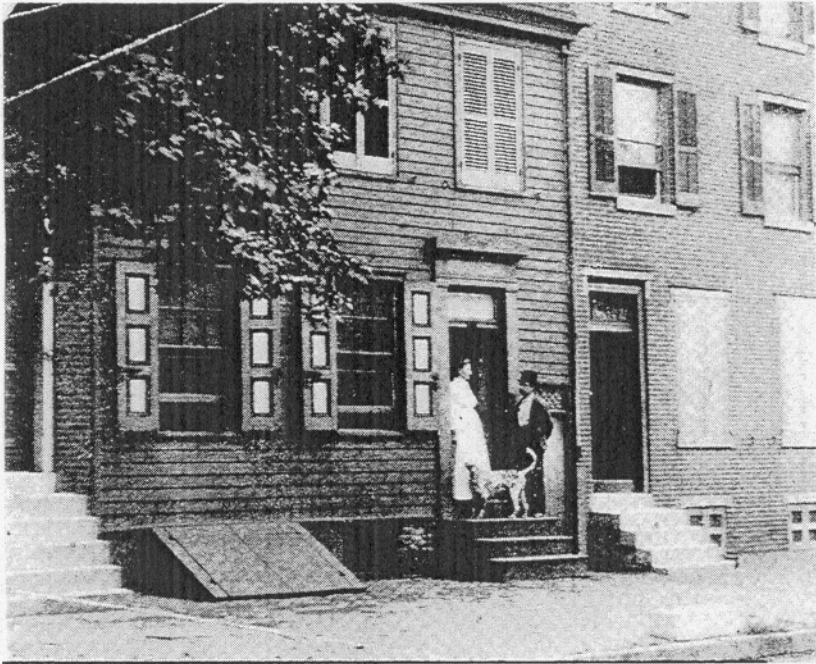


Walt Whitman and Nineteenth-Century America



Lesson Plans for Grades 7 - 12
Walt Whitman House, NJ State Historic Site
Camden, New Jersey

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PREFACE

These lesson plans were developed for teachers to use in conjunction with a class visit to the Walt Whitman House in Camden, New Jersey, the poet's home in the last years of his life. He came to Camden in 1873 where he lived with his brother George. By this time in his career, Whitman had an international reputation and attracted the attention of the day's most prominent literary figures. Among them, Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde came to Camden to visit Walt Whitman. In 1884 he purchased his own home, the only house he ever owned, at 328 Mickle Street. He lived there until his death in 1892. Whitman is considered one of this country's greatest poets. Invigorating poetry with a fresh, original voice, Whitman amazed his contemporaries. Among them, Ralph Waldo Emerson described Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed."

The first part of the plan focuses on some of Whitman's poems and provides a description of the guided visit to the Whitman House. We hope students will see Whitman's modest home as a reflection of the egalitarian spirit of his poetry. Resource numbers four through seven touch on the theme of urban development in the nineteenth century. The outlines showing the developments in technology and transportation and the outline of political and reform movements can be used in various ways. Students can be asked to research how these developments were (or were not) reflected in their own communities. Whitman claimed that he contained multitudes. We realize that we have just scratched the surface of the subject of Whitman and the city in the nineteenth century and hope to add materials to this handbook. If you have suggestions or comments for future editions of teachers' handbooks, please contact the Walt Whitman House.

This handbook was made possible by a generous grant from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

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CONTENTS

Pre-Visit Course of Study (Overview)	1
House Visit (Overview)	1
Post-Visit Activities	1-2
Resource #1 Poems for Discussion	3-6
Resource #2 Visit to Walt Whitman House	7-11
Resource #3 Walt Whitman: America's Poet (biographical sketch)	12-15
Resource #4 Walt Whitman and the City	16
Resource #5 Political Developments and Reform Movements	17-18
Resource #6 Transportation	19
Resource #7 Technology	20-21
Resource #8 Walt Whitman Chronology	22-24
References	25

Walt Whitman and Nineteenth-Century America

Purpose

The purpose of this unit is to allow students in grades 7 through 12 to explore nineteenth-century America through the life and words of Walt Whitman. The Walt Whitman House on Mickle Boulevard in Camden, New Jersey, and the artifacts therein will serve as the primary resource for this teaching unit.

Pre-Visit Course of Study

In order to give students a foundation for understanding Walt Whitman and his life in nineteenth-century America, it is recommended that students begin with a brief study of Whitman's biography, and follow that with a study of several Whitman poems. A teacher's guide to discussion questions and response activities for four poems is provided in Resource #1.

