

This Day in History... January 19, 1809

Birth of Renowned Writer Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe was born on January 19, 1809, in Boston, Massachusetts.

Poe's work, featuring dark themes of death and violence, is a reflection of his tormented and tragic life. His father abandoned the family when Edgar was only a year old. His mother, actress Elizabeth Arnold Poe, died when he was only two. Eerily, the Richmond Theater, where she gave her last performance, burned to the ground a few days later, killing 72 people.

Orphaned at the age of two, Poe was taken in by John and Frances Allan, of Richmond, Virginia. They never formally adopted him, and Poe believed they never really loved him. His foster father both spoiled and sternly disciplined Poe throughout his childhood.



"The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is considered the first modern detective story.

The family traveled to Britain in 1815, and Edgar attended grammar school in both Scotland and London. Poe returned to America in 1820 and later served in the youth honor guard that welcomed Marquis de Lafayette during his 1824 visit to America. In 1826 he attended the University of Virginia, but amassed significant gambling debts and dropped out after a year. Poe then took a series of odd jobs before enlisting in the Army.

Poe joined the Army for a five year term under the name Edgar A. Perry. He also lied about his age, claiming he was 22 when he was only 18. Around this same time, Poe published his first book, a 40-page collection of poetry titled, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. There were only 50 copies printed and the book received little attention.

After a brief stint at Fort Independence in Boston, Poe was ordered to South Carolina's Fort Moultrie in October 1827. Despite his poor performance in school, Poe was a good soldier, earning two promotions during his one-year stay at Fort Moultrie. He reached the highest rank of a non-commissioned officer, regimental sergeant-major.

Eventually Poe realized that he would not make it any farther in the military without attending West Point, so he got permission to leave his enlistment early to enroll in the famous school. However, his lack of focus again made him a poor student, and he eventually dropped out and committed himself to being a full-time writer.

Poe is often considered the first well-known American to try to make a living by writing alone. At the time most publishers simply reprinted British works because it was cheaper than paying American writers for new stories. However, this didn't deter Poe from writing. By the early 1830s he'd published three books of poetry and had his short stories printed in various periodicals. In 1833, he won an award from the *Baltimore Saturday*

Visitor for his short story, "MS. Found in a Bottle." This earned him some attention and led to an editor's position at a Richmond periodical. Poe claimed that the paper's circulation increased from 700 to 3,400 during his tenure, in which he published poems, book reviews, critiques, and short stories. It was also during this time that he married his 13-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm.

Over the next few years, Poe worked for several other periodicals and attempted to start his own. On January 29, 1845, his poem "The Raven" was published in the *Evening Mirror* and earned him considerable fame. However, he was only paid \$9 for its publication. Then in 1847, his wife who'd been sick for several years died. Poe's drinking had worsened when she first became sick, but after her death he became unstable.

On October 3, 1849, Poe was found wandering the streets of Baltimore in a delirious state. He was taken to Washington Medical College where he died on October 7. His medical records and death certificate were lost, and no one knows for sure what caused his death. His last words were reported to have been "Lord help my poor soul."



"The Gold-Bug" was Poe's most financially-successful work during his life.



Poe's time at Fort Moultrie influenced several of his later writings, which were set in that area of South Carolina.



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