, Connecticut.

Whittier became interested in politics in the 1830s, but lost a Congressional election in 1832. Shortly thereafter, he suffered a nervous breakdown and returned home at age 25. In 1833, he resumed his correspondence with Garrison, who encouraged Whittier to join the cause.

Beginning with his publication of the antislavery pamphlet *Justice and Expediency*, in 1837, Whittier dedicated

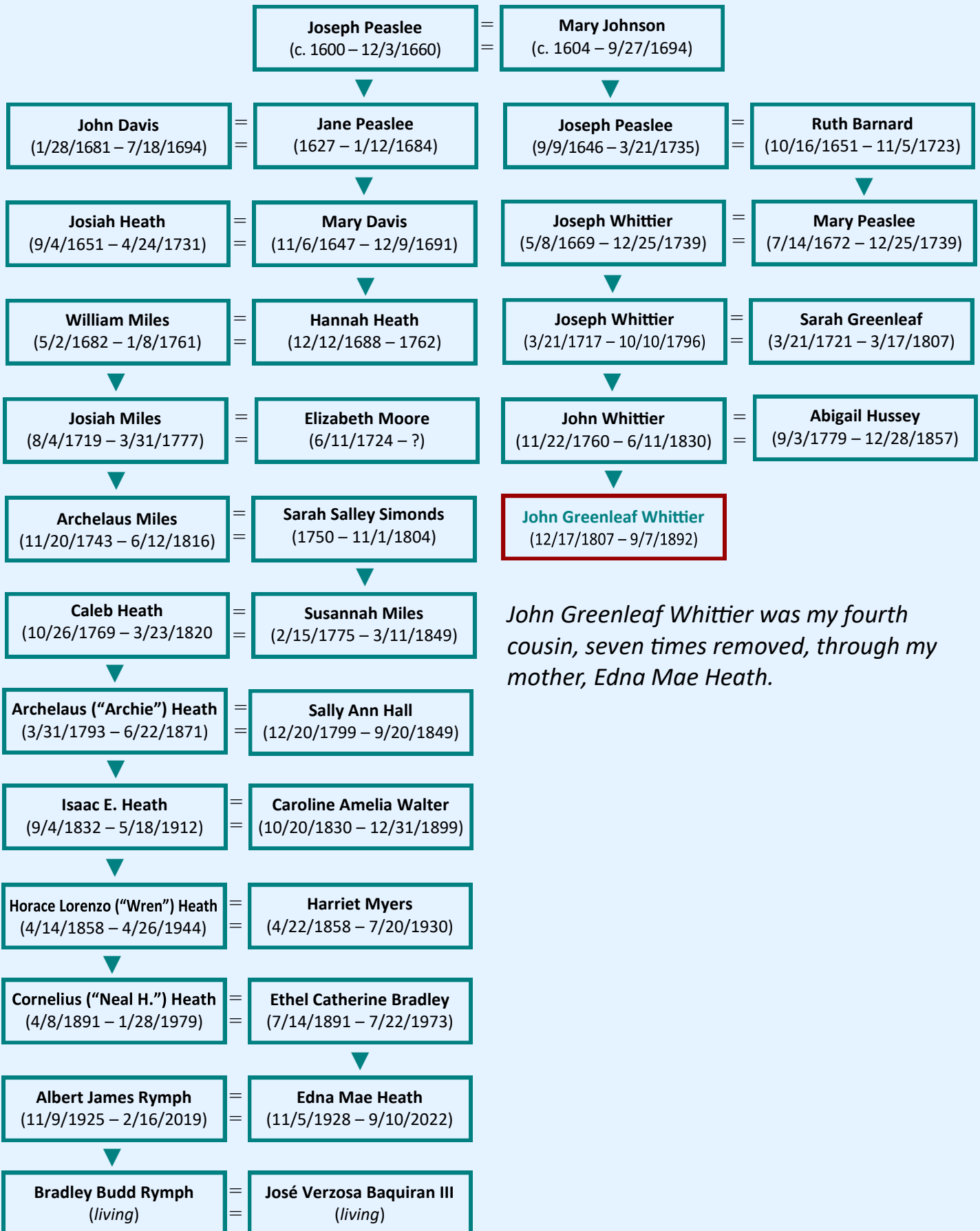
the next 20 years of his life to the abolitionist cause. Whittier's anti-slavery poem, "Our Countrymen in Chains," was also published as a broadside flyer that year.

