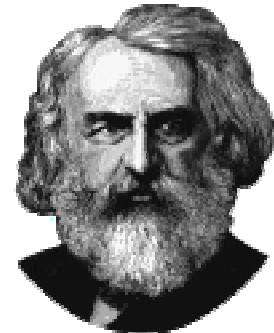


Lady Wentworth

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow [1807–1882] (from *Tales of a Wayside Inn*)

One hundred years ago, and something more,
In Queen Street, Portsmouth, at her tavern door,
Neat as a pin, and blooming as a rose,
Stood Mistress Stavers in her furbelows,
Just as her cuckoo clock was striking nine.
Above her head, resplendent on the sign,
The portrait of the Earl of Halifax,
In scarlet coat and periwig of flax,
Surveyed at leisure all her varied charms,
Her cap, her bodice, her white folded arms,
And half resolved, though he was past his prime,
And rather damaged by the lapse of time,
To fall down at her feet and to declare
The passion that had driven him to despair.
For from his lofty station he had seen
Stavers, her husband, dressed in bottle green,
Drive his new Flying Stage-coach, four in hand,
Down the long lane, and out into the land,
And knew that he was far upon the way
To Ipswich and to Boston on the Bay!

10



20

Longfellow

Just then the meditations of the Earl
Were interrupted by a little girl,
Barefooted, ragged, with neglected hair,
Eyes full of laughter, neck and shoulders bare,
A thin slip of a girl, like a new moon,
Sure to be rounded into beauty soon,
A creature men would worship and adore,
Though now in mean habiliments she bore
A pail of water, dripping, through the street
And bathing, as she went her naked feet.

30

It was a pretty picture, full of grace,—
The slender form, the delicate, thin face;
The swaying motion, as she hurried by;
The shining feet, the laughter in her eye,
That o'er her face in ripples gleamed and glanced,
As in her pail the shifting sunbeam danced:
And with uncommon feelings of delight
The Earl of Halifax beheld the sight.
Not so Dame Stavers, for he heard her say
These words, or thought he did, as plain as day:

40

“O Martha Hilton! Fie! how dare you go
About the town half dressed, and looking so!”
At which the gypsy laughed, and straight replied:
“No matter how I look; I yet shall ride
In my own chariot, ma’am.” And on the child
The Earl of Halifax benignly smiled,
As with her heavy burden she passed on,
Looked back, then turned the corner, and was gone.

What next, upon that memorable day,
Arrested his attention was a gay
And brilliant equipage, that flashed and spun,
The silver harness glittering in the sun,
Outriders with red jackets, lithe and lank,
Pounding the saddles as they rose and sank,
While all alone within the chariot sat
A portly person with three-cornered hat,
A crimson velvet coat, head high in air,
Gold-headed cane, and nicely powdered hair,
And diamond buckles sparkling at his knees,
Dignified, stately, florid, much at ease.
Onward the pageant swept, and as it passed,
Fair Mistress Stavers courtesied low and fast;
For this was Governor Wentworth, driving down
To Little Harbor, just beyond the town,
Where his Great House stood looking out to sea,
A goodly place, where it was good to be.

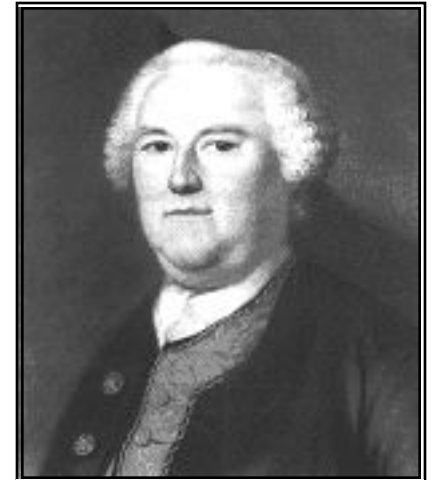
It was a pleasant mansion, an abode
Near and yet hidden from the great high-road,
Sequestered among trees, a noble pile,
Baronial and colonial in its style;
Gables and dormer-windows everywhere,
And stacks of chimneys rising high in air,—
Pandaeon pipes, on which all winds that blew
Made mournful music the whole winter through.
Within, unwonted splendors met the eye,
Panels, and floors of oak, and tapestry;
Carved chimney-pieces, where on brazen dogs
Revelled and roared the Christmas fires of logs;
Doors opening into darkness unawares,
Mysterious passages, and flights of stairs;
And on the walls, in heavy gilded frames,
The ancestral Wentworths with Old-Scripture names.

50

60

70

80



Governor Wentworth

Such was the mansion where the great man dwelt.
A widower and childless; and he felt
The loneliness, the uncongenial gloom,
That like a presence haunted ever room;
For though not given to weakness, he could feel
The pain of wounds, that ache because they heal.

The years came and the years went,—seven in all,
And passed in cloud and sunshine o'er the Hall; 90
The dawns their splendor through its chambers shed,
The sunsets flushed its western windows red;
The snow was on its roofs, the wind, the rain;
Its woodlands were in leaf and bare again;
Moons waxed and waned, the lilacs bloomed and died,
In the broad river ebbd and flowed the tide,
Ships went to sea, and ships came home from sea,
And the slow years sailed by and ceased to be.

