

## *Brief Biography of Emily Dickinson*

Emily Dickinson was born on 10 December 1830 in [Amherst](#), in western [Massachusetts](#), and died there on 15 May 1886. Her parents were Edward Dickinson (1803-1874) and Emily Norcross Dickinson (1804-1882). The family included three children: Austin (1828-1895), Emily, and Lavinia (1833-1899). Most of the family belonged to the [Congregational Church](#), though the poet herself never became a member. The Dickinsons were well-off and well-educated. Both Edward and Austin were college graduates, leaders in the community and of [Amherst College](#). Edward Dickinson was a Whig (later a Republican) representative to state and national legislatures. Emily had a strong secondary education and a year of college at South Hadley Female Seminary (later [Mount Holyoke College](#)).

The poet was born in, and died in, a house called [the Homestead](#), built by her grandfather Samuel Fowler Dickinson in 1813. This house was sold out of the family, however, in 1833, and not re-purchased by Edward Dickinson till 1855; so most of the poet's younger years were lived in other houses.

After her years at school, Emily Dickinson lived in the family home for the rest of her life. She cared for her parents in their later years and was a companion to her sister Lavinia, who also stayed "at home" for her entire life. Neither sister married. The extended Dickinson family included Austin's wife Susan Huntington Gilbert, who lived for many years next door in the house called The Evergreens, and Susan and Austin's three children.

The myth, of course, is of Dickinson as a reclusive spinster-poet, brooding over a deep romantic mystery in her past. The realities are more mundane. Especially among relatively wealthy families in 19th-century Massachusetts, it was far from unusual for grown women simply to keep house as a primary occupation, neither marrying nor working outside the home. The thing that sets Dickinson apart from other women of her class and generation is simply her poetic gift, something attributable more to nature and culture than to some emotional trauma.

We know much of Dickinson's life through her correspondences. She maintained a lifelong correspondence with Susan Dickinson, even though they were next-door neighbors; this correspondence, preserved by Susan, is the source for many of the poet's manuscripts. But Emily Dickinson also corresponded with school friends, with her cousins Fanny and Loo Norcross, and with several people of letters, including Samuel Bowles, Dr. and Mrs. J.G. Holland, [T.W. Higginson](#), and [Helen Hunt Jackson](#).

The central events, then, of Dickinson's life are those that are central to the lives of most writers: she *wrote*. She compiled a manuscript record of nearly 1,800 poems, along with many letters. In or around 1858 she began to keep manuscript books of her poetry, the "fascicles," hand-produced and hand-bound. In the early 1860s she produced hundreds of poems each year. In

1864 and 1865, failing eyesight, which impelled her to make two extended visits to Cambridge, Massachusetts for medical treatment, slowed her production of manuscript books. But her production of manuscripts continued at a slower pace until her last illnesses in 1885-86. Though she wrote hundreds of poems, Dickinson never published a book of poetry. The few poems published during her lifetime were anonymous (see [Publishing History](#)). The reasons why she never published are still unclear. A myth promoted by [William Luce's play](#) *The Belle of Amherst* (1976) is that Higginson discouraged her writing; however, it is probably not the case that Dickinson met with rejection from the literary world. For one thing, Higginson was instrumental in getting her poetry published soon after her death, suggesting that her reluctance and not his disapproval was the barrier to him doing this earlier. Also, both Bowles and Hunt Jackson arranged for anonymous publication of individual poems by Dickinson during the poet's lifetime. At Hunt Jackson's suggestion, Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers publishing house tried to get the poet to submit a volume of poems for publication in 1883; she declined.