

This Day in History... July 18, 1899

Death of Horatio Alger

On July 18, 1899, "rags to riches" author Horatio Alger died.

Horatio Alger was born in Chelsea, Massachusetts, on January 13, 1832. Alger was the son of a Unitarian minister and his forefathers had settled Plymouth, attended the Constitutional Convention, and fought in the War of 1812.

Alger was a talented but sickly child and his father was determined that he'd one day enter the ministry. To this end his father tutored him in classical studies and invited him to sit in while he ministered parishioners.

While attending school, Alger published his earliest works in local newspapers. After graduating from preparatory school at age 15, Alger was accepted to Harvard. He was a bright student, earning scholastic prizes and awards. Alger's writing also blossomed during this time, as he studied under Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In fact, Alger often used Longfellow's writing as a model for his own. During this time he also explored the works of other modern writers including Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, and Herman Melville. In 1849 he became a professional writer when he sold two essays and a poem to the *Pictorial National Library* magazine.

Alger graduated eighth in his class in 1852. With no job prospects he returned home and continued writing, sending his work to magazines with some success. After a brief time at the Harvard Divinity School, Alger took a job as assistant editor of the *Boston Daily Advertiser*. However he soon found he disliked editing and quit to become a teacher at a boy's boarding school known as The Grange.

Alger published his first book, a collection of short stories titled, *Bertha's Christmas Vision: An Autumn Sheaf*, in 1856. The following year he published another book, a long satirical poem, titled, *Nothing to Do: A Tilt at Our Best Society*. Alger then returned to the Harvard Divinity School before touring Europe. When he returned to America in 1861, America was at war. His health exempted him from the draft, but Alger published a number of writings supporting the Union cause.

From the Famous Authors Series



In 1864 Alger's first novel, *Marie Bertrand: The Felon's Daughter*, was printed in serials in the *New York Weekly*. That same year he also published his first boys' book, *Frank's Campaign*. After a brief time as a minister, Alger decided to commit all his time to writing and moved to New York City. There he was moved by the plight of thousands of vagrant children that relocated to the city following the Civil War. He then composed a ballad, "John Maynard," which earned him accolades from many, including his idol, Longfellow.

As many of his adult novels were poorly received, Alger focused more on writing for children. In January 1867 the *Student and Schoolmate* began running installments of his story, *Ragged Dick*, about a poor bootblack (boot shiner) that rose to middle-class success. The story proved so popular Alger expanded it and published it as a novel in 1868. *Ragged Dick* was Alger's most popular and successful work of his career. He was contracted to write a whole series of books, though none ever reached the popularity of *Ragged Dick*.

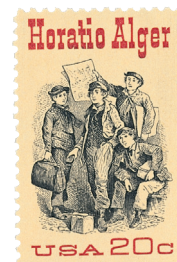


Stamp pictures Longfellow and a scene from his famous poem, "Paul Revere's Ride."

By the mid 1870s, Alger was suffering financially and his work had become stale, so he set out West to find inspiration. However, his stories had the same "rags to riches" themes, but were just set in the West. After returning to New York, Alger continued to write while also tutoring the children of the rich and helping the poor children in the streets to find better lives.

In 1881, Alger was hired to write a biography of President James Garfield. The book sold well, though many of the conversations and events were based on the author's imagination and not reality. He was then commissioned to write biography of Abraham Lincoln, which was also more based in fantasy than reality.

Alger continued to write into his final years until his death on July 18, 1899. His legacy lives on through the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans, which gives out annual awards to "outstanding individuals... who have succeeded in the face of adversity" and scholarships "to encourage young people to pursue their dreams with determination and perseverance." And in 1982 the musical *Shine!* was based on his writing.



Stamp pictures some of Alger's "rags to riches" characters.



Issued in New Bedford, Massachusetts, the setting of Moby Dick.

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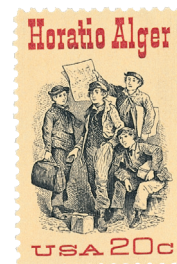
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