View a videotape that provides biographical background on the life and work of Walt Whitman. (Highly recommended is *Voices and Visions: Walt Whitman*. The video and a viewer's guide is available from the Annenberg Multimedia Collection at P.O. Box 2345, S. Burlington, VT 05407-2345; phone number 800LEARNER.)

House Visit

After the poems have been studied in relation to how they reveal Whitman's philosophy and the way in which he lived out that philosophy, a visit to the house will provide students with an opportunity to examine the building and artifacts. Students will then use inferencing and other critical thinking skills to assess for themselves how Whitman's surroundings might reflect the poet's values and ideals. An overview of the house tour is provided in Resource #2.

Post-Visit Activities

Design Projects

- (1) Design a museum catalogue of at least five of the artifacts on display at the Walt Whitman House Historic Site. Write an one page introduction to the house, describing the famous poet who lived there.
- (2) Design a nineteenth-century style real estate "broadside" publicizing the sale of house and the contents therein at the death of Walt Whitman.

Skit Writing

(1) Write a skit that involves interaction and dialogue between Walt Whitman and his housekeeper Mary Davis.

(2) As an alternative, write a one-woman or one-man monologue of either person.

Journal Entry

Write at least three days of journal entries detailing a time in the life of either Walt Whitman or Mary Davis.

Dialogue

(1) The more stylistically traditional and more popular poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, had once visited Whitman in Camden. Since Walt was at the waterfront at the time of Henry's visit, the rival poets met there for conversation. Imagine the dialogue between those two renowned, yet very different, men.

(2) Imagine yourself walking to the waterfront with Walt Whitman. Write a dialogue between the two of you.

Web Site Exploration

Have students visit the web site which provides photos of Whitman throughout his lifetime. (He is said to be one of the most widely photographed people of his era.) Have students discuss Whitman's style of dress. Ask them what they can surmise about his personality based on the pictures. The web site address is:

<http://jefferson.village.Virginia.edu/whitman/photos/>

Resource #1 Poems for Discussion

A Noiseless Patient Spider

A NOISELESS patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

“A Noiseless Patient Spider”

1. In the first five lines, what has the speaker “mark’d,” or noted, about the spider he has observed? (**Its isolation**)
2. What are “filament”? Why is it significant that these filaments come “out of [the spider] itself”? (**The spider is actively working for connection with something outside of itself**)
3. In this poem the speaker is comparing himself to a spider. What does the *spider* try to connect with, or “catch”? (**Something solid; Something tangible**)
4. What do you think the *speaker* wishes to connect with, or “catch”? (**Other people, a religious deity, and universal love are possible interpretations**)

RESPONDING TO THE POEM

Have you ever silently watched an animal or insect closely? What thoughts ran through your mind? Did the actions of the animal or insect remind you in any way of the actions of human beings? **Write a poem** in which you compare your feelings, wishes, or longings to the behavior of an animal or insect. Examples: You watch a dog frolic on a beach and you envy the freedom the dog seems to have. You observe a colony of ants at work (as the American poet and essayist Henry David Thoreau did) and reflect on the diligence and industry of those creatures.

I Dream'd in a Dream

I DREAM'D in a dream I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole
of the rest of the earth,
I dream'd that was the new city of Friends,
Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love,
it led the rest,
It was seen every hour in the actions of the men of that city,
And in all their looks and words.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

"I Dream'd In a Dream"

1. What could Whitman mean in line three "... the new city of Friends"? **(Perhaps he is dreaming of the ideal harmony among people in a democratic society. In addition, this could be an exaltation of the tolerant Society of Friends.)**
2. What is the "...robust love" that "led the rest" in line four? **(Since the city of this poem is not necessarily a literal place, but perhaps an "invincible," assured self, or an ideally harmonious human family, the "robust love" might be the initiative that some one or some group may take in an attempt to bring unity.)**
3. Consider the diction (i.e. the poet's vocabulary choice) of this poem. Would you say that it is common and ordinary, or exotic and sophisticated? **(Other than the words "invincible" (l. 1) and "robust" (l.4) the rest of the diction is quite simple. Whitman was a learned man, but he consciously chose common language as a vehicle of expression of democratic ideals.)**
4. Even though the "city" of this poem is not interpreted as a literal place, Whitman has chosen the idea of a city for the central metaphor of his poem. Why do you think he made this choice? **(Whitman knew well several American cities, including New York City, Washington, D.C. and Camden, New Jersey. The liveliness and variety of cities made them appropriate backdrops for Whitman's exploration of the themes of independence and democratic ideals.)**

RESPONDING TO THE POEM

Whitman's "city" in this poem is not a real place but a metaphor for someone or some group that is invincible, new, and led by love. Can you think of something that could stand for your family, your community, or the world at large? Identify something that

embodies the qualities that the group possesses or wishes to possess. **Write a poem that begins *I dreamed in a dream I saw a* _____.** Fill in the blank with something that will represent a perfect place or an ideal group of people. Complete the poem in free verse with details about the qualities of that place or group.

