WALT WHITMAN
HERE IN TRIMMING SQUARE

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Nineteen hundred ninety-two, as one observance after another has reminded the country, is the hundredth anniversary of the death of Walt Whitman. The mixed reactions that the poet met with in his lifetime have yielded to a universal respect, which in this centennial year has amounted almost to adulation. The planners of Adelphi University's tribute to the good gray poet began with the view that, whatever else they did—and whatever else anyone did—they should honor Whitman as a local poet, Long Island's permanently eminent bard.

This starting point raised the question, how local? Whitman's associations with Huntington and Brooklyn are familiar, but in fact Whitman was all over Long Island. When he was growing up on the island he and his family changed homes at a dizzying rate, and he, once he was working, changed jobs as fast as homes. Even when we can pinpoint the location of Whitman's home or workplace at a given moment—and we can do so in most cases—it is a daunting task to follow him; if we cannot identify the location, then Whitman passes temporarily off the screen, and we're left with hints and must-have-beens about that period of his life.

Consider the tidy account of his mobility that Whitman himself left in a notebook entry:

    We lived at Vandykes 4th of July 1826
    We lived in Adams st in Brooklyn, 1827
    I was in Lawyer Clarke's office in 1830—
    We moved to Brooklyn in May 1823
    Moved to Cranberry st 1824
    Moved to Johnson st May 1st 1825
    Moved to Tillary st (Martin's) 1st May 1827—moved to my
    own house Nov lived there till Nov 1831
    We lived in Henry st the winter before the first cholera summer
    (1830-1831?)
    I was at Clements printing office in the summer of 1831—
    I went to Spooner's in the fall of '32.
    I was at Worthington's in the summer of '32
I was at Spooner’s when father moved in the country in 33. We lived at Norwich in 1834.—
I went up to Hempstead from New York 1st of May 1836—
gone to Norwich to teach school in June the same year. I kept the school west of Babylon the winter of 36-7
At Long Swamp the spring of ’37
At Smithtown the fall and winter of 37—
Went to Huntington the spring of 38—
We moved to Dix Hills in May 1840
We moved from Hempstead to Babylon in 1836 (August)
I went from Huntington to Babylon in 1839 (Spring)
Came down to New York (after selling Nina [his horse]) in the summer of 39.
I went to Woodbury to teach school in the summer of 40
I went to edit the Aurora in April 1842
In Jamaica first time in the latter part of the summer of 1839. In the winter succeeding, I taught school between Jamaica and Flushing—also in February and spring of ’40 at Triming Square—
In summer of 40 I taught at Woodbury¹

All right. At what point was he our nearest neighbor? And where the devil on Long Island is Triming Square? In The Solitary Singer, which came out in 1955 and was the most authoritative work on Whitman’s life to date, Gay Wilson Allen wrote, “From Little Bay Side [the school Whitman described as being between Jamaica and Flushing] Whitman returned to the West Hills region, where he taught during the spring of 1840 at Triming Square (no longer found on Long Island maps) and the following summer at Woodbury, three or four miles from West Hills.”² No longer found on Long Island maps indeed, but real, and it wasn’t in West Hills.

Bertha H. Funnell found it. Right here where we are. As we put this exhibition together we’re standing in Triming Square. Ms. Funnell, an authority on Whitman and Long Island, located Triming Square (two m’s) with the help of Daniel Tredwell’s resource-crammed, engaging, and unfairly forgotten Personal Reminiscences of Men and Things on Long Island.³ Triming Square was a significant community two miles west of Hempstead covering at least fifteen square miles and centered on the intersection of Jamaica Road and John Street. Today Jamaica Road is Hempstead Turnpike and John Street is Nassau Boulevard, so Triming Square is a sizable chunk of present day West Hempstead plus the southern part of what is today Garden City up as far as Adelphi University and the buildings of St. Paul’s School. At a point in time hard to determine Triming Square’s name was changed to Washington Square and then Washington Square itself disappeared from the maps.

