

Research Report: The Pursuit of the Nathan Longfellow Family

By Russell C. Farnham, CG

In the process of compiling a new opus on the Longfellow family, I recently had occasion to research the family of Nathan Longfellow, born in Whitefield, Maine, December 26, 1805, the son of Jacob Longfellow. What follows is the account of my pursuit of the Nathan Longfellow family and the methodology of creating and executing a research plan.

I knew little about Nathan Longfellow. He graduated from Bowdoin College, spent a year as a teacher, and then took a position at a private seminary in Atlanta, Georgia. However that record does not give any indication whether he was teaching there or if he may have been leaning toward the priesthood. Something to place in the "things to do" hopper! After eight years, Nathan returned to New England and married Eliza Wayne Southwick, allegedly at Vassalboro, Maine, February 6, 1844, and they settled in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts. (I reminded myself it would be important to look at published *Southwick Genealogies* to possibly learn of Eliza's parentage. Another thing to place in my "things to do" hopper!) Nathan acquired a paper mill from the well-known Crane family and took up farming later in life. His teaching background clearly influenced his decision to aid his community by serving on the school committee, which he did for 24 years.

But I needed to learn more about him. Off I went to the most logical repository, the New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS) in Boston. A cursory examination of the vast archival material there did not yield much, but a published index of the Norfolk County Probate Court files more or less confirmed Nathan's death at Wellesley in 1894. That year coincides exactly with information I had from other sources, and as he was the only known Nathan Longfellow with a presence there, there is no question as to the identity. Moreover, just above his name was Eliza W. Longfellow, surely his wife. But a third entry for a Nathan Longfellow at Wellesley, this one in 1892, really got my attention, as this was a guardian file. Hmmm! How could this be? Could it be an unknown son of the same name? But the date was before the death of either Nathan or wife Eliza!

I went downstairs at NEHGS, where I was able to access the probate court files of Norfolk County on microfilm. Having already printed a copy of the probate index page containing Nathan, it was now necessary to correlate that docket number with the volume and page index. To my astonishment, the guardian docket on Nathan Longfellow showed the order concerned him, and was a result of a petition filed by his wife Eliza W. Longfellow, and daughter Fannie E. Longfellow, in 1892. He was declared "insane, and incapable of caring for himself." I shrugged this off as nothing more than the normal aging process, as Nathan was then 87 years old.

The following day I made plans for my next stop at the Middlesex County Probate Court in Cambridge. I wanted to be certain that those probate files did not hold any of the Wellesley families. Before leaving, I had to be certain that the court still possessed 150-year-old probate files and that they hadn't been transferred to the State Archives in Dorchester. It would be foolish to drive down the turnpike to Cambridge, cope with the commute, parking, and the courthouse without knowing for certain that they still possessed the files I was after. I was finally able to reach a live person at the court (don't we love the automated answering devices and their limited menus!). "Don" assured me that they indeed had the post-1871 probate files (but not pre-1871) at the Cambridge court, so off I went to face the commute. The Cambridge court is directly in front of Superior Court, where all of the civil cases are heard. Access to the probate court is from Cambridge Street, a main thoroughfare, and the Register of Deeds is conveniently located directly across the street. I was obliged to wait about an hour as "Don" retrieved from another building the old dockets that I wished to review. They were then brought to me and I was able to look at the original documents filed in each docket.

Having now gathered the facts from the probate court, I made plans to visit the Wellesley town library the next day. However, there was little in the way of genealogical materials there. The reference desk librarian was very helpful in locating the many titles they suggested about the town's history. I was able to look at several very small town histories, and one in particular, an environmental report on "Longfellow Pond," really tweaked my interest. Was the pond named for Nathan, or his cousin the poet? I also reviewed the *History of the Town of Wellesley, Massachusetts* (Hon. Joseph

E. Fiske) and, since Wellesley was not incorporated until 1881, the *History of Needham Massachusetts 1711-1911* (George Kuhn Clarke, A.M., L.L.B., 1912). The latter contained considerable references to the Longfellows, but the former had very little information. However, the *Annual Town Reports* of Needham and Wellesley were of great interest to me, as they revealed the taxpayers residing in the towns and other incidental information (for instance, Nathan was paid \$23 in 1859 for his service on the school committee, and \$1.60 for "gravel" in 1882). The "gravel" entry insinuated that he was reimbursed by the town for laying down gravel, perhaps to improve drainage, or for a road.

I was then off to the next town to visit the Needham Public Library because I had concern about some loose ends. While marriage and death records were shown in the town reports (no Longfellows however), birth records were not. But the tax records I found fascinating because I was able to see the growth of Nathan's property, as witnessed by the acreage he owned for his pasture, the buildings (his house and barn), and the mill that he acquired from the Crane family.

The birth records were nowhere to be found, but after further review, I began to have strong suspicions the births occurred in Maine rather than in Wellesley, as I had seen in a secondary source. However, I could now present a much broader picture of Nathan's lifestyle, by virtue of the information uncovered at these various repositories. I found primary records attesting to his health just before his death, his purchase of the mill and buildings from the Crane family, his 24-year tenure on the school committee, and evidence that he still continued to farm his land in his retirement years.

I also found mention of three other Longfellows: A. W. Longfellow (whom I suspect was Augustus, a female), Mary Longfellow, and Fannie E. Longfellow. The latter is a proven daughter of Nathan's, who began teaching at age 16. But Mary Longfellow continues to baffle me, as she shows up early in the 1850s as a teacher, too early to be Nathan's daughter. Could she possibly be a sister? I attempted to access the 1850 U.S. census population schedule for Needham at these libraries to see who was living in Nathan's home at that time, but was unsuccessful. I have now put that into the "things to do" hopper as well, along with my plan for further research. Of special use and interest will be the 1855 census, which the county or town conducted, which could narrow the window considerably. Finally, there is the lingering question of Nathan's stay in Georgia. I plan to look at the 1840 Atlanta census to see if he shows up there. He may very well have had an earlier marriage to a southern woman, and that would explain Mary Longfellow's presence in Wellesley. If so, the 1840 census will show me the number of individuals that lived in Nathan's household, which will help me reconstruct his family before he moved to Wellesley.

For the next phase of Longfellow research, there is clearly a need for a research plan, as there are many loose ends that need to be clarified. Here then are the contents of my Longfellow "things to do" hopper:

- Check 1850 census population schedules, Wellesley and Needham, Mass.
- Check 1840 census, Atlanta, Georgia for Longfellows
- Check 1860 census, Wellesley, Norfolk Co., for Nathan. Confirm place of birth for all family members
- If necessary, check 1830 Atlanta census for Nathan
- Determine if Nathan had an earlier marriage as may be shown in the Atlanta census
- Reconstruct his family, as necessary, from that early census
- Access Vassalboro, Maine records; find Nathan marriage
- Review Maine vital records microfilm for Longfellows at Maine State Archives
- Go to Norfolk County (or NEHGS) and get copy of Longfellow deed index
- Review any Norfolk County history
- Contact town of Wellesley for death and burial records of Longfellows
- Integrate all new information for this family into the current manuscript
- Determine future research