

# The Boston Globe

[http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2006/02/16/bringing\\_sound\\_to\\_snow\\_bound/?page=2](http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2006/02/16/bringing_sound_to_snow_bound/?page=2)

## Bringing sound to 'Snow-Bound'

### Whittier poem gets a reading

By Joel Brown, Globe Correspondent | February 16, 2006

AMESBURY -- Try to think of last weekend's snowstorm as a stage-setter.

John Greenleaf Whittier lived at 86 Friend St. when he wrote his classic poem "Snow-Bound: A Winter Idyl." The long verse was published on Feb. 17, 1866, and quickly brought him fame and a measure of fortune, selling 20,000 copies in just a few months.

On Friday night, 140 years to the day after it was published, "Snow-Bound" will be read aloud at the Amesbury Cultural Center in the Upper Millyard, a short walk from the Whittier Home.

The reading is part of a push by Connecticut's Michael Maglaras to win back for Haverhill native Whittier (1807-1892) some of the public attention that poets now seldom receive. More importantly, he wants people to savor the pleasure and meaning that a great poem offers.

"I think this is a time in our society, in our life, in our America, where it is a wonderful thing to sit back and reflect on this exquisite poem, this enormously passionate, beautifully transcendent poem," Maglaras said.

Maglaras grew up in Dover, N.H. His father knew whole stanzas of "Snow-Bound" by heart, he recalls. Now Maglaras has recorded a CD of the poem and released it on his own 217 Records. It's the first part of what he's calling the Whittier Bicentennial Recording Project, marking the poet's birth. The second volume will appear in the fall, and there are tentative plans for a third.

Maglaras has already lived several professional lives, including as a business consultant and opera singer -- the latter is evident in his mellifluous tone as he reads "Snow-Bound."

He and his wife, Terri Templeton, were in Maine a year ago, making an independent film based on Marsden Hartley's "Cleophas and His Own," when he pulled a volume of Whittier out of his bag.

"I put my feet up, resting, I was in costume and makeup, and I literally opened to 'Snow-Bound' and started reading it again," he said.

The poem depicts a real experience in Whittier's life, when he was growing up on the farm at 305 Whittier Road in Haverhill where he was born in 1807. Whittier and his family and a couple of guests had been cooped up for a week during and after a blizzard.

"This sounds sort of corny, but this poem was written at a time when, if you were snowbound at a farm in Haverhill, Mass., there were no e-mails, no TV, no radio," Maglaras said. "What you did was you sat in front of the fireplace and kept the fire going all night, and you told stories, and you visited with each other and revealed each other's personalities through conversation."

Those conversations and stories make up the bulk of the poem, interspersed with observations of the rather terrifying storm. Comfort in hearth and family, the power of the imagination against the cold and dark -- these were powerful elements for a nation that had just endured the bloody chaos of the Civil War and Lincoln's assassination. And the abolitionist Whittier had known a more personal loss, the death of his beloved sister, Elizabeth.

"Poetry is meant to be heard, not just read, so I think this is a wonderful opportunity for the people of the North Shore," said Pamela Fenner, president of the board of directors of the Whittier Home Association in Amesbury, who suggested a local performance to Maglaras.

The home on Friend Street, open from May to October each year, regularly attracts visitors from towns and high schools named after Whittier all around the country, she said. The Garden Room, where he wrote "Snow-Bound," is essentially unchanged, complete with his desk and the pictures on the walls.

Fenner said Whittier's name has also been kept alive in local schools; one former local teacher wrote a biography. A lot of the interest stems from Whittier's work as an abolitionist, she said.

"He was certainly a man who led his life based on the principles he espoused and lived by as a Quaker. I guess you would say he took on the mantle of abolitionist work very early . . . for which he risked his life, and limb, and fortune, and reputation."

That moral courage resonates with students as well as his literary accomplishments, Fenner said. Maglaras said our own times offer plenty of reasons to read or hear the poem.

"We don't have enough time to sit quietly and pause, and reflect, and use our minds because of the busy lives that we lead. To read 'Snow-Bound' to oneself or have it read to you or put it on the CD player requires a little bit less than an hour of your time," he said.

"I really think that it's Whittier's time," Maglaras said. "We don't have [slavery] anymore, but we have other things that trouble us socially and on a psychic basis. And Whittier's passion, Whittier's insistence that we pause and reflect on our lives, is something very wonderfully New England to me."

*The reading will begin at 7 p.m. at the Amesbury Cultural Center, 36 High St. Admission is \$5. Call 978-884-6726. Information about visiting Whittier's homes in Amesbury and Haverhill is on [www.essexheritage.org](http://www.essexheritage.org).*

## **Excerpt from 'A Winter Idyl'**

*Unwarmed by any sunset light  
The gray day darkened into night,  
A night made hoary with the swarm  
And whirl-dance of the blinding storm,  
As zigzag, wavering to and fro,  
Crossed and recrossed the winged snow:  
And ere the early bedtime came  
The white drift piled the window-frame,  
And through the grass the clothes-line posts  
Looked in like tall and sheeted ghosts.■*

© Copyright 2006 Globe Newspaper Company.