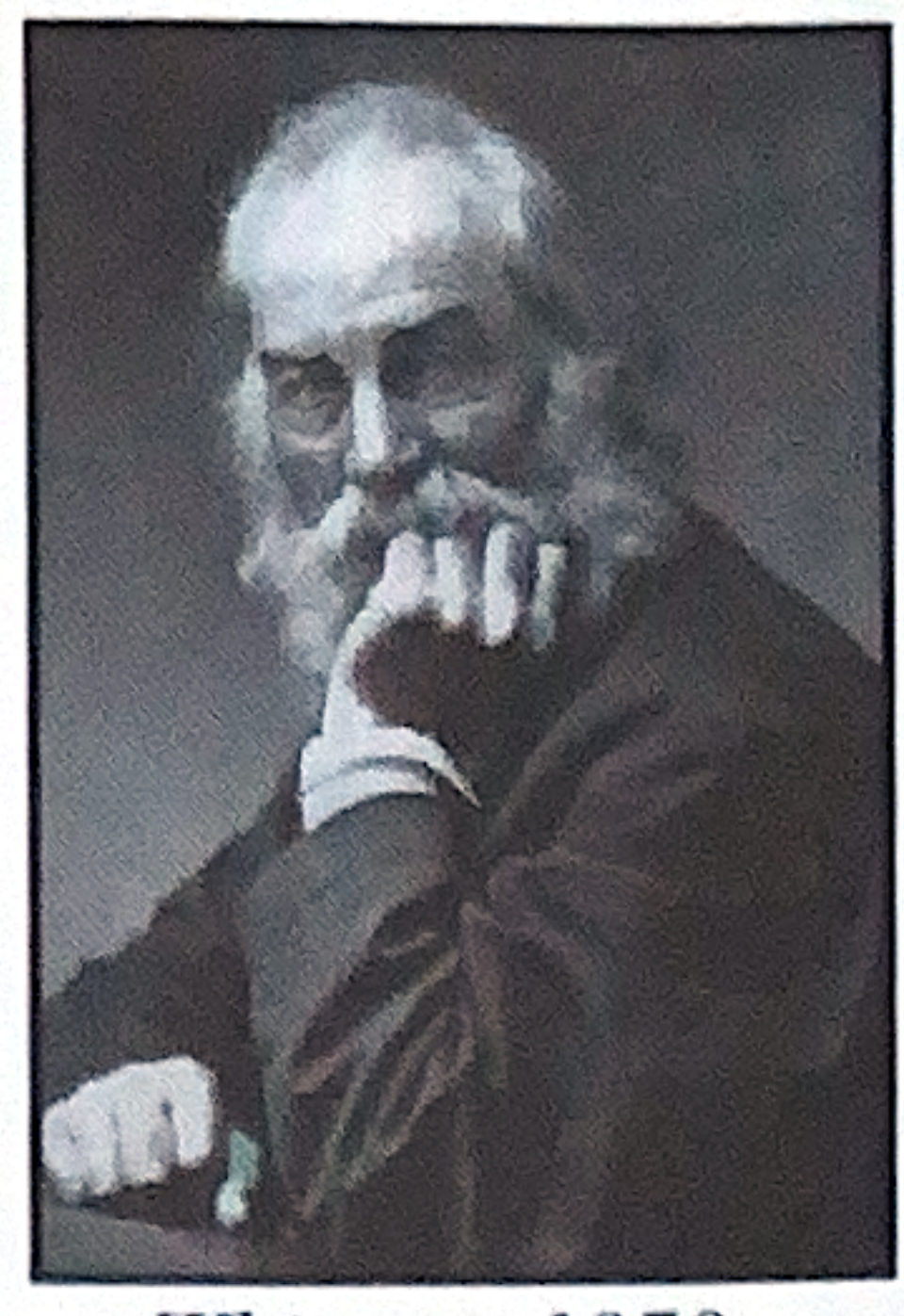


WHITMAN

America's poet, Walt Whitman, was a proud adopted son of the nation's capital. Arriving here nearly eight years following the 1855 publication



Whitman 1870
Ohio Wesleyan University

of his landmark Leaves of Grass, Whitman lived and worked among us during a decade (1863-1873) that proved to be a crucible for the American experiment in democracy.

