

In the Waiting Room: Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979)



This self-guided tour (20 minutes driving, 85 minutes walking) leads you southward along Main Street in Worcester, Massachusetts, to six sites related to Elizabeth Bishop (Fig. 1), who won the Pulitzer Prize for her *Poems: North and South and A Cold Spring*; the National Book Award for her *Complete Poems*; and the Neustadt Prize for her last book, *Geography III*, among other honors. As the titles of her books might suggest, such a tour is particularly appropriate for Bishop—who, after leaving Worcester, spent much of her life traveling and found homes across many continents and countries. It begins at **507 Main Street** (at the corner of Franklin Street, near City Hall) and ends at her grave in **Hope Cemetery**.

Fig 1. Pen-and-ink portrait of Bishop by Emma Kuper; courtesy of the artist

1. One of Bishop's most famous poems, "In the Waiting Room," opens with the line "In Worcester, Massachusetts," which recurs in the last stanza. Written from a child's point of view, this poem recounts a frightening experience that young Elizabeth had in a dentist's waiting room, three days before her seventh birthday, when she heard her aunt cry out in pain and found herself suddenly confused about who she was, how she was connected to other people, and what it means to be human. Bishop wrote the poem a few years before her death, more than half a century after the incident occurred. Although Bishop names her aunt "Consuelo" in the poem and "Jenny" in an autobiographical essay, "The Country Mouse," it was apparently her aunt Florence Jane Bishop whom she accompanied to the dentist. Dr. Martin Deranian, a dental historian, speculates that the dentist was Dr. Leon Storz (1888-1973), who maintained an office—as many dentists did—in the Park Building (Fig. 2). Deranian notes that Storz was a very skilled dentist, known for his gentleness in treating patients. Thus, as the poem suggests, that cry of pain may have come as much from a distressed child as from an adult patient. In order to focus on Bishop as a poet, our tour begins at this building, now called Park Plaza, which still stands at **507 Main Street** in downtown Worcester.



Fig 2. Park Plaza, at the corner of Main and Franklin; photograph by Leonardo da Silva (Creative Commons 2.0)

➔ To get there, head south on Main Street. Park Plaza will be on your left, at the corner of Franklin Street, immediately after you pass City Hall. Consider visiting the Worcester Public Library, one block down on Franklin and across from City Hall Plaza, to borrow Bishop's *Collected Poems* for reading on the tour.

2. Bishop was born in 1911 at her parents' home at **875 Main Street**, which has since been replaced by another building. However, she lived there for only eight months before her father, William Thomas Bishop, died and her grief-stricken mother returned home to Great Village, Nova Scotia. In that rural community, Elizabeth lived with her mother, her maternal grandparents, and her mother's younger siblings, keeping a garden, helping to care for various animals, and attending lessons in a small schoolhouse.

→ Keep heading south and you will come to 875 Main Street, the site of Bishop's birthplace, on your left.

3. When Elizabeth was five, her mother, Gertrude Bulmer Bishop, suffered a nervous breakdown and was institutionalized; they never saw each other again. Afterwards, her wealthy paternal grandparents brought Elizabeth back to Worcester to save her, she later said, from "poverty and provincialism." In her autobiographical essay, "The Country



Fig. 3. Pilgrim Congregational Church, Worcester; photograph by Kenneth C. Zirkel (Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0)

Mouse," Bishop describes the long train ride from Nova Scotia to Boston and her first impressions of Worcester, which seemed busy and confusing after life in a small village. She met people from other countries and cultures—including her grandparents' cook, maid, and gardener, recent immigrants from Sweden—and discovered that not everyone is treated equally. The whole world was at war, and Elizabeth thought of herself as Canadian, not American. She may have accompanied her grandmother to services at Pilgrim Congregational Church (Fig. 3), which still stands at **911 Main Street**.

→ Keep heading south. The church is a block past the site of Bishop's birth, also on the left.

4. Elizabeth was miserable during the single year she spent in Worcester. Her paternal grandparents seemed cold, not even letting her bring her dolls with her from Nova Scotia because they might carry germs. She was embarrassed by their wealth as well as the class distinctions it implied. In addition, Elizabeth was so disturbed by her mother's recent institutionalization that she told another child her mother was dead—the first time, Bishop later wrote, that she "had lied deliberately and consciously." Bishop also remembered that the living creature in Worcester with whom she had identified most was Beppo, a clever but anxious Boston terrier whose status in her grandparents' home seemed similar to her own. During this period, Elizabeth not only developed both asthma and eczema but also experienced the severe emotional crisis that she later recounted in her poem "In the Waiting Room."



Fig. 4. Our Lady of the Angels Church. Photograph by Katie Knippler

Bishop lived with her grandparents for nine months in their enormous home at **1212 Main Street**. She recalled it as “gloomy” and “dismal,” partly because her dead father had grown up there. It was twice as large as the house where she had lived in Nova Scotia, “with two windows for each of the Nova Scotia ones and a higher roof,” as well as many wings, porches, and fireplaces, a library, a sewing room, and a billiard room. The 150-year-old building, originally a farmhouse, sat on 15 acres of land that included an apple orchard, a summerhouse, a carriage house, and a barn for cows and chickens. Today the entire property belongs to Our Lady of the Angels Roman Catholic Church (Fig. 4). One remaining wing of the house has

been remodeled to serve as the rectory, and a plaque identifies the site as the location of Bishop’s grandparents’ home, where she lived from 1917 to 1918 (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Plaque on the steps to Our Lady of the Angels; photograph by Katie Knippler.

➔ You will need to shift lanes as you go through Webster Square, but stay on Main Street as it becomes Route 9 West. After the traffic light at Park Avenue, shift to the right lane and look for Our Lady of the Angels at 1212 Main Street on your right. (There will be room to park on the street in front of the church.) The plaque dedicated to Bishop is set into the first set of steps on the right leading up from the sidewalk.