Song of Myself

1

I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soul, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and
 their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never
 forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

Song of Myself

6

(excerpt)

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see
and remark, and say *Whose?*

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

“Song of Myself” (excerpt from Section 1)

1. What is the tone (i.e. the speaker's attitude toward his subject) of these lines of the poem? **(The tone is celebratory or joyful.)**
2. What is the speaker celebrating? Do you think it is individualism? Self-aggrandizement? Do you think it could be unity, oneness? Give reasons for your answers. **(Discuss students' interpretations. Guide students to the understanding that although the lines have sometimes been misunderstood as self-aggrandizement, many scholars have interpreted the poem to be an embracing of unity amid differences.)**
3. To what does the speaker “invite” his soul in the fourth line? **(Perhaps contemplation that requires quiet inactivity)**
4. Why do you think the speaker “leans and loafes”? Is it out of laziness or is there another purpose? **(The speaker is advocating a quiet inactivity necessary if the soul (or mind or heart) is to become open to expansive thought.)**

RESPONDING TO THE POEM

Have you ever felt sadness within yourself for no apparent reason? Though we may not think others share such feelings, many people have had just that experience. Whitman “assumed” a certain unity about the human race. Perhaps feelings of joy and pain were what he had in mind. **Model six lines or more of free verse on the lines from section one of *Song of Myself*.** Keep your poem in the first person, using the personal pronoun I. Change as much as you like, but be sure to change the verbs *celebrate*, *sing*, *loafe*, *invite*, and *lean*, to words of your choosing. Also, change the noun phrase ‘*a speare of summer grass*’ to words of your own.

Resource #2

Guided House Visit

Before touring the house, students will see a slide presentation that will give them some background to answer the following questions.

I. Begin the experience of the house on the sidewalk outside. Notice the marble stepping stone at the curb. It was placed there after friends presented Walt Whitman with a gift of a horse and buggy. Look carefully at the building.

1. What style of architecture is it? (Simple Greek Revival. It was built between 1848 and 1850. Whitman purchased it in 1884 for \$1,750. His previous residence was in the home of his brother George, two blocks away. George Whitman's home was more lavish, Italianate in style, costing \$3,700.)

2. Would you describe the house as plain or elaborate? (One of the last wood houses on the street, it is rather plain. Walt called it his "shanty.")

3. Do the external decorations (i.e. the dentil trim above the door) reveal a modest or boastful attitude on the part of the homeowner?

In his book *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life*, Thomas J. Schlereth says that Americans of the post-Civil War era "saw their houses as symbolic statements of the owners' outlook and priorities" (Schlereth 95). Homeowners who were interested in impressing others with their measure of success and good taste endeavored to build regal homes. One common to the era was the manse which "implied affluence and achievement through its elaborate, monumental facade. This residential ideal championed an idea of 'artistic' beauty and individualistic design, hence the extravagant interest in all forms of ornamentation" (Schlereth 95).

Reflect on this information about American Victorian housing.

4. How does Whitman's choice of housing compare to the choices of the upwardly mobile Americans of his time?

5. What does his choice of housing in the last years of his life say about his view of himself in society?

6. Can you recall examples of this view revealed in the poems you studied?

II. Step into the entrance hall of the house.

Read the following excerpt from Thomas Schlereth's *Victorian America* to give students a reference for analysis of the Whitman house:

Its [a front hall's] decor indicated the character of both the dwelling and its inhabitants. Decorating books recommended bright colors, a dado [the lower part of an interior wall, often distinctively decorated] a rail, and hand stenciling or wallpaper. Most front halls before 1900 included a staircase to the second story. A full furnished front hall contained a hall stand, hall chairs, and a card receiver. A family's articles of personal costume (hats, coats, parasols, or umbrellas) bedecked their hall stand. Here clutter was class. (Schlereth 117)

The front hall of the Whitman house, void of any furniture, stands in stark contrast to many nineteenth-century halls, which were typically over decorated and replete with the items identified in Thomas Schlereth's excerpt above. In fact, period documents reveal that the front hall of the Whitman house was rather dark and a barrel was wedged into the space at the back end, propping open the kitchen door.

1. What does the front hall of the Whitman house say about "the character of its inhabitant"? What does it say about Whitman and "first impressions"?
2. A card receiver was a typical nineteenth-century formality that provided a place for visitors to leave their personal calling cards upon a social call. This was protocol even if, indeed especially if, the homeowner was not available to meet his guest. Is there any evidence that Whitman abided by this very proper ritual of his day? What, possibly, does this say about how he felt people should communicate and interact with one another?

