

TOUR OF WHITMANLAND In HISTORIC WEST HILLS
WALT WHITMAN BIRTHPLACE ASSOCIATION
Huntington, Long Island, New York

INTRODUCTION

At a town meeting held April 1, 1668, the first notice of the Whitman family in West Hills is noted.

"Also it was voated and agreed the same Daie that Joseph Whitman shall take up ten or twelve acars of land on the west sid of the south path on the hether side of Samuell Ketchams hollow, it being toward his secon division."

The "south path" mentioned is New York Avenue south of Jericho Turnpike, and "Samuel Ketchams hollow" is present day Melville.

In a deed dated March 7, 1700, we find our first clue to the "genealogy" of most of the Whitman homes in West Hills.

"Between Joseph Whitman and Nathaniel and Zebulon Whitman, sons of the aforesaid Joseph Whitman, by and with the approbation and consent of Sarah, his wife. Consideration...a reasonable sum. Two home lots, the one of which is the lot I now live on with my house (Whitman--Carll House) and barn, orchard, fences, the said doth to the same belongs, I sell to my son, Zebulon Whitman, the said other lot I sell to my son, Nathaniel Whitman (Whitman--Place House), and my son Samuel Whitman's lot (Whitman--White House)."

WHITMANLAND

1. WALT WHITMAN BIRTHPLACE. 246 Old Walt Whitman Road

Built by Walter Whitman, Sr. ca. 1819, the Birthplace has been carefully restored by the State of New York in 2001. Walt's father took his bride, Louise Van Velsor, to this house and it was here the poet lived for the first four years of his life before his family moved to Brooklyn. Since then, thousands have visited the Birthplace to pay homage to the man who was to become America's greatest poet. Walt's poetry in Leaves of Grass was to sing songs of hope, beauty, and democracy which are still treasured in the hearts of many people everywhere. During his career as a school teacher, editor, and later as a writer, Walt visited his home grounds on many occasions. In 1881, he wrote "Rode around all the old familiar spots, viewing and pondering and dwelling long upon them, everything coming back to me from fifty years, with childhood scenes. Went first to the old Whitman homestead (Whitman--Carll House) on the upland at West Hills, and took a view eastward inclining south over the broad and beautiful lands of my grandfather and my father. There was the new house (Whitman--Place House), the big oak (no longer extant)...and a little way off even the well-kept remains of the dwellings of my great-grandfather (Whitman-Place

Barn) still standing with its mighty timbers and low ceilings...went down nearly a mile further to the house where I was born in the fertile meadow land" (Walt Whitman Birthplace).

2. JOSEPH WHITMAN HOUSE. 365 West Hills Road

Originally built some time prior to 1692, this is possibly the oldest house in West Hills. It was formally located across the street, and attached to the Whitman-Carll House.

3. WHITMAN-CARLL HOUSE. 356 West Hills Road

In 1788 Isaiah Whitman sold this property to Captain Timonty Carll, Revolutionary soldier. It remained in the Carll family until 1904. In 1899, Uncle Lem Carll, "a sure as death Democrat" died here. The Carll family was one of the most prominent in West Hills. Across from the house, up on the hill, hunters erected a stone fort to protect them from the Indians at night. This fort, in all probability, was erected shortly after the founding of the town in 1653, and before farms were established ca. 1670. The oldest part of this house was moved across the street in 1908.

4. WHITMAN-WHITE HOUSE. 349 West Hills Road

Bought by the White family in 1772, this house was built by Samuel Whitman before 1700. Samuel, who died in 1721, was the bachelor son of Joseph Whitman. The house remained in the White family until the early 1900's.

5. WEST HILLS SCHOOL HOUSE. 79 Sweet Hollow Road

This structure is the old West Hills school house, built in the 18th century. According to the grand-daughter of Lemuel Carll, when the old school building was partially burned in the 1880's, she walked to Melville school.

6. PEACE AND PLENTY INN. 107 Chichester Road

This inn was built in the latter part of the 17th century and remained in the Chichester family until the early part of the 20th century. It was the center of social life in West Hills for many years and was a favorite stop for President Theodore Roosevelt. Eliphalet Chichester, born in 1737, was a Revolutionary War soldier, and is buried on a hill not far from the inn.

7. WHITMAN-ROME HOUSE. 85 Chichester Road

Originally built by Nathaniel Whitman, the house was lost in 1821 by his grandson, Daniel Whitman, and Daniel's wife Ollionee for failure to pay a mortgage of \$1400. Sold to the Rome family in 1822, the house remained in that family until 1940. It is believed to have been built ca. 1705.

WHITMAN BURIAL GROUND

Located on the hill in back of the Whitman-Rome House are approximately 147 discernible gravesites. The Chichester, Pine, Wood, Rome, and Whitman families are represented as is the gravestone of Experience Rogers who married Nathaniel Whitman in 1793. Walt Whitman visited this burial ground in 1881.

