

## This Day in History... July 22, 1898

### Birth of Stephen Vincent Benét

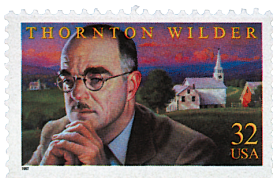
Stephen Vincent Benét was born on July 22, 1898, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Benet was born into a military family and grew up hearing their stories. He had an uncle who served with the Navy in the Spanish-American War, a grandfather who served with the Army Ordnance Corps during the Civil War, and his father was a colonel in the US Army. Growing up, Benét's father spent hours reading to his children. This, combined with tales of his family history, gave Benét a love of storytelling and a desire to become an author.

Benét went to the Hitchcock Military Academy when he was 10 and attended the Summerville Academy in Georgia. He then went to Yale University, where Thornton Wilder referred to him as "the power behind the Yale Lit" (*Yale Literary Magazine*). During his time there Benét also published some work in the school's humor magazine, *The Yale Record*.



Stamp from the Literary Arts Series, issued on Benét's 100th birthday.



Benét and Wilder became friends at the Elizabethan Society at Yale University.

Benét published his first book of poetry at the age of 17 while he was still a student – *Five Men and Pompey*. He published another book of poetry, *The Drug-Shop*, in 1917. He left school for a year for civilian military service, working as a cipher clerk. He then returned to Yale and submitted his third book of poetry in place of a thesis, graduating in 1919.

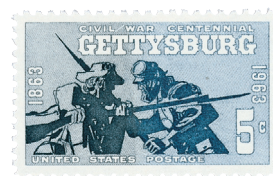
After publishing his first novel, *The Beginning of Wisdom*, in 1921, Benét moved to France for a traveling fellowship to study at the Sorbonne. While there, he met fellow writer Rosemary Carr, who he married upon returning to America. During their careers, the pair would collaborate on some of their works.

Benét quickly established himself as a leading, successful poet, with such works as *The Ballad of William Sycamore* and the ballad *The Mountain Whippoorwill*. Despite the fame and acclaim these works brought him, they didn't bring great fortune. Wanting to support his growing family, he took a variety of jobs including writing short stories for magazines, reviewing books and plays, collaborating on

two stage dramas, and writing romantic fiction for magazines.

With a long-held love of history, Benét approached the Guggenheim Foundation in 1925 requesting a grant to do research for a long historical poem on the Civil War. They awarded him the \$2,500 grant and he moved his family to Paris where they could live more frugally. Benét expected to need seven years to fully research his poem, but he completed it in less than two.

The resulting 15,000-line *John Brown's Body* (1928) would become his most famous work. It elevated him from a successful young poet to a national hero. It sold more than 130,000 copies in its first year alone. The epic poem tells the story of the Civil War from several viewpoints, including a Southern belle, an abolitionist, a slave, and a farmer who fights in the Battle of Gettysburg. The poem mixed historical figures with fictional characters to tell the stories behind important events of the war. Benet earned a Pulitzer Prize for this poem in 1929.



The Civil War epic *John Brown's Body* was one of Benét's most popular works.



"The Devil and Daniel Webster" was later adapted for stage and screen

Benét continued to write for popular magazines and briefly worked as a screenwriter in Hollywood, producing a script for *Abraham Lincoln* for D.W. Griffith. In 1930, he began suffering from arthritis, which would plague him for the rest of his life. In response to the rise of fascism in Europe, some of his work took on a more political tone, with such works as *Nightmare, with Angels*, and *Litany for Dictatorships*. During this time, he also collaborated with his wife on a book of poems about historical figures for children. In 1937, he published another of his most notable works, "The Devil and Daniel Webster." He won one of his three O. Henry Awards for this work.

In 1933, Benét was made editor of the Yale Series of Younger Poets. He also lectured at writers' conferences, wrote book reviews, was part of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. During World War II, Benét worked to raise American morale, serving on the Council for Democracy. He wrote speeches and radio scripts, as well as *America*, a 40,000-word history of the US that was distributed worldwide.

Benét worked tirelessly, even amid health problems and died of a heart attack on March 14, 1943. At the time, he'd been working on the first of a nine-book narrative poem about America's settlement, *Western Star*. It was published shortly after his death and won the 1944 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

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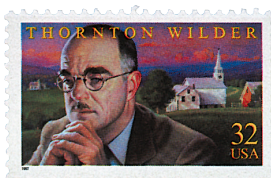
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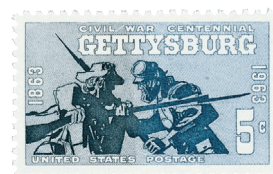
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