III. Move into the parlor.

In common with nineteenth-century houses, plain or lavish, the Whitman house included a front and back parlor. What was not ordinary, however, was the way in which Whitman used these two rooms. It was customary at the time that the front parlor be reserved for entertaining company and for showcasing family treasures, collectibles, and photographs. The back parlor was intended as space exclusively for the family.

In this house, Whitman chose to appropriate the front parlor for his needs and allow Mary Davis, the housekeeper with whom he shared the house, to have the back parlor for herself. Eventually, though, Walt spread his belongings across both rooms, and Mary was forced to use a part of the kitchen as a sitting area.

The burgundy, green and brown colors used in these parlors were typical to middle-class American homes of the time. The patterned carpet and wallpapers were commonplace and readily available and affordable. The horsehair upholstered Victorian side chairs and the oak and rattan rocker, Walt's favorite chair, were original to these rooms. Although Mary Davis, no doubt, had a role in the decor selections in the house, it was Whitman who purchased the house and accepted the furnishings that Mrs. Davis brought to it. Here he remained, writing and receiving visitors, some as well known as the artist Thomas Eakins.

1. Considering that Walt Whitman was an established poet of celebrity status, what does his choice of modest surroundings allow you to infer about him? Does your inference based on these surroundings agree or disagree with your knowledge of the poet as you have come to know him through his work?

2. Think about his themes of independence, individuality, support for the common man, democracy. Can you cite specific examples from any of the poems you studied to support your answers to question number one?

IV. Continue back to the kitchen.

Typical nineteenth-century urban kitchens were most often located in the back of the house and were dominated by a wood or coal stove.

A well-equipped kitchen of the 1880s would also contain a patented icebox or ice chest frequently located on an outside wall so the ice-delivery man could regularly deposit fresh ice in the box from the back porch and need not enter the home. Families also kept their iceboxes in the pantry, the basement, or a carriage house. Root cellars, well pits, and spring houses also served as coolants in winter. (Schlereth 127)

Often kitchens were gathering places where family members chatted, read to each other, or engaged in individual work such as sewing. The kitchen of the Walt Whitman house was papered and carpeted. One side of the room was used for cooking and dining and the other side was reserved as Mrs. Davis' sitting area. Notice the built-in cupboard, the galvanized sink, the range, the back-less chair now used as a step stool, the rocking chairs, and Mary Davis' sewing machine.

1. What in this room is evidence that Whitman's lifestyle was typical of the common American? Does anything in the room or the arrangement of the room reflect something atypical about Whitman as he lived out his life on Mickle Street?

2. Think about “A Noiseless Patient Spider.” Although the poem was written before Whitman lived in this house, can you imagine the poet observing a spider on a “promontory,” perhaps under a shelf or the arm of a chair here in this kitchen? Does the style and diction of that poem seem at home in these surroundings?

3. What can you say about the connections among these ordinary surroundings, the seemingly ordinary spider, and the extraordinary meaning of the poem?

4. The poem, in part, presents Whitman’s philosophy of individual freedom (to be alone, to think independently) and a longing for unity among people. Pause here for a moment and think about how the house of the poet’s last years reflect the same.

V. The bathroom facilities.

In the last half of the nineteenth-century, the standard bathroom facilities, or “necessary,” for middle class Americans was either an outhouse, as most rural homes would continue to have for some time to come, or a water closet, which was growing in availability for wealthier people in the cities.

In Whitman’s Camden home, an outhouse in the backyard continued to be used as a toilet facility even after a second floor bathroom with a tub, gas-heated water, and a washstand were added by Whitman after Mary Davis came to live there. The original splash pan with which the poet took sponge baths can be found under his bed.

1. Does this facility suggest that Whitman was a wealthy man in his later years? Does it reflect someone who was trying to improve his standard of living in his later years or someone who chose to live simply?

2. Is your answer to question number one in keeping with the kind of person who comes across in the poems you studied? Can you cite specific examples from one or more of the poems?

VI. End the tour of the house in the poet’s bedroom

In *Victorian America* Thomas Schlereth writes, “Since Victorians considered bed chambers their inner sanctums, not shown to anyone outside the immediate family, the decor of these rooms was often sparse” (Schlereth 129).

1. Look around Whitman’s bedroom. Is the decoration sparse? The wallpaper is a reproduction of what scholars have come to believe covered these walls when the poet lived here. It represents a readily available, middle class choice. What else in the room that might give some insight into the character who spent his final days here?

2. Is there evidence that this room was kept private? (Note the chairs around the room for visitors who were received daily by Walt in his bedroom.) What do your answers to these questions lead you to infer about Whitman's sense of conformity?

