

For Immediate Release

The Newburyport Literary Festival

For more information contact:

Skye Wentworth

(978) 462-4453

press@newburyportliteraryfestival.org

John Greenleaf Whittier Comes to the Newburyport Literary Festival

The spirit of American poet John Greenleaf Whittier, one of Amesbury's favorite sons and one of America's best-known poets, will be felt on both Saturday and Sunday in Newburyport, when two Newburyport Literary Festival events will be dedicated to his work. Whittier scholar Ben Pickard will present both events with the aid of the John Greenleaf Whittier Homestead.

In the mid- and late-nineteenth century, Whittier was one of the most famous men in America. Statesman, ardent abolitionist, and poet of the first rank, his poems were read and memorized throughout America and much of the English-speaking world. He was born in Haverhill in 1807 and lived in Amesbury from 1836 until his death in 1892. Whittier wrote most of his poetry and prose in his house in Amesbury.

His birthplace, the John Greenleaf Whittier Homestead in Haverhill, is now a museum open to the public, as is the John Greenleaf Whittier Home in Amesbury, his residence for 56 years.

Whittier as a Local Poet, Saturday, April 28

A Whittier biographer once noted that his poetry was written first of all for his neighbors. And certainly Whittier's best poetry seems firmly rooted to his family birthplace, his second home in Amesbury, and, in general, the natural beauty, legends, and history that abounded in Essex County and all New England. This talk will examine a group of these "local," often unknown poems, including "The Countess," "The Double-Headed Snake of Newbury," and "To My Old Schoolmaster." These poems illustrate the tenacious and

artistically satisfying hold that Whittier had on certain local realities like the native scenery, the region's past history and legends, family values, and a belief in principles of freedom and equality.

Whittier and the Two Elizabeths, Sunday, April 29

One of Whittier's lesser poems is entitled "The Two Elizabeths," and, though it deals with St. Elizabeth of Hungary and the Quaker reformer Elizabeth Fry, its theme is the overriding power of a woman's compassion and love in affecting mankind. So the poem serves as an apt metaphor for the two Elizabeths who were central in his life: his sister Elizabeth Hussey Whittier and his niece, another Elizabeth Hussey Whittier. Both these women devoted most of their mature life to caring for Whittier, subordinating their own personal desires to free him from the practical burdens of life, to provide him with the needed time for writing poetry, and to shield him from the incessant demands of his fame. Their lives of service personify the domestic ideal of womanhood that was so prevalent during the nineteenth century, one strongly reinforced by the Christianity of the time. By contrast, Whittier's only mature love relation, the third Elizabeth (Elizabeth Lloyd Howell), suggests another, more emancipated approach that a woman might pursue and one that greatly attracted the poet. The discussion will focus on some of the main roles that the three women named Elizabeth played in Whittier's life.

About Ben Pickard

Ben Pickard, a former professor of English at the University of Florida, taught there for thirty-three years before he retired in 1996. He earned his Ph.D. from Wisconsin and taught at the University of California and Rice University before relocating to Florida. His special interest has always been American literature and he has published or edited thirteen books, mainly on nineteenth-century authors such as John Greenleaf Whittier and Emily Dickinson. He has also been active in the teaching of film and served as a movie columnist for the *Gainesville Sun*. He helped found a preservation society, Historic Gainesville, served as its president, and published three books on local history for that organization. One of them, *Florida's Eden: An Illustrated History of Alachua County*, was the first comprehensive history of the county. In addition he has served as president of the Alachua County Historical Society, helped found the Matheson Historical Center,

and wrote histories of both societies. In 1999 he organized the Alachua Press, served as its first president until 2004, and oversaw its publishing of eight books on local history.

About the festival

The 2007 Newburyport Literary Festival (NLF) runs from Friday, April 27, through Sunday, April 29. A three-day celebration of reading, writing, and the love of books, this year's festival features more than 70 writers of distinguished fiction and non-fiction—including short story writers, children's authors, biographers, nature writers, critics, screenwriters, poets, novelists, and journalists—who will read and discuss their work in venues throughout Newburyport's historic downtown.

The vision of the Newburyport Literary Festival is shared by many individuals and organizations. The NLF is especially grateful for the generous support of our founding sponsors, the Newburyport Five Cents Savings Bank Charitable Foundation and the Institution for Savings, who have made it possible for the festival to take root and flourish. This program is supported in part by a grant from the Amesbury Cultural Council, a local agency that is supported by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency.

All festival events are wheelchair accessible and open to the public. All events are free, except for the opening night gala. For complete information about the festival, including event times and venues, please visit: www.newburyportliteraryfestival.org.