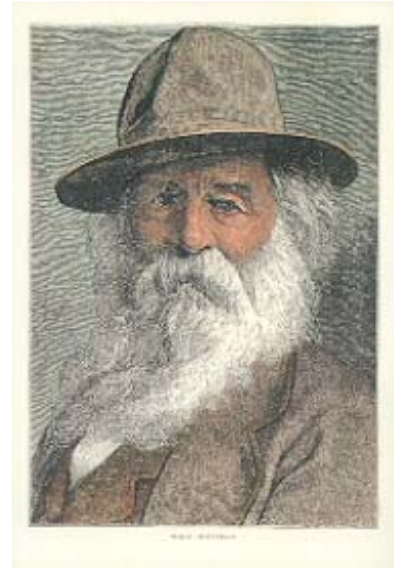


# Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

## *The Poet of Democracy*

Walt Whitman, the “Poet of Democracy,” was born on May 31, 1819, at West Hills, in Huntington, Long Island. The Whitman family first settled in the Huntington area by the middle of the seventeenth century. “Whitman-land” covered over 500 acres in what is now West Hills and Huntington Station. The poet’s father, Walter Whitman Sr., built the Walt Whitman Birthplace. A few years after Walt’s birth in 1819, the family moved to the city of Brooklyn, where his father labored as a house-builder to support his growing brood. Walt attended grammar school in Brooklyn and took his first job as a printer’s devil for the *Long Island Patriot*. By 1835 he was employed as a printer in New York City. However, an economic depression forced him to return with his family eastward, to Long Island, to teach and to farm. In 1836, for financial reasons and with enthusiasm, he commenced a series of teaching positions. His first assignment was in Norwich (East Norwich). By the winter of 1837-38 Whitman had taught in Hempstead, Babylon, Long Swamp (Huntington Station), and Smithtown. He was to teach also at Woodbury and Little Bayside. His last teaching position was at Whitestone during the winter/spring of 1841.



While teaching, Walt pursued his interests in newspapers. In 1838 he founded a weekly newspaper still published in Huntington, *The Long Islander*. Though later in his life he claimed it was one of his favorite projects, within a year of its founding he was led by his restless nature to sell the paper and return to New York City. Again the lack of opportunity caused him to come back to the Island to teach school and to work for the *Long Island Democrat* in Jamaica. Here and in other newspapers he published the “Sundowner” column. He also campaigned for the 1840 Democratic Presidential candidate, Martin Van Buren. Between 1841 and the summer of 1859, Whitman held editorial positions on seven different newspapers, four of them on Long Island, two in New York City, and one as far away as New Orleans. In all these positions he was an outspoken advocate of social, economic, and political reform in both local and national issues. The local papers were the *Long Island Star*, 1845; *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1846-1848; *The Brooklyn Freeman*, 1848-1849; *The Brooklyn Daily Times*, 1857-1859.

In the spring of 1855 Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. It was a thin volume of poems written in a highly innovative style. Unable to find a publisher, he employed his Brooklyn friends, the Rome brothers, to print it. Although it was not a bestseller, it was praised by such noted intellectuals as Ralph Waldo Emerson and found acceptance among progressively minded Americans. *Leaves of Grass* seemed strange to most of the poet’s contemporaries, but today it is considered a masterpiece of world literature. The book is a poetic summary of Whitman and his fellow Americans. Between 1855 and 1892 it went through nine successive editions. In each edition Whitman made alterations or deletions, but the book grew apace with the nation.



Walt Whitman Birthplace in 1903. Photo by Ben Conklin. © Walt Whitman Birthplace Association

During 1862 Whitman left Brooklyn to search for his brother George who was listed as missing after the Battle of Fredericksburg. Shocked by the plight of the wounded in Washington’s military hospitals, Walt secured a Civil Service post and, in his spare time, made nearly 600 hospital visits. These visits provided ample material for “*The Wound Dresser*.” By the time he wrote “*From Paumanok Starting I Fly Like a Bird*,” he had changed his focus and poetic reference; no longer a poet of Long Island, he now belonged to the nation. In line with this change was a change of residence, and he lived in the nation’s capital until 1873.

Whitman idolized President Abraham Lincoln, and at least four poems were written as an expression of his and the Union’s grief at Lincoln’s assassination. The most famous of these is “*O Captain! My Captain!*”

The 1881 seventh edition of *Leaves of Grass* sold better than any other and allowed Whitman to purchase a modest house on Mickel Street in Camden, New Jersey. As *Leaves of Grass* became respected in England, Germany, France, and Denmark, Whitman achieved recognition as America’s national poet – America’s greatest poet.

Although he was never to live on Long Island again, Walt returned several times to continue friendships and refresh memories. His last trip to Huntington took place in 1882. Many Long Island recollections were written in “*Specimen Days and Collect*,” a book of reminiscences by the poet published in 1882. Whitman spent the last years of his life in Camden, New Jersey. He died there in March of 1892.

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