

Who Owns Robert Frost?

*The Contentious Legacy of the
Great American Poet*



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CAROL E. THOMPSON/THE FRIENDS OF ROBERT FROST

Left: Robert Frost's cabin in Ripton is where he is reputed to have written while summering in the Middlebury area. Right: His Shaftsbury home is being turned into a museum by Frost enthusiasts in that area.

BY STEPHEN S. HOWIE

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Sure, the woods were lovely. But they were also dark and deep. And Robert Frost had promises to keep — lectures across the country, ongoing academic positions at Amherst, Dartmouth, Harvard and the University of Michigan, positions that required him not to teach, but to be available for readings and dinner parties; he had farms to tend in New Hampshire and Vermont; he had a troubled family life to keep up with, friends to visit, critics to respond to, and books to publish.

When he was done with a lifetime of poetry, Frost left to the world a disjointed and contradictory legacy. Scholars dispute everything from who Frost was as a man to where he did his best work, how successful he was as a farmer and which of his many farms and homesteads Frost and his family held most dear.

Frost seemed to add to the controversy during his life. His poem *New Hampshire* about the virtue of that state, ends with the playfully ironic line, "At present I am living in Vermont." To make matters worse, Frost dedicated the book *New Hampshire* to Vermont and Michigan. According to Frost's granddaughter, Lesley Lee Francis, Frost reveled in the idea that his legacy would be disputed well after his death.

"He often spoke of the clash over him after he'd gone," Francis said. "He thought there would be a clashing of sorts, fighting over his soul."

The provincial clash over Frost took shape early in his career. In 1922, the Vermont State League of Women's Clubs voted to name Frost Poet Laureate in Vermont, despite the fact that he was spending most of the year teaching in Michigan and was a California native. The *New York Times* was quick to pick up on the contradiction, noting in an editorial that Frost "does have a summer place in South Shaftsbury, Vt., and that seems to be his only connection with the Green Mountain State...."

The battle over the "Great American Poet" has continued posthumously, just as Frost hoped it would. New Hampshire, the only state to have a Frost book named in its honor, is home to two Frost homesteads, the Robert Frost Farm in Derry, where Frost lived from 1900-1910, and the Frost Place in Franconia, where Frost and his family lived from 1915 to 1920.

A southern Vermont group calling itself the "Friends of Robert Frost" is in the midst of an effort to buy and convert the Stone House in Shaftsbury into a Frost Museum. Frost lived there on and off from 1920 to 1938, and he is buried nearby.

Further north, Frost's summer cabin in Ripton, VT, is used to house Middlebury College faculty in the summer. To the south, Lawrence, MA, which sports a Frost Fountain and Robert Frost Elementary School, boasts that it is "Robert Frost's Home Town," despite the fact that Frost was born in San Francisco. Lawrence is also home to the Robert Frost Foundation, a group that eventually hopes to create the Robert Frost National Visitors Center in Lawrence. As for the Robert Frost Society, publisher of the *Robert Frost Review*, its home is the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

In The *Robert Frost Encyclopedia*, the entry for "Homes of Robert Frost" takes up three pages. Indeed, the poet known as a reclusive Yankee was restless, "barding around the country" as he used to say. For those who imagine Frost as a settled farmer waking early and retreating to his study for hours on end, it might come as a shock that the poet lived in 40 different homes in the 70 years between marriage and death, including an estate in South Miami.

The Yankee poet was in fact named after the Confederate General Robert E. Lee, whom his father idolized despite his northern upbringing. During the Civil War, a young Will Frost ran away from his home in Massachusetts to fight under General Lee. He made it as far as Philadelphia before he was arrested and sent back to face two very angry parents.

Frost himself was a paradox. The New England poet was first recognized for his craft in England, where his first two books were published. He became famous as a speaker, but was so nervous before an audience that at his high school co-valedictorian speech in Lawrence, he ran outside before taking the stage to throw up in the parking lot. He was sickly in youth and hearty in his old age, a prolific author more known for staying up all night talking than he was for doing the same at his writing chair. During his Derry years, the poet who became known for capturing New England speech, actually listened in to farmers talking on the party line, to catch the nuances of New Hampshire dialect.

"Frost as a New England farmer is a self-invention," explained biographer Jay Parini. "He chose a mask for himself, and, over seven decades, he became that mask."