Whitman’s school served District 17 and stood on John Street, i.e., Nassau Boulevard, in the acute angle formed by the intersection of Dogwood Avenue. From a photograph found by Paul Van Wie and mounted in the present exhibition we can get some impression of the appearance of the school; although the photograph shows the building in the early years of the twentieth century when a wing had been added to the original frame structure, it is easy enough to see the early schoolhouse as it was
The Walling map of Queens County (1859) shows the Trimming Square school at the corner of John Street and Dogwood Avenue. This map antedates the creation of Garden City and shows the old Washington Race Course northeast of the school on Washington Avenue. Arrow indicates location of Whitman’s school.

Courtesy of William Asadorian and the Long Island Room of the Queens Public Library.
before its expansion. It is interesting to retain the old street name in describing the location, for that name lingers in one place only—on the large redbrick John Street School that today stands just a bit to the north of the site of Whitman's old school. The John Street School is the heir to Whitman's old school, and its name probably mystifies local residents. Whitman's students would have come from anywhere in District 17, which included all of Trimming Square and a bit of Franklin Square to the west; the eastern boundary of the district was a line running along Garden City's Rockaway Avenue (neither Garden City nor Rockaway Avenue existed in Whitman's day) and continuing near the intersection of present day Front Street and Hempstead Turnpike south to Hempstead Lake State Park. Families who would have sent their children to Whitman's school bore such old Long Island names as Eldert, Hewlett, Nostrand, Carman, and Duryea; toward the northern side of the district, where Adelphi University now stands, lived families named Mott, Sloder, Ingles, Green, and Vanliew.

Hempstead Town Records indicate that, as of April 1840, school had been kept in the district for five months and twenty-one days, of which four months and twenty days were by an “approved teacher.” If Whitman was “approved,” he would have been responsible for three of the four months plus mentioned in the records. The teachers' wages are recorded as totals only, so it is unclear how much went to Whitman and how much to any teachers that preceded him; the district received $56.10 in public money and $55.81 from other sources for teachers' wages. The number of children in the district older than five and younger than sixteen—the school age children—was ninety-five; the number actually taught in the school was sixty-three. The school was inspected once in the course of the year and had thirty-three volumes in its library.

Whitman apparently left no record of his impressions of his Trimming Square experiences, a possible indication that they were not bad, considering what he had to say about the teaching job he moved to in Woodbury immediately after Trimming Square. In a series of letters to a friend in Jamaica, some of them datelined “Devil's den” and “Purgatory Fields,” Whitman wrote:

I believe when the Lord created the world, he used up all the good stuff, and was forced to form Woodbury and its denizens, out of the fag ends, the scraps and refuse; for a more unsophisticated race than lives hereabouts you will seldom meet with in your travels. . . .

In the manufactory of Nature, the building of these coarse gump-heads that people Woodbury, must have been given to some raw hand; for surely no decent workman ever had the making of them.—And these are the contemptible ninnies, with whom I have to do, and among whom I have to live.—O, damnation, damnation! thy other name is school-teaching and thy residence Woodbury! . . .

Fate never made a place where dulness perched on every tree, obtuseness located himself on every hill, and despair might be seen “sittin on a rail,” every ten yards, so completely as in this
The only known photograph of Whitman's old Trimming Square school. This early twentieth-century picture shows the school shortly before its demolition; a wing had been added since Whitman's time.

Courtesy of Paul Van Wie and the Franklin Square Historical Society. Reproduced from the Franklin Square Bulletin (March 13, 1941).
A number of passages from Whitman's writings not only reveal his reactions to his teaching experiences but constitute some of the best commentaries anywhere on nineteenth-century education on Long Island. Five years after his teaching at Trimming Square, Whitman wrote:

The schools of Long Island, are taught as a general thing altogether by what we may call chance teachers—young men during college vacations, poor students, tolerably intelligent farmers, who have some months leisure in the winter, and wish to make a little money,—and so on. There are very few permanent teachers. The schools are kept open, some three months (the law requires this time, otherwise they will get no public money), some four, some six, and a few twelve months. As the teachers are strangers to the district, and to the trustees, it more than half the time happens that great ground of dissatisfaction exists the very first week of keeping school. . . . More care should be exercised in the selection of teachers. . . . Greater liberality should be exercised in the construction and furnishing of school houses.