5. One block past Bishop’s grandparents’ home was Gates Lane School, at **1238 Main Street**, where she attended first grade. The building that Bishop knew (Fig. 6) has been replaced by another, called Gates Lane Elementary School. Because she was so unhappy in Worcester, after one year her grandparents paid some of her mother’s relatives to bring her up in Revere and later in Clifton-dale, Massachusetts. Bishop went on to graduate from Walnut Hill School and Vassar College, then became a renowned poet who traveled widely and who found homes in Greenwich Village; Key West; Washington, DC; Petrópolis and Ouro Prêto, Brazil; and Cambridge, Massachusetts.



Fig. 6. Gates Lane School in the 1940s. Detail of photograph, courtesy of the Worcester Historical Museum.

➔ Continue for one more block to Gates Lane Elementary School at 1238 Main, also on the right. Turn right onto Holland Street, just after the Webster Square Laundry, to access the school’s parking lot.

6. Bishop is buried in Hope Cemetery at **119 Webster Street**. Established in 1852, Hope Cemetery is one of many historic “rural” cemeteries, resembling public parks, that became popular in the nineteenth century after Mount Auburn Cemetery opened in Cambridge, Massachusetts. For more information, visit the cemetery office on your right as you enter the grounds (open 8 am-3 pm, Monday to Friday), or the websites sponsored by Worcester’s Department of Parks and Recreation and the Friends of Hope Cemetery.

➔ To get to Hope Cemetery from Gates Lane Elementary School, turn left from Holland Street onto Main to retrace your path toward downtown Worcester. Turn right onto Mill Street, then turn right immediately at a T-junction onto Webster Street. After three blocks the cemetery’s main gate will appear on your left.

➔ To get to Hope Cemetery from Route 290 West, take exit 14 (Hope Avenue, Route 12 North) and bear right. After you turn sharply right at a rotary to exit onto Webster Street, the cemetery’s main gate will be on your right.



Fig. 7. The route on this section map, highlighted in yellow, leads to Bishop’s grave in section 49. Map courtesy of Hope Cemetery; photograph by Katie Knippler

DATE	LOCATION	NAME	AGE
10/15/11	R F 1	Bishop, William T. (V)	39
6/8/34	R F 2	Bishop, Gertrude B. (HV)	54
10/25/79	Interred	Bishop, Elizabeth (ASHES)	68

Fig. 8. Copy of a Lot Card describing where Bishop and her parents are buried; courtesy of Hope Cemetery. The cemetery office also offers maps, brochures, and a copy of Lloyd Schwartz’s obituary for Elizabeth Bishop which appeared in the *Boston Phoenix*, Oct. 16, 1979.

Bishop’s ashes are buried here in a family plot next to her parents’ granite gravestone (Fig. 8). The side of the stone facing Beech Avenue bears their names and dates: William T. Bishop, 1872-1911, and Gertrude Bulmer Bishop, 1879-1934 (Fig. 9). The stone’s other side is inscribed with Bishop’s name, her dates, and a quotation from “The Bight,” a poem that she wrote on the occasion of her thirty-seventh birthday, February 8, 1948. This poem describes the busy, messy, unending movement of waves and boats and sea-birds along the bay (or “bight”) in Key West, where Bishop was living at the time. Its last two lines, which Bishop had wanted to be carved on her gravestone, read:

*All the untidy activity continues,
awful but cheerful.*

Bishop later wrote in a letter to Dr. Anny Bauman: “I still think if I can just keep the last line in mind, everything may still turn out all right.”

For seventeen years after Bishop’s death, her grave was not marked with either her name or her dates, let alone the last two lines of her poem. Eventually, Angela Dorenkamp, Carle Johnson, and Laura Menides, three members of the Worcester County Poetry Association, had the words carved onto the stone after requesting permission from Alice Methfessel, the executor of Bishop’s estate. The letters were hand-cut, rather than sandblasted, to match her parents’ inscriptions on the other side of the stone (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9. The front of Bishop’s gravestone, bearing her parents’ names and dates. Note the rocks left in tribute atop the grave. Photograph by Katie Knippler.



Fig 10. The back of the stone, inscribed with Bishop’s name, her dates, and the last two lines of her poem “The Bight.”; Photograph by Katie Knippler.

➔ To find Bishop’s grave, enter the main gate of Hope Cemetery and drive along Curtis Avenue. Take your fourth left onto Beech Avenue (after Elm, Larch, and Bush Avenues). Proceed for one short block until you see two trees next to each other on the left side of the road; Bishop’s grave lies behind the first tree (Fig. 7). There is ample space to park close to the gravestone.

As long as you are strolling through peaceful Hope Cemetery, you may also wish to visit the graves of Elizabeth Bishop’s Worcester relatives, all on her father’s side. Her paternal grandparents, John Wilson Bishop (1846-1923) and Sarah A. Foster Bishop (1849-1923), are buried on Cedar Street in Section 54, not far from Elizabeth Bishop and her parents.

Bishop’s father had been one of eight children, three of whom died in infancy. The five unmarried children are buried with their parents: Mina F. Bishop (1871-1871), Frederick Herbert Bishop (1874-1875), Alice Marie Bishop (1884-1885), Nathaniel Smart Bishop (1886-1904), and Florence Jane Bishop (1875-1963). Two other married children are buried, like Bishop’s father, with their spouses: John W. Bishop (1880-1934) in Section 79, near the intersection of Rockwood and Harrington Avenues, and Sarah Adelaide Bishop Orr (1881-1912) in Section 49, not far from Bishop’s own grave.

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