Here Whitman chronicled the Union's "*splendid wrestling with Secession-Slavery, the arch-enemy personified, the instant he unmistakably show'ed his face.*" Here he gave voice to the Union's grief at the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Here he met the great love of his life, Peter Doyle. Friendships Whitman developed with soldiers and citizens satisfied Whitman's "need of comrades." But for a stroke that forced him to retire to Camden under the care of his brother George, Whitman very likely would have spent the remainder of his life in Washington and been buried near Peter Doyle in Congressional Cemetery.

Whitman was forty-three years old when he arrived here in late December 1862, having spent most of his life in and around Brooklyn, New York. His most recent edition of Leaves of Grass, published in 1860, contained the "Calamus" poems, as open a celebration of same-sex love as could be imagined for someone writing in this period.

Whitman came to Washington to nurse his brother George, a Union

soldier wounded in the Battle of Fredericksburg, back to health. Attracted to the wartime city and particularly the opportunity to provide solace to wounded soldiers in the many hospitals scattered throughout the Capital, Whitman stayed on.

At least 56 separate facilities in Washington were used as hospitals at some time over the course of the war. At the current site of the Air & Space Museum,



Armory Square Hospital
Library of Congress

stood Armory Square Hospital, which Whitman visited frequently. As he explained in a letter to his mother, *"I devote myself much to Armory Square Hospital because it contains by far the worst cases, most repulsive wounds, has the most suffering & most need of consolation - I go every day without fail, & often at night - sometimes stay very late - no one interferes with me, guards, doctors, nurses, nor any one - I am let to take my own course."*

Whitman developed intense friendships with soldiers Lewy Brown, a Maryland volunteer, Tom Sawyer, a popular seargeant from a Boston regiment, and Reuben Farwell, a Michigan farmer who rode with Custer's Brigade. Whitman recalled that,

*"Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips."*

Although a journalist by trade, Whitman supported himself here by working in minor government clerkships. His principal vocation, however, was his poetry. During this period, he wrote nearly 100 poems, including his poignant war verses, called *Drum-Taps*, his eulogies to Lincoln, and "Passage to India," a poem of praise to America's spiritual and political promise.

Whitman's life here was marked by rich friendships with abolitionists William and Ellen O'Connor, who helped found Myrtilla Miner's Normal School (which developed into UDC), and John Burroughs, one of America's first popular observers of Nature. Another friend was Charles Eldridge, the publisher of Whitman's "Calamus" poems and an architect of America's

tax code. Whitman's most intimate friendship was with Peter Doyle, an Irish immigrant and former Rebel, with whom he fell in love while riding the Pennsylvania Avenue streetcars.

Just as his brother George's illness caused Whitman to come to Washington, his own illness made him depart the city. He suffered a stroke in early 1873, and went to George's home in Camden, NJ, to recuperate. Whitman never fully recovered, and lived there as a "half-Paralytic" until his death in 1892.

⇒ 1. SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, F & 8TH STREETS, NW.

In Whitman's day, this was the U.S. Patent Office. Like most large buildings in DC during the Civil War, it served as a temporary hospital. Whitman frequently visited sick and wounded soldiers here. Commenting on use of the same rooms for Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural ball, Whitman wrote: *"To-night beautiful women, perfumes, the violins' sweetness, the polka and the waltz; but then, the amputation, the blue face, the groan, the glassy eye of the dying, the clotted rage, the odor of wounds and blood...."*

Whitman worked as a clerk for the Bureau of Indian Affairs on the ground floor in the building's east wing in early 1865. He responded to Congressional requests for information. Whitman described it in a letter to his brother Jeff:



U.S. Patent Office, The Bureau of Indian Affairs was in the basement

*"It is easy enough-
I take things very easy-the rule is to come at 9 and go at 4-but I don't come at 9, and only stay till 4 when I want, as at present to finish a letter for the mail-I am treated with great courtesy, as an evidence of which I have to inform you that since I began this letter, I have been sent for by the cashier to receive my PAY for the arduous & invaluable services I have already rendered to the government."*

When the new Secretary of the Interior, James Harlan, got wind that the author of the notorious *Leaves of Grass* was his employee, he promptly fired Whitman. The firing became a cause celebre among Whitman's supporters in the U.S. and abroad.