A year later Whitman commented on the substance rather than the circumstances of the educational system that he had been part of. His words seem especially remarkable coming out of his time and place and also give a hint that he was already predisposed to do what is so evident in his poetry, namely, to make Emerson his guiding philosophical light.

In our prevalent system of Common School Instruction, there is far too much of mere forms and words. Boys and girls learn "lessons" in books, pat enough to the tongue, but vacant to the brain. . . .

Unless what is taught in a school be understood, and has some greater value than merely a knowledge of the words which convey it, it is all a sham. In schools (as too much in religion) many people have been too long accustomed to look at the mere form—the outward circumstance—without attending to the reality. It matters little that a teacher preserves the most admirable discipline—performs all the time-honored floggings and thumpings and cuffings—and goes through with all the old-established ceremonies of school-teaching—unless the pupils are aided in forming sharp, intelligent minds—and are properly advanced in the branches they may be pursuing. Without these follow, his education is a mockery—a make-believe. . . .

A proper education unfolds and develops every faculty in its just proportions. It commences at the beginning, and leads [the student] along the path step by step. Its aim is not to give so much book-learning, but to polish and invigorate the mind—to make it used to thinking and acting for itself, and to imbue it with a
love for knowledge. It seeks to move the youthful intellect to rea-
son, reflect and judge, and exercise its curiosity and powers of
thought. . . . We consider it a great thing in education that the
learner be taught to rely on himself. The best teachers do not
profess to form the mind, but to direct it in such a manner—and
put such tools in its power—that it builds up itself.9

The visionary character of these comments is all the more striking when the perfun-
tory and far from visionary practice that they were directed against was carried out in
a school system that looked made to order to produce Huckleberry Finns. School dis-
tricts were created in New York state in 1812 and the first compulsory attendance
law was passed in 1853, when Whitman was no longer teaching, and that law was
not enforced; it was not until 1894—after Whitman’s death—that New York state
law made year-round school attendance mandatory.10

District 17, in any event, must have got its money’s worth out of its young teacher in
1840. The scattered recollections of students from Whitman’s classes in other
schools contain some criticism of the young teacher, but the majority suggest that he
was effective and popular. A well-known comment by one of Whitman’s former stu-
dents, Charles A. Roe, gives a picture of an imaginative and innovative teacher whose
methods matched his above-cited philosophy and would have been broadly approved
of in educational circles today.11 Another student of Whitman’s, Sanford Brown,
criticized him for being more preoccupied with writing than teaching: “He warnt in
his element. He was always musin’ and writin’ ‘stead of tending to his proper
duties.”12 It’s a comment that time changes our perspective on.

One wonders whether any of his students or their families knew that the teacher was
a budding writer; some of Whitman’s early writing was done while he was in
Trimming Square. “The Sun-Down Papers.—From the Desk of a Schoolmaster”
began to appear during those months in the Hempstead Inquirer.13 These sketches
are primarily of historical interest but they are not badly written; they are good ex-
ercises. Internal evidence also suggests that some other items appearing in the Inquirer
during or right before Whitman’s months inTrimming Square came from his pen.

At first glance it might seem that the fact that Whitman’s earliest extant poems date
roughly from the Trimming Square period would be one of the more momentous
biographical details to note here. It is worth noting—even if we did not have copies
of the poems, we would want to know that he was writing verse at this time—but
one has to be prepared to encounter juvenilia. The easiest poem to mock is “Young
Grimes,” which was written right before Whitman came to Trimming Square:

In youth, ‘tis said, he liked not school—
Of tasks he was no lover;
He wrote sums in a ciphering book,
Which had a pasteboard cover.14

But this poem is modeled on and probably intended as a satire of Albert Gorton
Greene’s “Old Grimes,” a then-popular piece of verse worthy of Huckleberry Finn’s
Emmeline Grangerford. As satire it is quite good. “The Inca’s Daughter,” probably
written while Whitman was teaching in Trimming Square, is still juvenilia but not
embarrassing:

And I—a Daughter of the Sun—
Shall I ingloriously still live?
Shall a Peruvian monarch’s child
Become the white lord’s slave?¹⁵

It is possible to reconstruct to some extent the setting that we find Whitman living and working in in 1840. Setting was not lost on him—as any reader of Song of Myself will be aware. Speaking of the schoolteacher’s exposure to the community, Whitman said in an 1858 article:

Sometimes the teachers “board round”; that is they distribute and average themselves among the parents of the children that attend school—they stop two or three days in one place, a week in another, and so on.

