

The Boston Globe

## Lifestyle

# Learning from the homes of famous writers

By Daniel Grant | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 04, 2013

‘Emily Dickinson is an overarching category that includes her writing and her biography,’ says Jane Wald, executive director of the **Emily Dickinson Museum** in Amherst.

And you thought she was just a poet.

What Wald means is that there is a larger story to tell, which includes the house she lived in, the house next door where her brother, Austin, lived, her locally prominent family, the times they all lived in and, of course, the poetry itself.

“The houses act as a set for this story,” Wald says.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

New England is home to a number of houses where famous writers once lived and worked, and fall is a popular time for day trips to visit. But what are we supposed to get from these homes? This is the chair he sat in while penning his great poem, the table on which she wrote the renowned novel — so what?



JANET KNOTT/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2008

**The royalties from Edith Wharton’s novels paid for her Lenox home, The Mount, and its furnishings.**

## Related

PHOTOS

Anne Trubek, author of “A Skeptic’s Guide to Writers’ Houses,” notes that she had a dim view of these places when she began working on the book (“The point of writing is that it can take you anywhere, that it can be done anywhere, and that it frees you from physical restraints,” she says) but that her view changed over time.

“You see the profound emotional experience that visitors have in being in the room where, for instance, Emily Dickinson wrote,” says Trubek. “You develop a connection to the author that is physical.”

The houses, the objects within, and grounds — in the case of Dickinson, what she could see looking out her bedroom window — “help to understand the story of her life,” says Wald.

Born and raised in Amherst, Dickinson rarely ventured far from home and was famously reclusive, sometimes talking to visitors from the other side of a door rather than face-to-face.

“This house was her homestead, and she had a longstanding investment in the house and town of Amherst,” Wald says.

A tour of the Dickinson homestead starts with a quick poetry lesson, listening to a few poems (occasionally, visitors are asked to read one), and a discussion of how her work compared with her contemporaries’.

Different writers’ houses vary in their presentations and events designed to reflect the famous former occupants. **The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center** in Hartford brings in speakers to lead discussions on serious topics such as mental



**Photos: Where they wrote**

- If you make a day trip of famous writers’ houses

“

*‘You see the profound emotional experience that visitors have in being in the room where, for instance, Emily Dickinson wrote. You develop a connection to the author that is physical.’*

illness, human trafficking, bullying, and the criminal justice system, while the adjacent **Mark Twain House & Museum** has Twain impersonators regaling visitors with amusing anecdotes.

Stowe moved into the Hartford house in 1873, 21 years after “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was published (it was written in a house she and her husband rented in Brunswick, Maine, that was later designated a National Historic Landmark), so the house has little to offer visitors who want to see where the writer and abolitionist penned her most famous book. “We use Stowe’s story to engender civic engagement,” says Katherine Kane, the Stowe Center’s executive director. The writer is less the subject of the center than its starting point. “In effect, we say to people, ‘If she could address all these issues, you can do it too.’”

The Mark Twain House, on the other hand, offers not so much the complexities of the times as those of the man. The guided tour begins in the house’s entry hall, which is the picture of Gilded Age splendor (silver-stenciled wainscoting and heavily carved banisters) — where one learns that this writer, who famously skewered the pretensions of the affluent, had quite regal tastes.

Closer to Boston are the **Louisa May Alcott Orchard House** in Concord and the **Longfellow National Historic Site** in Cambridge. Both are strong on authenticity, with the actual decorations and furniture that the authors knew and used during their lifetimes.

The Longfellow home is owned and managed by the National Park Service, one of six writers’ homes that the federal agency oversees. “All the furnishings and paintings belonged to the Longfellow family,” says Rick Jenkins, supervisory park ranger in charge of the facility, and the collection includes 30,000 objects. The poet’s daughter, Alice Longfellow, established the Longfellow House Trust in 1928; members of the Longfellow family continued to reside in the premises until 1950.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82) was one of the country’s most famous poets in his day. Tour guides recite “Paul Revere’s Ride” (“Listen my children and you shall hear . . .”) and other works, often less well-known today; they also point out and detail the period objects in the home. During the Revolutionary War,

General George Washington lived in the house, which was built in 1759, so a big theme of the tour is “seeing the house as a prism of much of American political and literary history,” Jenkins says.