⇒ 2. U.S. SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION, 415 6TH STREET, NW.

This is the site of a three-story wood frame house owned by a widow, Mrs. Eliza Baker, where Whitman lived in 1863 and 1864. Whitman told his mother that the room overlooked a sunny side yard that provided "sweet & good air." Directly across the street lived Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase. Chase's biographer John Townsend Trowbridge was a friend of Whitman and on a visit to the city, called upon the poet in his attic room. Trowbridge recalls,

"Garret it literally was, containing hardly any more furniture than a bed, a cheap pine table, and a little sheet-iron stove in which there was no fire. But Walt, clearing a chair or two of their litter of newspapers, invited us to sit down and stop awhile with as simple and sweet hospitality as if he had been offering us the luxuries of the great mansion across the square."

Whitman lived in a series of boarding houses downtown, none of which still stands.

⇒ 3. GRAND ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC MEMORIAL, 7TH ST. & PENNSYLVANIA AVE., NW.

The Civil War transformed Washington. Whitman wrote of the "swarm" of soldiers here: *"Their blue pants and overcoats are everywhere."* Whitman was especially proud of one particular soldier, his younger brother. George Whitman enlisted as a private within days of the attack on Ft. Sumter, saw action at Antietam, Fredericksburg, the Wilderness, and Petersburg, and rose steadily through the ranks to the office of Major.

Whitman would have watched the Grand Review of the Union Army at the close of the War. *"For two days now the broad spaces of Pennsylvania Avenue along to Treasury hill, and so by detour around to the President's house, and so up to Georgetown, and across the aqueduct bridge, have been alive with a magnificent sight, the returning armies."*

⇒ 4. ARCHIVES-NAVY MEMORIAL

The Archives is the site of Center Market. Whitman shopped here regularly, especially for small gifts to distribute to the hospital-bound soldiers. His friend Elijah Allen owned a shop inside the Market. He recalled once seeing



Whitman pass, "with his arms full of bottles and lemons, going to some hospitals, to give the boys a good time."

Entering the Metro station, take a look at the sculpture "Ocean Piece" by Jorge Martins. A gift of the Lisbon Metro system, the artwork symbolically unites the United States and Portugal with quotes from their representative poets, Walt Whitman and Fernando Pessoa.

Pennsylvania Avenue here has a special significance for Whitman. One evening in 1865, Whitman was riding the streetcars when he met the great love of his life, Peter Doyle, a conductor for the Washington and Georgetown Railroad. Doyle recalled his first meeting with Walt: "He was the only passenger, it was a lonely night, so I thought I would go in and talk with him...we were familiar at once-I put my hand on his knee-we understood. From that time on, we were the biggest sort of friends." An Irish immigrant who was raised in Virginia, Doyle served as a Rebel during the Civil War. Just twenty-one when he met Whitman, Doyle was already the principal support of his widowed mother and younger siblings in a home he made for them in Southwest Washington.



Whitman and Doyle, 1869
Ohio Wesleyan University

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⇒ 5. FORD'S THEATER, 511 10TH ST., NW.

President Lincoln was assassinated here on April 14, 1865. Although Whitman was in Brooklyn visiting his family for the Easter holiday, Peter Doyle was present in the balcony when, "I heard the pistol shot. I had no idea what it was, what it meant...until Mrs. Lincoln leaned out of the box and cried, 'The President is shot!'"

Despite his friendship with Lincoln's secretary John Hay, Whitman never met Lincoln. Yet he felt he loved the President "personally."

Whitman wrote several poems commemorating the slain President, the most popular of which was "O Captain! My Captain!" Of more lasting artistic value is Whitman's elegy, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." This poem recreates the period of national mourning, as Lincoln's body was carried by funeral train from the Capital to its final resting place in Springfield, Illinois:

*"Here, coffin that slowly passes
I give you my sprig of lilac."*

⇒ 6. FREEDOM PLAZA, PENNSYLVANIA AVE., BETWEEN 13TH & 14TH STS., NW.