This “boarding round” gives a first-rate opportunity for the study of human nature. You go from place to place, from the rich to the poor, from the pious to the atheistical, from where there are good kind-hearted women to places where there are—But, good heavens! what were we going to say!¹⁶

One of the opportunities for “the study of human nature” that Trimming Square afforded was the study of life in a racing town. On the border between Hempstead and Trimming Square lay one of the oldest (seventeenth century!) and most popular race tracks in America, the Washington Race Course, as it was known in Whitman’s time. Old Tredwell tells us something about it:

In the middle of this island is a fine level tract of land called Salisbury Plain, where horse races are held, to which the gentlemen of New England and the neighboring colonies resort, as those of old England do to the New Market....¹⁷

Salisbury Plain, or the Hempstead Plains, was extensive, covering a good deal of the central part of the island. The race track lay in the northwest corner of Trimming Square on the south side of Washington Avenue, a road that no longer exists except for its beginnings in Hempstead (where it is today Atlantic Avenue). Charted in terms of present-day names and locations, Washington Avenue ran from Atlantic Avenue into Garden City, across the Cherry Valley Country Club’s golf course, through the Adelphi University campus, past the intersection of Nassau Boulevard and Newmarket Road, where it forked, one branch going to Denton Avenue and Jericho Turnpike and the other to New Hyde Park Road right south of the Long Island Rail Road’s Port Jefferson line tracks. The Washington Race Course lay on the site of the south end of the Cherry Valley golf course and probably part of the Adelphi University campus. Tredwell is very taken by the race course; he talks about it at some length:

Horse racing on the Hempstead Plains dates from the period of Richard Nicols, Governor of the Provinces, 1665. He established
a race course on Long Island which he named New Market, and ordered that a plate be run for every year. He found an ideal course at his hands on the great plains at Hempstead (more recently Salisbury Plains), with not a stick or stone to hinder the horses' heels or endanger them in their racing. This was the first race course in the province and was named New Market after the celebrated English track. . . . The governor and his suite, and the high dignities and officials of the City of New York and the sturdy farmers of Hempstead assembled here to enjoy the sport. . . .

On the first Friday in May, 1750, a great horse race was run at Hempstead Plains for a considerable wager, which engaged the attention of so many of the city nobility that upwards of seventy chairs and chaises were brought over the ferry from New York on the day before preparatory for an early start for the track. A great number of horses were brought over. It was thought that the number of horses on the race ground exceeded 1,000 . . .

These British officers neglected no opportunity for enjoying themselves in every variety of horse sport. We quote from "Rivingston's Gazette" August 13, 1779, the following of many similar announcements: "A number of excellent fox-hounds having been at great difficulty and expense collected, there will be hunting every Monday, Wednesday and Thursday at Hempstead Plains . . . ."

Bull baiting and other good old English sports were attempted.

Washington Race Course, the name which succeeded New Market was also famous as a race track. But it has degenerated and in modern times it is noted for its Huckleberry Frolic held there once a year. The bill of performances included horse-races, mule-races, foot-races, women-races, sack-races, troops of lofty tumblers, moving comedies, fire-eaters, wild beasts from the Desert of Arabia and the Mountains of Siberia. Probably no doings on this once famous Sporting Ground were more noted for wanton profanity, obscenity, dissipation, knavery and every other conceivable wickedness and abomination than Huckleberry Frolic.¹⁸