From 1835 to 1838, Whittier traveled widely in the North, attending conventions, securing votes, speaking to the public, and lobbying politicians. In response, Whittier was mobbed, stoned, and run out of town several times. From 1838 to 1840, he was



*Birthplace of
John Greenleaf Whittier,
Haverhill, Massachusetts*

HOW WE'RE RELATED



"THE ETERNAL GOODNESS"

— John Greenleaf Whittier (1865)

*O friends! with whom my feet have trod
The quiet aisles of prayer,
Glad witness to your zeal for God
And love of man I bear.*

*I trace your lines of argument;
Your logic linked and strong
I weigh as one who dreads dissent,
And fears a doubt as wrong.*

*But still my human hands are weak
To hold your iron creeds
Against the words ye bid me speak
My heart within me pleads.*

*Who fathoms the Eternal Thought?
Who talks of scheme and plan?
The Lord is God! He needeth not
The poor device of man.*

*I walk with bare, hushed feet the ground
Ye tread with boldness shod;
I dare not fix with mete and bound
The love and power of God.*

*Ye praise His justice; even such
His pitying love I deem
Ye seek a king; I fain would touch
The robe that hath no seam.*

*Ye see the curse which overbroods
A world of pain and loss;
I hear our Lord's beatitudes
And prayer upon the cross.*

*More than your schoolmen teach, within
Myself, alas! I know
Too dark ye cannot paint the sin,
Too small the merit show.*

*I bow my forehead to the dust,
I veil mine eyes for shame,
And urge, in trembling self-distrust,
A prayer without a claim.*

*I see the wrong that round me lies,
I feel the guilt within;
I hear, with groan and travail-cries,
The world confess its sin.*

*Yet, in the maddening maze of things,
And tossed by storm and flood,
To one fixed trust my spirit clings;
I know that God is good!*

*Not mine to look where cherubim
And seraphs may not see,
But nothing can be good in Him
Which evil is in me.*

*The wrong that pains my soul below
I dare not throne above,
I know not of His hate,—I know
His goodness and His love.*

*I dimly guess from blessings known
Of greater out of sight,
And, with the chastened Psalmist, own
His judgments too are right.*

*I long for household voices gone,
For vanished smiles I long,
But God hath led my dear ones on,
And He can do no wrong.*

*I know not what the future hath
Of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death
His mercy underlies.*

*And if my heart and flesh are weak
To bear an untried pain,
The bruised reed He will not break,
But strengthen and sustain.*

*No offering of my own I have,
Nor works my faith to prove;
I can but give the gifts He gave,
And plead His love for love.*

*And so beside the Silent Sea
I wait the muffled oar;
No harm from Him can come to me
On ocean or on shore.*

*I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.*

*O brothers! if my faith is vain,
If hopes like these betray,
Pray for me that my feet may gain
The sure and safer way.*

*And Thou, O Lord! by whom are seen
Thy creatures as they be,
Forgive me if too close I lean
My human heart on Thee!*

editor of a leading anti-slavery paper, the Philadelphia-based *Pennsylvania Freeman*. Whittier also continued to write poetry and nearly all of his poems in this period dealt with the problem of slavery.

In 1845, Whittier began writing his essay, "The Black Man." This essay included an anecdote about John Fountain, a free black man who had been jailed in Virginia for helping slaves escape. After his release, Fountain went on a speaking tour and thanked Whittier for writing his story.

Eventually, the stresses of editorial duties, worsening health, and dangerous violence caused Whittier to have a physical breakdown. He went home to Amesbury, Massachusetts, and remained there for the rest of his life, ending his *active* participation in abolition, though he remained

committed to the abolitionist cause from his home base.

In 1847, Whittier became editor of *The National Era*, one of the most influential abolitionist newspapers in the North. For the next 10 years, it featured the best of his writing, both as prose and poetry, while Whittier remained home and away from the action.

In addition to his anti-slavery poetry, Whittier is remembered today for his more religious poems. In one of these, "The Eternal Goodness" (see box, previous page), Whittier reflects on the nature of God's relationship with humankind. He also questions traditional but rigid religious doctrines, such as creedalism and preoccupation with judgment and justice, rather than love and blessing.

Some of Whittier's religious poems were later set to music and turned into hymns. Of these the best known is "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind":

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways;
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives Thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise....

Breathe through the heats of our
 desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake,
 wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.

Another poem-made-hymn, "O Brother Man," particularly illustrated Whittier's Quaker theologies:

O Brother Man, fold to thy heart
 thy brother:
Where pity dwells, the peace of
 God is there;
To worship rightly is to love each
 other,
Each smile a hymn, each kindly
 word a prayer.

TO LEARN MORE

Whittier Birthplace. (www.johngreenleafwhittier.com/)
Wikipedia. "John Greenleaf Whittier." (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Greenleaf_Whittier)