This urban park depicts Pierre L'Enfant's blueprint for Washington, and celebrates Whitman's connection with Washington, DC. In the southeast corner, one finds Whitman's observation, "I went to Washington as everybody goes there, prepared to see everything done with some furtive intention, but I was disappointed-pleasantly disappointed." Closer to the White House, in the plaza's northwest corner, Whitman exhorts the passer-by with,

*"The sum of all known reverence I add up in
you whoever you are,
The President is there in the White House for
you, it is not you who are here for him."*

⇒ 7. WILLARD HOTEL, PENNSYLVANIA AVE. AT 14TH STREET, NW.

There has been a Willard Hotel on this site since the 1850s (the present building dates from 1901). The hotel was the social center of Civil War Washington. Whitman visited on occasion and is remembered by a likeness hanging in the hotel's Round Robin Bar. Before coming to DC, Whitman imagined the scene here following the Union rout at 1st Bull Run: "Resolution, manliness, seem to have abandoned Washington....Willard's is full of shoulder-straps...Sneak, blow, put on airs there in Willard's sumptuous parlors and barrooms or anywhere-no explanation shall save you. Bull Run is your work."

Across from Willard's was "Newspaper Row,"



Ford's Theater, 1861
National Archives

which housed the offices of various out-of-town papers. A journalist by trade, Whitman occasionally wrote letters from Washington to the *New York Times*, and contributed to the local *Evening Star* and *Morning Chronicle* as well.

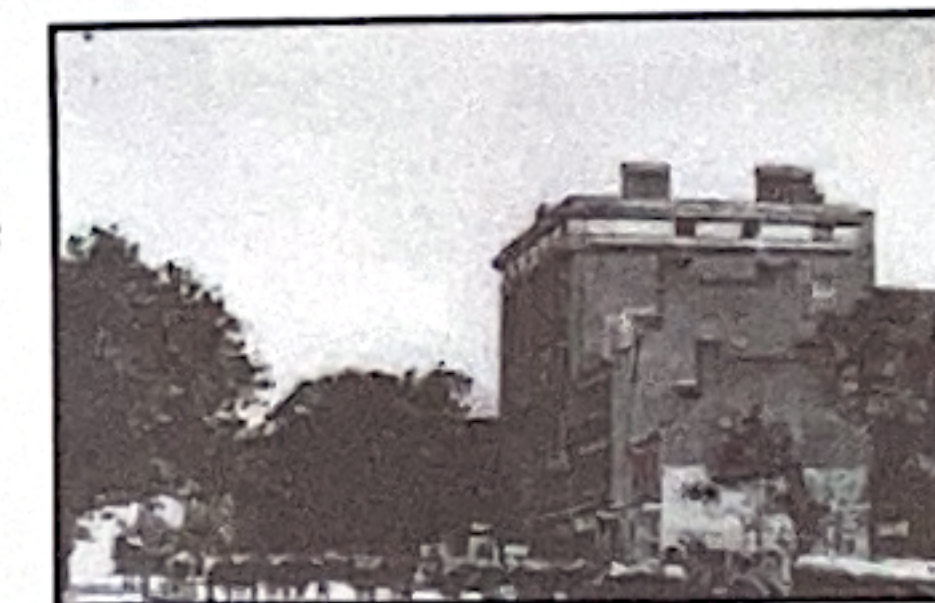
⇒ 8. HOTEL WASHINGTON, 515 15TH ST., NW.

This was the site of the Corcoran Office Building, where Whitman worked as a copyist for the Army Paymaster during the War. The offices were on

the 5th floor with "a splendid view" of the Potomac River and Georgetown. Whitman recalled the "clank of crutches" ascending the steep steps as a steady stream of wounded soldiers came to be paid before leaving on furlough. Outside his door, Whitman would observe, "A long string of army wagons are defiling along 15th street, and around into Pennsylvania avenue - white canvas coverings arch them over, and each one has its six-mule team - the teamsters are some of them walking along by the sides of their animals - squads of the provost-guard are tramping frequently along - and once or twice a party of cavalry in their yellow-trimmed jackets gallop along." Whitman lived in a boarding house on this block during his last year in Washington.