Aha! Here's a little insight into traditional values. The land on which the Huckleberry Frolic was celebrated was smothered in the 1870s by the descent from the skies of A. T. Stewart's planned community of Garden City, which wiped out local streets and landmarks and deposited a custom-made village on Trimming Square (then Washington Square) and its grand old racetrack. But roots are roots, after all, and one wonders whether they are not underground (as all roots are) keeping cheerfully alive the village's true and noble tradition of wanton profanity, obscenity, dissipation, and knavery, which is its heritage and which the old Trimming Square fathers must weep to see forgotten.
In fact the huckleberry frolic was a feature of late summer life on the island; what makes Trimming Square’s celebration of it notable is probably that it was the biggest and best—Rio’s carnival next to all the other carnivals. Unfortunately Whitman was already out in his detested Woodbury by the end of the summer of 1840, and the huckleberry frolic that he took in was that town’s version of the festival. It measured up to everything else in Woodbury in Whitman’s eyes:

Now is the season for what they call “huckleberry frolicks.”—I had the inestimable ecstasy of being invited to one of these refined amusements.—I went.—We each carried a tin pail, or a basket, or a big bowl, or a pudding bag.—It was fun no doubt, but it cost me two mortal pounds of flesh, besides numerous remnants of my apparel, which still remain, for what I know, on the briars and bushes.... And then our dinner—our pic-nic dinner!—there’s the rub!—Guess now what we had.—A broken-bowl half full of cold potatoes; three or four bones thinly garnished with dirty, greasy ham; a huge pie, made out of green apples, molasses, and buckwheat crust; six radishes, and a tin pail of boiled beans!—And all this washed down with a drink they called “switchel,” a villainous compound, as near as I could discover, of water, vinegar, and brown sugar.... Tim Hewlett, vowed he ought to have a buss from Patty Strong; Patty modestly declined the honor.—A struggle was the result, in which Tim’s face received permanent marks of the length of Patty’s finger nails; and the comb of that vigorous young damsel lost some of its fair proportions.—It was a drawn battle.19

So this was our neighbor, Walt Whitman. This was our schoolteacher. In this year of his “boarding round” the nation he has come to spend a few days with us, one of the families in the district. Not alone because he was our neighbor and schoolmaster do we welcome him, but because he had a true friend here at Adelphi in years past. Professor Emory Holloway of the Adelphi English Department was the most noted Whitman scholar of his day and indeed a timeless one, whose works, even amid the monumental textual and biographical studies of our time, remain indispensable and constantly in use. Walt, you’re among old friends.

Welcome to Walt Whitman Here in Trimming Square.
NOTES


4 Paul Van Wie in *The Way it Was: the Story of Old Franklin Square* (Franklin Square, NY: The Franklin Square Historical Society, 1984), 37, recorded the recollections, which were at points a bit imprecise, of the last principal to preside over the original school building.

5 “Abstract of an annual report of trustees of Common Schools of the Town of Hempstead. Made to the Commissioner of Schools of Said the first of April 1840,” *Hempstead Town Records*, vol. 6 (1784-1862).


7 Early newspaper articles by Whitman on education have been collected by Florence B. Freedman in *Walt Whitman Looks at the Schools* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1950). Interesting excerpts from these Whitman articles have been assembled by Natalie Naylor in “At School: Whitman and Teaching: Selected Whitman Writings on Schools, Teaching, and Education. (Privately printed.)

8 *Brooklyn Evening Star* (October 2, 1845) reprinted in Freedman, 67-68.

9 *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Nov. 23, 1846) repr. in Holloway *UPP*, I, 145, and Freedman 147-49.


12 Quoted in Allen, 37, and Funnell, 63.

13 Seven of the "Sun-Down Papers" are reprinted in *UPP*, I, 32-51, where they are identified by Holloway as numbers 5 to 10, including 9 bis. Holloway, unable to find issues of the *Hempstead Inquirer* containing the Whitman essays, took his text from the *Long Island Democrat*, and in one instance from the *Long Island Farmer*, which had reprinted the "Sun-Down Papers" from what Holloway called number 5 onward. The first four numbers appeared in the *Inquirer* in February, March, and April 1840. Numbers 1-3 have been reprinted in H. Bergmann and William White, "Whitman’s Lost ‘Sun-Down Papers’, Nos. 1-3," *American Book Collector* 20 (January 1970), 17-20. Bergmann and White speculate that Holloway’s number 5 is, in fact, number 4; see this article for a discussion of the confusion over the numbering of the Papers.


17 Tredwell, 209.

18 Tredwell, 210-11.