Frost died in Boston, but his gravesite is in Bennington, VT, with an inscription that seems to sum up the turbulent path of the man himself, "I had a lovers' quarrel with the world."

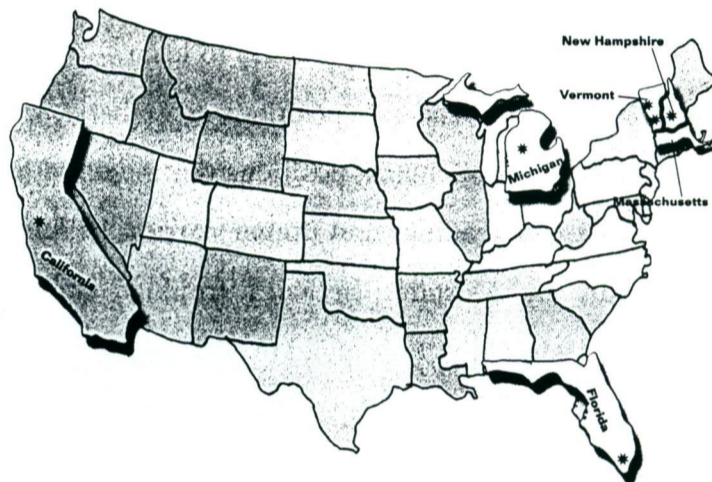
In the years since his death, granddaughter and biographer Lesley Lee Francis has seen the debate over Robert Frost come full circle. When Lawrence Thompson published his exhaustive, three-book biography, a New York critic labeled Frost a "monster." At Frost's 85th birthday party in New York, author Lionel Trilling called Frost a "terrifying poet."

More recent biographers have cast him as a tortured genius who blamed himself for the many tragedies that befell his family.

In the introduction to his book examining the contradictions and tensions in Frost's poetry, editor Robert Faggen suggests that Frost enjoyed writing on two levels and often took on the role of "a trickster — innocent and sinister at once..." Parini suggested that Frost might have been manic-depressive, a diagnosis disputed by Frost's granddaughter. According to Francis, Frost foresaw the struggle to come to grips with his legacy, and embraced the idea that he and his work could be both benign and terrifying. Indeed, in the weeks after Trilling's infamous birthday speech, Frost admitted that he liked his new role. As he wrote to an apologetic Trilling: "No sweeter music can come to my ears than the clash of arms over my dead body when I am down."

Now that Frost is in fact "down," the clashing of arms has taken shape in a geographical debate. Parini insists that Frost did his best work during his Derry years, although he adds that Frost "felt most at home in Vermont." Donald Sheehan, executive director of the Frost Place, said Frost "did his best work in Franconia," even though much of that work wasn't published until Frost was living in Vermont.

Carole Thompson, who's spearheading the effort to purchase Frost's Shaftsbury home, claims Frost's career did not truly blossom until he was situated in southern Vermont, where he wrote "*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*" (written on a hot July morning, no less). It was while living at the Stone House, Thompson points out, that Frost won three of his four Pulitzer prizes. Other scholars say much of



A few of the places that Robert Frost called home throughout his life.

that material was either written when he lived in New Hampshire or inspired by his memories there.

Some contend that, if it hadn't been for the outbreak of World War I, Frost would have never even returned to the United States from England. In recognition of this, yet another group, The Friends of the Dymock Poets, honors Frost and others in Ledbury, England.

According to Sheehan, Frost's Franconia advocate, the important thing is not that Frost lived a settled life, but that he understood the significance of place. "I think from early experiences, he had the sense of significance of place," Sheehan said. "His capacity to enter into a place and be present to its truth is astonishing."

Throughout his life, Frost was known for manipulating opposites in both his poetry and in his conversations. He once said that self-knowledge can come only through understanding opposites and that the most important part of poetry is what's left "unsaid." Perhaps then it should come as no surprise that Frost's legacy is also filled with the paradoxes he enjoyed playing with in his life and work. His own granddaughter only adds to the question when talking about the issue of who, in the end, can lay the greatest and most unabashed claim to the American and English poet. of Californian and New England descent, who lived for a time here and for a time there, and who is now memorialized from the northern tip of New Hampshire to the deep south of Mississippi.

"When was he most at home?" Francis mused about her contradictory grandfather. "He was most at home when walking." ▀