8. WHITMAN-PLACE HOUSE. 69 Chichester Road

Sold in 1835 by Tredwell Whitman, this land was mentioned by the poet as being owned by his great-grandfather of whom he was very proud. It is believed that the barn on this property is a structure from the original homestead of John Whitman mentioned in the 1700 deed in the Introduction. The original homestead was built by Nathaniel Whitman ca. 1690; and the "new house" on the site was built by Jesse Whitman in 1810.

OTHER IMPORTANT SITES

A. JAYNE'S HILL. Reservoir Road

Located in Suffolk County's West Hills Park, this elevation is the highest point on Long Island. The hill was known by several different names; it was known as Oakley by the early white settlers, High Hill by Silas Wood, Long Island's first historian, and Jayne's Hill after the prominent pioneer family. In 1825, the mount was surveyed by Abel Ketcham for Silas Wood at 354 feet above sea level. It was a great triumph for Wood, a West Hills native, that the hill surpassed Hempstead Harbor Hill as the highest point on Long Island. The hill has since been resurveyed, a number of times, at the turn-of-the-century, and by the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey, as a triangulation station, and is presently known at an elevation of 400.9 feet above sea level. In Walt's day, one could see from the hill, on a clear day, the ships sailing off Fire Island, and before the growth of trees to the north, Connecticut was clearly visible. In 1850 Walt Whitman wrote, "West Hills is a romantic and beautiful spot; it is the most hilly and elevated part of Long Island. The "high hill" (Jayne's hill) affords an extensive and pleasant view." Today, the quiet, shaded hill-top, with its wooded slopes, still holds the memory of the poet who tarried there for inspiration in by-gone years--a plaqued stone marks the mounts pinnacle.

B. COYLER HOUSE. 26 Mt. Misery Road

Built ca. 1819 by Walt Whitman, Sr., the design of the structure is almost identical to that of the Birthplace. The house was originally part of a farm of 80 acres acquired by Richard Coyler from Tredwell Whitman and has been the subject of numerous sketches and paintings, including those of George Avery, Rudolph Ruzicka, and Hobart Nichols. At the time of the poet's visit to the house in 1850, it was occupied by Walt's Aunt Sarah and her daughter Hannah, the widow of Richard Coyler, "These three days, we have been on a visit (father and myself) to West Hills, the old native place. We went up in the L.I.R.R., and so in the stage to Woodbury--then on foot along the turnpike and 'across lots' to Colyer's, I plumped in the kitchen door. Aunt S. (Sarah), father's sister, was standing there."

WALT WHITMAN'S VISIT TO WEST HILLS

In 1881 Walt Whitman wrote to the New York *Tribune* to describe his trip with Richard Maurice Bucke to West Hills and his Birthplace. He was anxious to show his friend and literary executor the place where he had spent so many happy times. This is what he said:

"A Week at West Hills."

New York *Tribune*, August 4, 1881

Sir: I have been for the last two weeks jaunting around Long Island, and now devote this letter to West Hills (Suffolk County, 30 miles from New York), and the main purpose of a journey thither, to resume and identify my birth-spot, and that of my parents and their parents, and to explore the picturesque regions comprised in the townships of Huntington and Cold Spring Harbor. I shall just give my notes verbatim as I pencilled them.

Went down nearly a mile further to the house where I was born (May 31, 1819) in the fertile meadow land. As I paused and looked around I felt that any good farmer would have gloated over the scene. Rich corn in tassel, many fields; they had cradled their wheat and rye, and were cutting their oats. Everything had changed so much, and it looked so fine, I began to doubt about the house, and drove in and inquired, to be certain. I saw Mrs. J--- wife of the owner, (son of the J--- that bought the farm of my father 60 years ago.) She was very courteous, and invited us in (Dr. Bucke, of Canada, with me), but we declined.

We drove back to the homestead, let down some bars at the foot of a slope, and ascended to a spot most interesting of all.

The Whitmans as originally spreading from this outset, were long-lived, most of them farmers, had big families, and were strenuous for the best education that could be obtained. One is mentioned as a great linguist, and sometimes acted in the courts as interpreter with the Indians; and down to the present date twelve of the name have graduated at Harvard, five at Yale and nine at other New England colleges. There have been ministers and deacons and teachers by the dozen.

I write this back again at West Hills on the high elevation (the highest spot on Long Island?) of Jayne's Hill, which we have reached by a fascinating winding road. A view of thirty or forty, or even fifty or more miles, especially to the east and south and southwest; the Atlantic Ocean to the latter points in the distance--a glimpse or so of Long Island Sound to the north.

