

Just Who Was the First (Unofficial) Poet Laureate of the United States?

Robert Lee Frost (March 26, 1874 – January 29, 1963) was born in San Francisco, CA, the son of a teacher/journalist, William Prescott Frost, Jr., and Isabelle Moodie Frost. His father died when Robert was ten years old, and Robert moved to Lawrence, MA with his mother and his sister, Jeanie, to live with his paternal grandparents. Today, there is an elementary school named for Frost in Lawrence, MA.

Frost graduated from Lawrence High School in 1892, co-valedictorian with the young woman who was later to become his wife, Elinor White. He attended Dartmouth College for one semester, but he was restless and returned home to teach and to work at various jobs.

Frost's first published poem, "My Butterfly: An Elegy" appeared in the *New York Independent* in November, 1894. He was paid fifteen dollars; this convinced him that he could write good poetry.

In December of 1895, Robert finally married Elinor (she had turned him down before, because she wanted to finish college first). Their first child, Elliott, was born the following September in 1896.

Frost decided to give formal education another try, and he entered Harvard in September, 1897 to study liberal arts. He left Harvard after two years without attaining a degree in order to work and support his young family.

The Frosts' second child, Lesley, was born in April of 1899. Their first son, Elliott, died of cholera in July, 1900, just a few months short of his fourth birthday.

In October, 1900, the Frosts moved to a poultry farm in Derry, NH, which was purchased for them by Robert's paternal grandfather. A month later, his mother, Isabelle, passed away from cancer. The farm in Derry is now a New Hampshire State Park location and is run as an historic house museum.

May, 1902, brought the birth of the Frosts' third child, a son named Carol. In June, 1903, their fourth child, Irma was born. Their fifth child, Marjorie, was born in March, 1905.

Robert Frost began teaching at Pinkerton Academy in Derry, NH in 1906. He held this position for five years. Pinkerton Academy now houses the Robert Frost Writing Center on campus.

The Frosts' sixth child, Elinor Bettina, was born in June of 1907; sadly, she passed away within a few days.

Frost gave up poultry farming in 1911 and moved to teaching English full time at the New Hampshire Normal School in Plymouth, NH (now Plymouth State University). There are several of Frost's letters and other artifacts at Plymouth State University in the [George H. Browne Robert Frost Collection](#) at the [Michael J. Spinelli Jr. Center for University Archives and Special Collections](#).

Robert Frost

Unable to get his poetry appreciated and published in the United States, Frost and his family moved to England in September, 1912. There he made the acquaintance of several authors and poets, among them Edward Thomas, T. E. Hulme, and Ezra Pound, and in 1913, Frost's first collection, *A Boy's Will*, was published in England. Shortly after, in May of 1914, *North of Boston* was also published in England; this event assured Frost a degree of fame and established him as a new and interesting voice in poetry. Familiar works from these two books include "A Late Walk," "Storm Fear," and "Now Close the Windows" (from *A Boy's Will*), and "Mending Wall," "After Apple Picking," "Home Burial," and "Death of the Hired Man" (from *North of Boston*).

The advent of World War I in 1915 spurred the Frost family to return to the United States. After some looking around while staying with friends in Bethlehem, NH, they settled on the farm on Ridge Road in Franconia, NH, where the family lived full-time for five years, and rented during the summer for nineteen years thereafter. This location is now the Frost Place museum and center for poetry and the arts, hosting the Dartmouth Poet in Residence every summer, along with three conferences for writing, teaching, and the work of poetry and poets.

Frost's collection, *Mountain Interval*, was published in 1916, republished in 1920, and the poems were re-ordered and the collection published again in 1921. Many of his most familiar poems appear in this collection: "The Road Not Taken," "Birches," and "Out, Out—" are among them.

Frost began the first of three periods of teaching at Amherst College in 1917: 1917-20, 1923-25, and 1926-38. The college is home to the Robert Frost Library, which houses many of the poet's works and artifacts. This library was dedicated by President John F. Kennedy in October, 1963.

In 1920, the Frosts moved to a home in Shaftsbury, VT called Stone House. This house is located on the campus of Bennington College and serves as a museum.