⇒ 9. U.S. TREASURY, PENNSYLVANIA & 15TH ST., NW.

Whitman worked for the Attorney General's Office from 1865 until 1873, and in this building in 1872 and 1873, as a clerk for the newly established Justice Department. His office was on the first floor, facing south, with a view of the partially-completed Washington Monument. Whitman processed pardons for former rebels, as he described in a letter: "This is the place where the big southerners now come up to get pardoned - all the rich men & big officers of the reb army have to get special pardons, before they



Corcoran Office Building
Whitman lived on the top floor of the second building, next to the taller Corcoran Building
National Archives

can buy or sell,
or do any thing
that will stand
law -

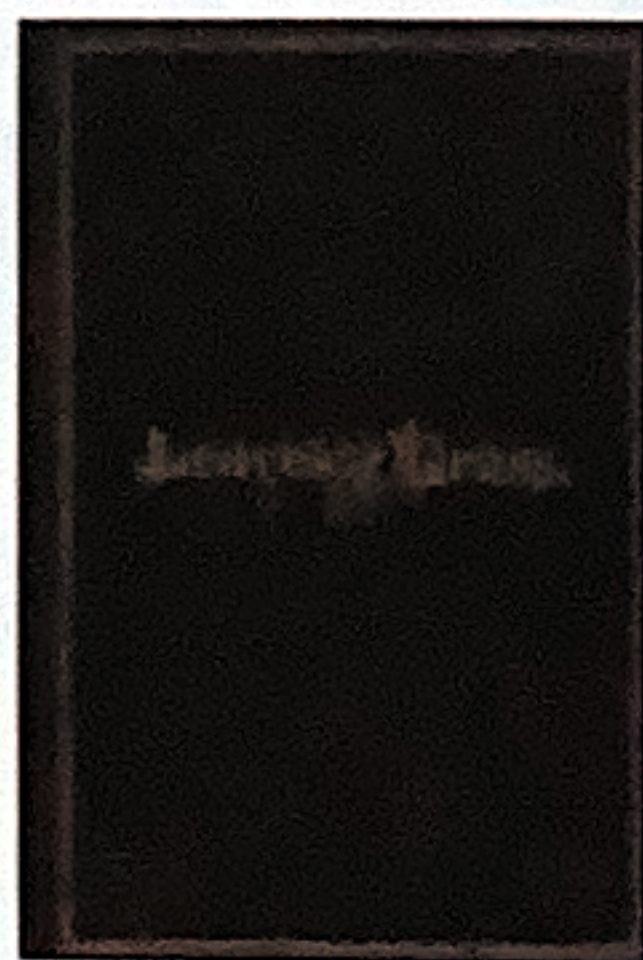
Sometimes
there is a
steady stream
of them coming
in here - old & young,
men & women - I talk
with them often, & find it very interesting to lis-
ten to their descriptions of things that have hap-
pened down south, & to how things are there
now."



Treasury Building, 1863
National Archives

Whitman spent his leisure time at Treasury reading and writing in the comfortable offices. As he noted in a letter to his mother, "I spend quite a good deal of time, evenings & Sundays, in the office at my desk, as I can get in the Treasury Building any time, as the door-keepers all know me--nearly all of them are broken down or one-legged soldiers--The office is warm & nice, with gas, & all the modern improvements." While getting ready to leave on the evening of Sunday, January 23, 1873, Whitman felt ill. The guard helped him to his rooms across the street, but the next morning Whitman couldn't move. He had suffered a stroke.

Although his Washington friends did all they could to assist him, Whitman left for his brother George's home in Camden, New Jersey, to recuperate. Whitman never recovered sufficiently to return to Washington, and remained in Camden until his death on March 26, 1892. He is buried in Camden's Harleigh Cemetery.



1855 edition, Leaves of Grass
Univ. of Virginia

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the
runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy
jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the
grass I love,

If you want me again look for me under your
boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

Walt Whitman



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