Louisa May Alcott’s “Little Women,” on the other hand, continues to be widely read and loved, and many visitors know the story from the film versions that also have been popular. “Eighty to 90 percent of our visitors have some knowledge of the book or movie,” says Jan Turnquist, executive director of the Alcott house. One looks at “the actual furniture the Alcotts sat on, the pillows they embroidered, their sewing bags, May’s original paintings and sketches,” she notes. “If the Alcotts were able to come back to life and walk in the doors, they would feel at home, because nothing has been moved.”

In Lenox, **The Mount** is the home and grounds of Edith Wharton (1862-1937) whose books were popular enough during her heyday that royalties paid for the house and its furnishings — no mean feat for a woman author at the time. The sprawling house and grounds (49 acres, down from its original 113) have since been used for other purposes or closed to the public from time to time, but The Mount has widened its appeal by becoming the residence of the summer theater group Shakespeare & Company, being the site of a summer-long outdoor sculpture exhibition, as well as being rented out for weddings and other events.

Like her good friend and fellow author Henry James, Wharton traveled extensively in Europe and developed a strong affection for European gardens and great houses, and she is believed to have contributed much of The Mount’s design. Her 1897 book “The Decoration of Houses” expressed many of her ideas about functionality, proportion, and symmetry, and Wharton “poured her heart and soul into The Mount,” says Susan Wissler, the executive director. “The house and grounds are autobiographical and provide a window into her mind and passions.”

The books most associated with The Mount are “The Age of Mirth” (1905) and “Ethan Frome” (1911), which she wrote there. The “Age of Mirth” tells a story of Gilded Age Manhattan, where Wharton lived off and on for much of her life before moving to Europe permanently in 1911. Wharton’s writing about life in the big city while living in the country might give some visitors pause, but consider

that Herman Melville wrote his whaling story “Moby-Dick” not in New Bedford (where he lived for a time) but at **Arrowhead**, his Pittsfield home, also a literary tourist site.

Very little of the furnishings in The Mount are authentic — after the house was sold, most of the furniture was sold, too — although more effort has been expended trying to find Wharton’s actual belongings in the library (where she entertained friends) and the bedroom suite (where she wrote). Wissler claims that authenticity has its drawbacks, since “real things” might need to be cordoned off, with “security guards keeping visitors from getting too close.” The mostly period objects in the house offer a certain freedom to visitors, who can touch objects, “sit where you want to sit. I think it’s a good trade-off.”

After all, part of the interest in visiting a writer’s home is simply just looking at how someone else lived, says Hilary Iris Lowe, an assistant professor of history and American studies at Temple University and author of “Mark Twain’s Homes and Literary Tourism.”

“I would say there is a fair number who are very interested in old things, antiques, but also a real interest in how people lived in the past, even the recent past,” she says. “I think we’re all pretty nosy when it comes to wanting to peek into other people’s homes to see how they live.”

*Daniel Grant can be reached at [danhq1@yahoo.com](mailto:danhq1@yahoo.com).*

© 2013 THE NEW YORK TIMES COMPANY

Get full access to [BostonGlobe.com](http://BostonGlobe.com)  
Get full access to [BostonGlobe.com](http://BostonGlobe.com), just 99¢ for 4 weeks

Get Access Now    Expand

Take the Globe with you wherever you go, thanks to [BostonGlobe.com](http://BostonGlobe.com)

Get access to all of the journalism from Boston’s largest newsroom, including articles from the daily paper, breaking news and more. Enjoy a website that easily adapts to your preferred device for the best reading experience. Receive subscriber-only benefits including Globe e-books, editorial events and more.

Get Access Now    Home delivery subscriber? Get your unlimited [BostonGlobe.com](http://BostonGlobe.com) access here.