Frost accepted a teaching fellowship at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor in 1921, where he taught until returning to Amherst. He was awarded a lifetime appointment at University of Michigan-Ann Arbor as a Fellow in Letters, and the Robert Frost Ann Arbor home was purchased by [The Henry Ford Museum](#) in Dearborn, Michigan, and has been relocated to the museum's Greenfield Village site for public tours.

The year 1921 saw the beginning of forty two summers that Frost lectured on the Bread Loaf Campus of Middlebury College in Ripton, VT. Starting in 1939 until his death in 1963, Robert Frost spent each summer and fall in a cabin on his farm in Ripton in order to lecture and teach at Middlebury College's Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and the Bread Loaf School of English. Middlebury College created the Robert Frost Farm and Cabin Preservation Fund in order to secure and maintain the site as a National Historic Landmark.

Robert Frost won his first Pulitzer Prize in 1923 for his collection titled *New Hampshire*. Among other favorites, the collection includes such favorite poems as "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Nothing Gold Can Stay," "For Once,



Then Something,” and the title poem, **“New Hampshire.”** Frost won his second Pulitzer Prize in 1931 for the book *Collected Poems*.

May, 1934 brought the death of his daughter, Marjorie, of puerperal fever, shortly after giving birth. Also starting in 1934, Frost began to spend winter months in Florida. In March 1935, he gave a talk at the University of Miami. Later, in 1940, Frost bought a five-acre piece of land in South Miami which he named Pencil Pines; he spent his winters there for the rest of his life

Frost won his third Pulitzer Prize in 1937 for the book *A Further Range*. This collection, currently out of print, includes familiar poems such as **“Design”** and **“Two Tramps in Mud Time.”**

Elinor White Frost died in March, 1938 of a heart attack after years of heart problems and breast cancer. This year also marked the end of his summers in Franconia, NH.

In 1939, Robert Frost was awarded the Ralph Waldo Emerson Fellow in Poetry at Harvard University, and he taught there until 1943.

Frost’s son Carol died of suicide in October, 1940.

Frost bought a house and moved to Cambridge, MA in 1941.

1943 brought a fourth and final Pulitzer Prize for the book *A Witness Tree*, which is currently out of print. The most famous poem from this collection is **“The Gift Outright,”** the poem Frost recited at President Kennedy’s inauguration. Also in 1943, Frost began a six-year teaching fellowship at Dartmouth College as the George Ticknor Fellow in the Humanities.

Frost was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal for his works in 1960.

On January 20, 1961, Robert Frost became the unofficial first Poet Laureate of the United States when he presented his poem “The Gift Outright” from memory at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy. Over the years, Kennedy and Frost had become friends, and Frost wrote an original poem for the inauguration titled “Dedication.” However, due to the bright sunlight, Frost was unable to see to read the poem, and therefore recited “The Gift Outright” instead.

Frost was named Poet Laureate of Vermont in July, 1961, and in 1962, he was awarded the Edward MacDowell Medal for outstanding contribution to the arts by the MacDowell Colony.

In September of 1962, upon the urging of President Kennedy, Robert Frost traveled to Russia and met with Nikita Khrushchev. The two discussed relations between the United States and Russia at Frost’s bedside, as the elderly poet-turned-diplomat had fallen ill on the trip. Khrushchev sent his personal physician to look after Frost, and he came to visit him personally so they could have their meeting. At the time, Frost was a Consultant to the Library of Congress, and due to his friendship with the president, he felt he was in a unique position to further the cause of peace with Russia. The two men—world leader and poet—spoke for about an hour and half, with Frost arguing that “the leaders [Khrushchev and



Kennedy] had a duty to resolve conflicts before they became inflamed and to create a climate of understanding in which wide-ranging contact and competition could thrive" (Udall). Unfortunately, upon returning, the exhausted Frost mis-spoke to the press, saying that Krushchev thought the United States was "too liberal to fight" (which Krushchev never said), and this angered President Kennedy. The result was an irreparable rift between Frost and Kennedy, and Frost died before they could mend their relationship.

On January 29, 1963, Robert Frost died at the age of 88 from complications following prostate surgery. He is buried at the Old Bennington Cemetery in Bennington, VT with his wife, Elinor, and other family members. Only his two daughters, Lesley and Irma, survived him.

Works Cited

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