According to *Victorian America*, "Home economics manuals recommended that bedroom walls be painted, but many people disregarded such advice, preferring colorful (and cheaply priced) patterned wallpaper" (Schlereth 129).

3. Did Whitman follow the dictates of home economics manuals in the decor of his bedroom? How does your answer fit with your overall understanding of the poet so far?

4. Examine the c.1887 photograph of Walt Whitman taken by Thomas Eakins. What do you think about the clutter and reams of paper strewn around the poet as he sits in his bedroom? (Remember he received guests amid this disarray of papers and books.) Does he look comfortable or distressed? Can you make any conjectures about Walt Whitman the man from this photograph?

5. Look closely at the c. 1887 photograph of the bedroom by J.J. Johnston. What artifacts from the room can you see in the photograph?

Two pieces of furniture in the Whitman bedroom are particularly significant. One is the last chair in which the poet sat; the other is the single bed in which he died. It was here that Whitman worked on his final draft of *Leaves of Grass*, thereafter referred to as the 'deathbed' edition.

6. Look at the many images (in portraits and photographs) of the self-assured, comfortably-clad poet of democracy. Contrast these images with a standard portrait of any well-known nineteenth-century American in which the subject is formally dressed and ceremoniously presented. What does the contrast suggest about the differences between Walt Whitman and his contemporaries? How does this contrast help you to understand Whitman better?

7. Think about Walt Whitman receiving visitors here in this private space. Imagine him as he sat by the window with open collar and slippers on his feet. Remember his defiance toward removing his hat indoors. Recall some of your favorite lines from the poems you studied. Draw some conclusions about Walt Whitman the poet, the man who heard America singing and added his unique voice to its chorus.

Resource #3

Walt Whitman: America's Poet

*I CELEBRATE myself
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

*I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease....observing a spear of summer grass.*

Song of Myself

With these lines Walt Whitman introduced himself to the literary world of his day. In 1855, at his own expense, he published *Leaves of Grass*. Of the 795 copies printed, almost none were sold. However, in time this small book, just 95 pages long, would alter the course of world literature.

Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, in Long Island, New York. At age four, he moved with his parents to Brooklyn, New York. He attended public school there for about six years but dropped out at age 11. In 1836 Whitman returned to Long Island where he was hired as a school teacher. From there, his career took him to New York City, where he edited and wrote for several newspapers, including the *Star* and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. He continued working as a journalist in New York until interests led him to New Orleans in 1846. His stay in New Orleans was brief. After only several months of employment at a newspaper, the *Daily Crescent*, Whitman returned to Brooklyn. For the next few years he, again, worked as a journalist and published several poems. It was the 1855 publication of *Leaves of Grass*, and its subsequent editions, that brought Whitman to the attention of the prominent literary figures of the day.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Americans looked for signs of an emerging cultural style distinct from European precedents. American painters flocked to Niagra Falls to capture on canvas a sight that was truly American. One of the country's leading man of letters, Ralph Waldo Emerson, called for a new kind of poet--an American bard who would create a new kind of poetry.

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem--a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.

Ralph Waldo Emerson "The Poet" (1844)

While many American poets abandoned European subjects, they continued to follow European conventions of form. Whitman, who had discovered Emerson's work in the early 1850s, abandoned these conventions, opening the line of the poem to allow greater freedom of expression. He later said: *I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil.* Whitman sent Emerson a copy of *Leaves of Grass* and received the following reply:

Concord, Massachusetts, 21 July, 1855

Dear Sir,

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of "Leaves of Grass." I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed...I greet you at the beginning of a great career...

Ralph Waldo Emerson

The rhythmic cadences of *Leaves of Grass* reflect the influence of the King James version of the Bible. Expressing the optimism of "manifest destiny" and the emerging importance of individual experience, Whitman addressed the world as the prophet of a new kind of poetry:

*Have you reckon'd a thousand acres much? Have you reckon'd
the earth much?*

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

*Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin
of all poems,*

*You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are
millions of suns left,)*

*You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor
look through the eyes of the dead....nor feed on the
spectres in books,*

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

Song of Myself

In addition to being unique in style, Whitman's poetry was different from that of his peers in subject matter. He wrote about common people, such as mechanics, shoemakers,

boatmen, and carpenters. Some critics felt that such ordinary subjects were not suitable for poetry. However, it is precisely because of his commonplace subjects and his poetic style that he is still popular today. This championing of the common people led many to call Whitman the “poet of democracy.” From his first publication in 1855, Whitman worked on *Leaves of Grass* for his entire life. Over the years, he added poems to the text, revised existing poems, and published several new editions of the book. The most complete edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1892, the year of Whitman’s death, and is known as the “deathbed” edition.