Huntington, Aug. 1.--We are just leaving; a perfect day in sun, temperature after the rain of yesterday and last night. I am indebted to Charles Velsor, Henry Lloyd, John Chichester, Lemuel Carll, Lawyer Street, Charles Shepard and other friends and relatives, for courtesies. Seems to me I have had the memorable though brief and quiet jaunt of my life. Every day a point attained; every day something refreshing, Nature's medicine. All about here, an area of many miles, Huntington, Cold Spring Harbor, East and West and Lloyd's Neck (to say nothing of the water views), the hundreds of tree-lined roads and lanes, with their turns and gentle slopes, the rows and groves of locusts, after the main objects of my jaunt, made the most attraction, as I rode around. I didn't know there was so much in mere lanes and trees. I believe they have done me more good than all the swell scenery I could find.

August 3, 1881

W.W.

WHITMAN RELATED SITES

THE LONG-ISLANDER. 313 Main Street, Huntington

The newspaper was founded by Walt Whitman in 1838 and sold by him in 1839. He wrote, edited, set the type, and delivered the paper by bicycle. This local paper is still in publication and received weekly by town residents.

LONG SWAMP SCHOOL. 2 Melville Road, Huntington Station

As a teenager, Walt Whitman taught school here in the summer of 1837. The site is now the location of the South Huntington Public Library.

SITE OF THE WOODBURY SCHOOL (Corner of Woodbury Road & Jericho Turnpike)

After finishing a Spring term at Timing Square in 1840, Walt taught a summer school at Woodbury, four miles from West Hills. The original school on this site, erected in 1807, was sold at auction in 1927 to make room for a new school structure and moved across the street on Jericho Turnpike. More than once threatened with destruction, the original schoolhouse was moved to the Alexander M. White estate in Oyster Bay Cove. The desk used by Whitman at Woodbury is now at the Birthplace.

THE VAN VELSOR CEMETERY, Woodbury

Like the Whitman family cemetery in West Hills, the burying grounds of Walt's mother's side of the family, the Van Velsors, exists although few graves can be identified. In 1881 Walt visited this spot and described it as: "...the most significant depository of the dead that could be imagin'd without the slightest help from art, soil sterile, a mostly bare plateau--flat of an acre, the top of a hill, brush and well grown trees and dense woods bordering all around, very primitive, secluded, no visitors, no road...The scene as I stood or sat, the delicate and wild odor of the woods, a slight drizzling rain, the emotional atmosphere of the place, and the infer'd reminiscences, were such as I never realized before."

THE WHITMAN CEMETERY, COMMACK, 486 Town Line Road

About 15 members of the Whitman family are buried here, in addition to members of the Carll, Harned, Moreland, Brush, Hubbard, and Smith families. The cemetery is in three divisions: the old church burying ground of 1/2 acre near the Commack Methodist Church; a group of privately owned plots, including that of the family of Zebulon D. Whitman; and 12 acres owned by the Commack Cemetery, Inc.

JOSEPH WHITMAN LANDS, Town Line road & Jericho Turnpike, Commack

On the border between the Towns of Huntington and Smithtown is a valley known originally by the Indian name Winnecomack, "Pleasant Land," later called Joseph Whitman's Great Hollow and finally Commack. Joseph settled there in 1672 on one of 10 farms established by the Town of Huntington. For 240 years the land remained in the possession of the Whitman family. Miss Anne Whitman, who died in 1912, was the last of the line. For several generations, the

Whitmans owned and operated a grocery store and U.S. post office at the corner of Town Line Road and Jericho Turnpike.

SCHOOLHOUSE 9 Singer Lane, Incorporated Village of The Branch Smithtown

From 1837 through 1838, Walt, not yet 19, was a teacher at this school-house founded in the 17th century. The subjects he taught here included reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, and geography. Records show his pay for five months teaching was \$72.70. During his stay in Smithtown, Walt boarded at the Conklin House, then located on the old Hallock Tavern property, and joined the local debating society becoming its secretary. Originally near the corner of Main Street and Bellmeade Avenue, the schoolhouse has since been moved to its present location and is currently known as the Village of The Branch Travel Agency.

LOCAL ATTRACTIONS

SITE OF SILAS WOOD'S HOME--Chichester Rd., West Hills

SITE OF MOUNTAIN MIST SPRINGS--Sweet Hollow Rd., West Hills

HIGH HOLD, THE STIMSON HOME--Chichester Rd., West Hills

THE SMITH COTTAGE--Chichester Rd., West Hills

ALFRED T. GREGORY HOME--Sweet Hollow Rd., Melville

"Oakley" (MELODY EQUESTRIAN FARMS HOUSE)--7 Downs Rd., West Hills

MELVILLE LIBRARY--510 Sweeth Hollow Rd., Melville

OLD COUNTRY ROAD.--Between Round Swamp Rd. & Route 110, Melville

THE GILMORE HOME--Wolf Hill Rd., Dix Hills

THE GENTRY B. SMITH HOME--Woodbury Rd. Woodbury

COMMACK METHODIST CHURCH--486 Town Line Rd., Commack