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
John Greenleaf Whittier was my fourth cousin, seven times removed, through my mother, Edna Mae Heath.
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.

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 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 that 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. (http://www.johngreenleafwhittier.com/)