In 1862 Whitman traveled to the war front in Virginia, where his brother George had been wounded. From there, Whitman settled in Washington D.C., serving as a volunteer nurse in army hospitals. The great impact that the war had on Whitman’s life is reflected in his poems, many written from first-hand experience, some written in quiet reflection in the subsequent years in New Jersey. He remained in Washington for ten years, earning his living as a government clerk. In January, 1873, Whitman suffered a stroke and was unable to work. By the middle of 1873, Walt realized that he would not be able to resume his employment in Washington and moved to Camden to live with his brother George and his family.

It was during the years Whitman spent in Camden that he realized his greatest popularity. Whitman had a following that grew steadily and included many prominent citizens. Among the notables who visited Whitman in Camden was Oscar Wilde, the renowned Irish writer. He paid the “Good Grey Poet” two visits in 1882. Whitman’s popularity continued to grow due to a series of lectures on the death of Abraham Lincoln, which he gave in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. It was through these dramatic presentations that some people, perhaps not as familiar with his poetry, came to know Whitman.

When his brother George moved to a farm in Bordentown, New Jersey, in 1884, Whitman bought his own house at 328 Mickle Street. Although George asked Walt to move in with him, Walt decided to stay in Camden because he liked the city. Camden, perhaps, reminded him of the Brooklyn of his youth, and he was pleased to be close to the ferry, which enabled him to visit Philadelphia often. In addition, Walt was close to the farm of friends, the Staffords, near Laurel Springs, New Jersey. For rest and relaxation, he frequented the farm and Timber Creek, which ran near the property.

When Walt Whitman lived in Camden, the city was a bustling industrial center of railroads, factories, and docks. Still, Camden was not viewed as an ideal place to live. Some of Whitman’s friends encouraged him to leave the city, and even offered him a place to live. The poet, however, preferred to stay in Camden. The city gave him an opportunity to live and work among the people he celebrated in his work.

Whitman's house on Mickle Street is a simple, wooden, row house that he called his "shanty." The two-story, brown house sits within a row of brick homes. Whitman's bedroom was on the second floor where, from his window, he liked to watch the activity of the street below and the waterfront beyond. He sometimes passed the time on the street with his dog, Watch, or went to the waterfront for a view of the setting sun.

Suffering a second stroke, the poet was in ill health in the last few years of his life. He died on March 26, 1892, and is buried in Harleigh Cemetery, Camden. Laid to rest with Walt in an impressive tomb of his own design are his parents and other family members.

Resource #4

Whitman and the City

Walt Whitman came to Camden in 1873 and remained here until his death in 1892. When Walt's brother George moved out to the "country," Bordentown, New Jersey, Walt had the opportunity to go along. Having grown so fond of Camden, however, he refused his brother's invitation, and settled securely in the house at 328 Mickle Street.

What was it about the sights and sounds of the city that appealed to this poet who also held a great love and appreciation for nature in a rural environment? One dimension of urban life so important to Whitman was people. He delighted in chats on the sidewalk as much as conversations in the parlor. He sat in a rocker at his window and out on the front stoop welcoming a chance meeting with passers-by. A great number of friends and admirers, including the Irish writer Oscar Wilde and the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow visited Walt Whitman in Camden. An amble to the waterfront, his goal often being a ferry ride to Philadelphia, provided further opportunities for fraternizing. In light of such a full social life, perhaps a farm in Burlington would have been a lonely place.

Though noise is often irritant that can't be avoided in an active city, it was not routinely annoying to Whitman. He seemed to take pleasure in the clatter of the Camden-Amboy railroad that ran north to south along what is now third street. The clanging of machinery from nearby factories and the clamor of dockside activity was pleasing, if not inspiring.

The benign cacophony of Camden was no the only aspect of city life that endeared the poet to this place. The buildings, the cobblestone streets, and the layout of the neighborhood may have reminded him of Brooklyn, New York, where he had spent most of his youth. Certainly, the ferry at Camden's waterfront recalled for him the Brooklyn Ferry, a favorite mode of transportation for the poet and subject of one of his most well-known poems.

Whether direct inspiration or evocative backdrop, the city of Camden figured significantly in the life and work of Walt Whitman. Though the physical surrounding have seen substantial change, the spirit of Camden, with its vibrance, its sense of purpose, its variety still offers residents and visitors alike a prism through which to view an engaging place.

Resource #5

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND REFORM MOVEMENTS

UNITED STATES

CAMDEN

WALT WHITMAN

1866 National Labor Union is organized in Baltimore, MD.

Whitman supports the philosophy of labor reform but does not officially join a movement saying, "I am somehow afraid of agitators, though I believe in agitation."