And all these years had Martha Hilton served 100
In the Great House, not wholly unobserved:
By day, by night, the silver crescent grew,
Though hidden by clouds, her light still shining through;
A maid of all work, whether coarse or fine,
A servant who made service seem divine!
Through her each room was fair to look upon;
The mirrors glistened, and the brasses shone,
The very knocker on the outer door,
If she but passed, was brighter than before.

And now the ceaseless turning of the mill 110
Of Time, that never for an hour stands still,
Ground out the Governor's sixtieth birthday,
And powdered his brown hair with silver-gray.
The robin, the forerunner of the spring,
The bluebird with his jocund carolling,
The restless swallows building in the eaves,
The golden buttercups, the grass, the leaves,
The lilacs tossing in the winds of May,
All welcomed this majestic holiday!
He gave a splendid banquet served on plate, 120
Such as became the Governor of the State,
Who represented England and the King,
And was magnificent in everything.
He had invited all his friends and peers,—
The Pepperels, the Langdons, and the Lears,
The Sparhawks, the Penhallows, and the rest;



“A Maid of All Work”

For why repeat the name of every guest?
But I must mention one, in bands and gown,
The rector there, the Reverend Arthur Brown
Of the Established Church; with smiling face
He sat beside the Governor and said grace;
And then the feast went on, as others do,
But ended as none other I e'er knew.

130

When they had drunk the King, with many a cheer,
The Governor whispered in a servant's ear,
Who disappeared and presently there stood
Within the room, in perfect womanhood,
A maiden, modest and yet self-possessed,
Youthful and beautiful, and simply dressed.
Can this be Martha Hilton? It must be!
Yes, Martha Hilton, and no other she!
Dowered with the beauty of her twenty years,
How ladylike, how queenlike she appears;
The pale, thin crescent of the days gone by
Is Dian now in all her majesty!
Yet scarce a guest perceived that she was there,
Until the Governor, rising from his chair,
Played slightly with his ruffles, then looked down,
And said unto the Reverend Arthur Brown:
"This is my birthday: it shall likewise be
My wedding-day; and you shall marry me!"

140



150

Lady Wentworth

The listening guests were greatly mystified,
None more so than the rector, who replied:
"Marry you? Yes, that were a pleasant task,
Your Excellency; but to whom? I ask."
The Governor answered: "To this lady here"
And beckoned Martha Hilton to draw near.
She came and stood, all blushes, at his side.
The rector paused. The impatient Governor cried:
"This is the lady; do you hesitate?
Then I command you as Chief Magistrate."
The rector read the service loud and clear:
"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here,"
And so on to the end. At his command
On the fourth finger of her fair left hand
The Governor placed the ring; and that was all:
Martha was Lady Wentworth of the Hall!

160

Notes (lines in parentheses)

Queen Street, Portsmouth (l. 2): Queen Street was a major street in pre-Revolutionary Portsmouth. After the Revolution, it was known for a time as Buck Street. Today, it is State Street. (King Street became Congress Street.)

Mistress Stavers (l. 4): John Stavers and his wife ran the Earl of Halifax Tavern. Before the Revolution, it was widely known as a Tory tavern — sympathetic to the English. Mindful of the changing political climate in 1775, Stavers renamed the establishment the William Pitt Tavern.

Furbelows (l. 4): ruffles

Earl of Halifax (l. 7): Taverns in the 18th century were identified by their signs, often of well known personages; see, for example, the General Wolfe Tavern sign on display at the Museum of N.H. History

Periwig (l. 8): wig

Bodice (l. 10): lady's laced outer garment, worn like a vest over the blouse

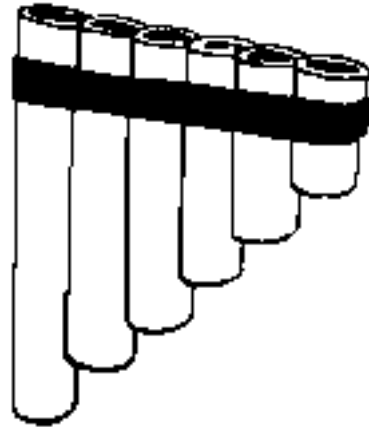
Habiliments (l. 28): clothing

Equipage (l. 51): fancy carriage

Pandæan pipes (l. 73): panpipes (see drawing)

Governor's sixtieth birthday (l. 111) and **beauty of her twenty years** (l. 141): Longfellow shaved a few years from both his subjects, but kept the disparity in their ages accurate. When he married Martha Hilton on March 15, 1760, Benning Wentworth was in his 64th year. Information about Martha Hilton is less certain, but it is believed she was born in 1737, making her 23 at her marriage to the governor.

Dian (l. 144): Diana was Roman goddess of chastity, the hunt — and the moon!



Questions for Study

1. Contrast the appearances of Martha Hilton and Governor Wentworth as they appear to Mistress Stavers.
2. Describe how Mistress Stavers's reaction to Martha Hilton differs from that to Governor Wentworth?
3. Martha Hilton is three times compared to the moon. Can you find the references? What do the different references tell us about how Martha is maturing?
4. According to the poet, how old was Benning Wentworth when he married? How old was Martha Hilton?
5. How did the party guests react to the governor's announcement that the Reverend Brown perform a marriage ceremony? Why did they react the way they did?