1869 Knights of Labor founded.

While his poetry abounds in praise and support of the working man and woman, many of Whitman's statements, including "Be radical, be radical, be radical-- be *not* too damned radical, " reveals his conflicting feelings about labor reform.

1850s - 1880s Nativism, a movement to restrict immigration, first begins in .1850s and reappears in 1880s.

1854 The Know-Nothing Party is established. It is pro-American and anti-immigration. It makes an appeal to antislavery groups because many immigrants are proslavery. Its slogan is "America for Americans"

1855 The Know-Nothing Party becomes the American Party. It champions the causes of abolition, temperance and the rights of workers.

1850s The temperance movement reaches it height. Many states pass laws against the manu-manufacture, sale and consumption of alcohol.

As editor of the newspaper, the *Aurora*, Whitman espouses nativist opinions, especially anti-Catholic and anti-immigration sentiments. Later, though, he denounces the Native American Party (which had grown out of nativist desires) and calls for kind treatment of immigrants.

Avoiding categorization, Whitman writes in his notebook in 1856 that he is no "particular representative of any one party-- no tied and ticketed democrat

Whig, abolitionist, republican, --no
bawling spokesman of natives against
foreigners.”

Though a convivial sport, Whitman did
become involved with the temperance
movement, motivated perhaps by
recollections of his father's bouts with
alcoholism. He joined the
Washingtonians, a movement
established in the 1840s that opposed
drinking and appealed to the working
class masses.

“Song of the Open Road” inveighs
against the rumdrinker. *Franklin
Evans*, a novel, published in **1842** is a
sensationalistic support of the
temperance movement.

TRANSPORTATION

UNITED STATES

B & O Railroad is granted the first charter in **1827**.

Long Island Railroad opens in **1844**.

It is the first rail route between New York and Boston.

1850s Public horse-drawn streetcars mark the origins of “mass transportation” in cities.

1862 The transcontinental railroad is begun and the linking of two lines completes it in **1869**.

Electric trolleys replace horse-drawn streetcars beginning with the first one used in New York City in **1874**.

1893 Elevated trains and automobiles begin to be used in cities.

CAMDEN

The charter for the Camden & Amboy Railroad and Transportation Company was granted on February 4, **1830**.

The first train ran into Camden in **1834**; It was the longest in the country to date.

The Camden & Amboy Railroad was the main link between Philadelphia and New York from the mid through the late **1800s**. The Camden & Atlantic Railroad went eastward to Atlantic City.

The horse trolley originated in Camden County in 1850s, developed fully 1870s, and by 1880s connected the ferry boats at the river front with every part of Camden. In 1889, new owners of the Camden Horse Railroad Co. made conversion to electricity.

WALT WHITMAN

In response to the railroad replacing the horse-drawn wagon, Whitman lamented in an article in the *Eagle*: “He [the wagon driver] has no one to keep him countenance; the Long Island Railroad has quelled the glory of his calling.”

Whitman writes specifically of the sights and sounds of the Camden&Amboy Railroad to his friend in Washington Peter Doyle, who was a conductor.

In **1876** Whitman publishes “To a Locomotive in Winter,” a poem that celebrates the technology and artistry of that machine.

Upon returning from a trip to the Midwest in **1879**, Whitman called the railroad America’s furthest “advance beyond primitive barbarism.”

UNITED STATES

1844 The first telegraph message is sent. After the Civil War Western Union Telegraph Company is founded.

The trans-Atlantic cable is completed in 1858.

By 1870 Western Union has sent 9 million messages over 112,000 miles of wire.

1876 Alexander Graham Bell invents the "speaking telegraph" or telephone.

1877 Edison receives a patent for the first phonograph which records sounds on metal foil.

1877 The first intercity phone conversation takes place between Boston and New York City.

1878 A telephone is first used in the White House.

1882 The Edison Illuminating Company lights the New York City skyline.

TECHNOLOGY

CAMDEN

1879 The first telephone appeared in Camden City when the American union Telegraph Company and the South Jersey Telephone Company competed to install poles and wires.

1884 The Camden Lighting and Heating Company built an electric generating plant on North Front Street. Soon after the company won several electric lighting contracts along Federal Street and adjoining avenues.

1893 Twenty-three public telephone stations, most located in pharmacies, operated in Camden City. Local calls cost ten cents; outside the city twenty-five cents.

WALT WHITMAN

1880s Whitman's home is heated by coal stoves and is lit by gas lights.

Edison may have recorded Whitman reciting one of his poems. Although still speculative, one of Edison's wax cylinders has been found on which someone has recorded a Whitman poem. Many scholars believe this is Whitman's voice.

continued from page 20

1884 American Telephone and Telegraph Company is founded.

1898 Nearly 3,000 power stations are lighting 2 million bulbs across the U.S.

Resource #8

Walt Whitman Chronology

- 1819 Walter Whitman born (May 31) at West Hills, Huntington Township, New York. Walter was the second child of eight children born to Walter Whitman and Louisa Van Velsor, both descendants of early settlers on Long Island.
- 1823 Walter Whitman senior moves his family to Brooklyn where he works as a house builder.
- 1825 The Marquis de Lafayette visits Brooklyn. Walt Whitman recounts the memory of seeing and being embraced by Lafayette during a public gathering. Walt attends public school until about 1830.
- 1831-36 Works as office boy, printer's apprentice, then printer.
- 1836-38 Teaches at several schools on Long Island.
- 1838-39 Founds and publishes weekly newspaper, *Long Islander*, in Huntington, Long Island; writes for *Long Island Democrat*; writes poetry and literary prose.
- 1840-41 Campaigns for Martin Van Buren. Teaches school on Long Island again.
- 1841 Moves to New York City where he works in printing office of *New World*; writes for *Democratic Review*.
- 1842-45 Works for *Aurora*, *Evening Tattler*, and other papers in New York City. Publishes a "temperance novel," *Franklin Evans* (Nov. 1842).
- 1846-48 Becomes editor of *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*; February, 1848, goes to New Orleans to work on the *Crescent*; in May, returns to Brooklyn by way of the Mississippi, the Great Lakes, and the Hudson.
- 1848-49 Founds and edits the *Brooklyn Freeman*, a "Free-Soil" newspaper.
- 1849-54 Runs job-printing office, bookstore, and house building business. Works as freelance journalist. Publishes several poems.

- 1855 Publishes first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (795 copies) first week of July. Father dies July 11. Ralph Waldo Emerson sends letter of praise (July 21) for *Leaves of Grass*.
- 1856 Publishes second edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Book expanded from twelve poems to thirty-three poems. Henry David Thoreau and Bronson Alcott visit him in Brooklyn. Writes "*The Eighteenth Presidency*."
- 1857-59 Writes for the *Brooklyn Times*.
- 1860 Goes to Boston to oversee publishing of third edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
- 1861 Civil War breaks out; George Whitman enlists in Union Army.
- 1862 George is wounded at Battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia. Walt goes to war front to find his brother.
- 1863-64 Settles in Washington, D.C., where he volunteers in the military hospitals and supports himself by part-time clerical work in the Army Paymaster's Office.
- 1865 Begins clerkship at Department of Interior; fired from clerkship by Secretary James Harlan, supposedly because of *Leaves of Grass*; transferred to clerkship in Attorney General's office. Writes "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (summer) in response to the assassination of Lincoln. Publishes *Drum-Taps and Sequel*.
- 1866 William Douglas O'Connor publishes *The Good Grey Poet*, defending Whitman.
- 1867 Publishes "Democracy" and the fourth edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
- 1868 William Michael Rossetti publishes *Poems of Walt Whitman* in London.
- 1870 Prints fifth edition of *Leaves of Grass*, *Democratic Vistas*, and *Passage to India*, all dated 1871.
- 1873 Suffers stroke and is partially paralyzed; mother dies; moves to Camden, New Jersey, to live with George and Louisa Whitman.

- 1874 Leaves government clerkship. Publishes “Song of the Redwood Tree” and “Prayer of Columbus.”
- 1876 Publishes “Centennial” edition of *Leaves of Grass* (a reprint of 1871 edition) and *Two Rivulets* to coincide with the nation’s centennial.
- 1879 Gives first Lincoln lecture in New York (April); travels west (September) as far as Colorado.
- 1880 Travels in Canada.
- 1881 Oscar Wilde visits Whitman in Camden (January).
- 1884 Moves to 328 Mickle Street, Camden, (March) which he calls “a little old shanty of my own.”
- 1885 Walt receives gift of horse and buggy from friends and supporters.
- 1886 Sits for portrait by Thomas Eakins.
- 1888 Suffers another paralytic stroke (June). Publishes *November Boughs* and *Complete Poems and Prose*.
- 1890 Delivers “Death of Abraham Lincoln” lecture for the last time (April) in Philadelphia. Begins planning construction of his tomb.
- 1891 Publishes *Good-Bye my Fancy* and “deathbed” edition of *Leaves of Grass* (“supercedes them all by far”).
- 1892 Dies (March 26) at Mickle Street; buried (March 30) in Harleigh Cemetery, Camden, New Jersey.

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