

The Walt Whitman Letters

By Tom Montalbano



The original one-room Woodbury School in which Walt Whitman taught in 1840, just east of the Jericho Turnpike/Woodbury Road intersection

As Woodbury residents and community leaders listened intently at the 1954 dedication ceremony for the brand new Walt Whitman Elementary School, speaker after speaker tendered nothing but praise for the school's namesake, who, in 1840, at the age of twenty-one, taught for three months at the original Woodbury School, which stood just a stone's throw away. The members of the newly formed Syosset Central School District had no reason to believe that the great American poet had anything but admiration and passion for the hamlet of Woodbury in his time. However, several letters discovered in 1985 to his close friend, Abraham Paul Leech, reveal the young Whitman's true sentiments about Woodbury and its people.

On July 30, 1840, after just a few short weeks of teaching in the small farming village, Whitman writes:



....I believe when the Lord created the world, he used up all the good stuff and was forced to form Woodbury and its citizens out of the fag ends - the scraps and refuse – for a more unsophisticated race than lives hereabout you will seldom meet in your travels. They get up in the morning and toil through the day with no interregnum of joy or leisure, except breakfast and dinner.

He continues...

I am getting to be a miserable kind of dog; I am sick of wearing away by the inches and spending the fairest portion of my little span of life here in this nest of bears, this forsaken of all God's creations, among clowns and country bumpkins, flat-heads and coarse brown-faced girls, dirty, ill-favored young brats with squalling throats and crude manners, and

bog trotters with all the disgusting conceit of ignorance and vulgarity. It is enough to make the fountains of goodwill dry up in our hearts, to wither all gentle and loving dispositions, when we are forced to descend and be as one among the grossest, the most low-minded of the human race.

Eleven days later, Whitman follows up with another letter to Leech, this time using the return address "The Devil's Den," Woodbury, NY:

How tired and sick I am of this wretched, wretched hole! I wander about like an evil spirit, over hills and dales, through woods, fields, and swamps. In the manufactory of nature, the building of these coarse gumpheads that people Woodbury, 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. Time, put spurs to thy leaden wings and bring on the period when my allotted time of torment here shall be fulfilled. Speed, ye airy hours, lift me from this earthly purgatory; nor do I care how soon ye lay these pudding-brained bog-trotters, amid their kindred earth. I do not believe a refined or generous idea was ever born of this place; the whole concern, with all its indwellers ought to be sunk to chaos. Never before have I entertained so low an idea of the beauty and perfection of man's nature. Never have I seen humanity in so degraded a shape as here. Ignorance, vulgarity, rudeness, conceit, and dullness are the reigning gods of this deuced sink of despair. The brutes go barefoot, shave once in three weeks, call "brown cow" "breown ceow," live on sour milk, rye bread, and strong pork, and believe Long Island Sound and the South Bay to be the ne-plus ultra (ultimate example) of creation.

He concludes with a plea:

Think, my friend, think on all this, and pray nightly for my deliverance from this dungeon where grace or good breeding were never seen, and from whence happiness fled shrieking twenty years ago.

In his next letter, dated August 19, from "Purgatory Fields," Woodbury, NY, Whitman's distaste for Woodbury becomes even more apparent:

...That this earthly habitation is a place of torment to my miserable self is made painfully evident every day of existence. Fate never made a place where dullness perched on every tree, obtuseness located himself on every hill, and despair might be seen "sittin on a rail," every ten yards, as completely as in this cursed Woodbury. Woodbury! Appropriate name! It would bury me or any being of the least wish for intelligent society, in one year, if compelled to endure its intolerable insipidity, without the hope of relief...You do not know, my friend, nor can you conceive, the horrid dullness of this place. Making money, plodding on and on and on; raising ducks, carting dung, and eating pork are the only methods of employment that occupy the Woodbury animals.

A passage in the same letter provides interesting, rare insight into day-to-day life in Woodbury during Whitman's time, and may explain, to some degree, why Whitman seemed so cranky:

What do you think I had for dinner? Guess, now. Beef? No. Mutton? No. Pot-pie? No. Salad and iced champagne? No, no, no. I'll tell you in the order that it was put up, or rather put down. Firstly, two cold potatoes, with the skins on, one of said potatoes considerably nibbled in a manner which left me in doubt whether it had been done by the teeth of a mouse or the bill of a chicken; Secondly, three boiled clams that had evidently seen their best days; thirdly, a chunk of molasses cake made of buckwheat flour; fourthly, a handful of old mouldy (sic) pot-cheese, with a smell strong enough to knock down an ox; fifthly, and lastly, two oblong slats of a mysterious substance which I concluded, after considerable reflection, must have been intended for bread...

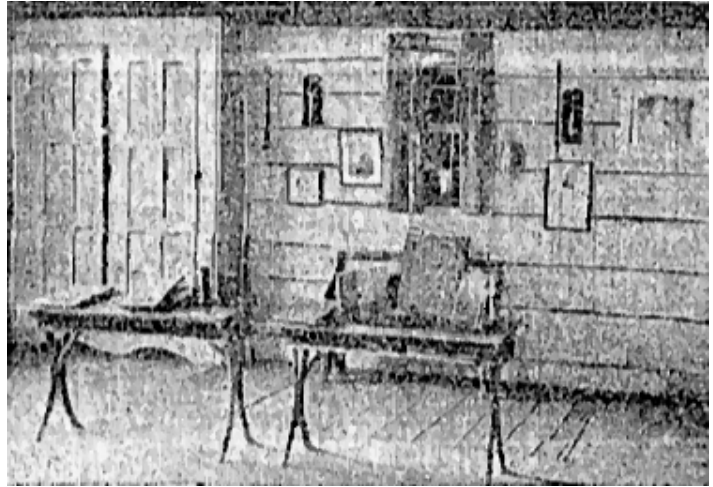
Soon after, the sarcasm grows darker:

O' ye gods, press me not too far, pour not my cup too full, or I know what I shall do. Dim and dreadful thoughts have lately been floating through my brain. The next time you hear of me, I may possibly be arraigned for murder or highway robbery, or assault and battery, at the least. I am getting savage.

There seems to be no relief. Fate is doing her worst. The devil is tempting me in every nook and corner...there is no telling but what I shall poison the whole village, or set fire to this old schoolhouse and run away by the light of it.

Although Whitman fortunately never acted on these temptations, his contempt for Woodbury continues, full force, in his next wildly sarcastic letter to Leech on August 26, 1840:

...Speaking of naturality reminds me of the peculiarities that distinguish the inhabitants, young and old, of this well-bred and highly romantic village. For instance, I was entertained the other day at dinner with a very interesting account by the "head of the family" (families of fourteen or fifteen, in these parts, have but one head amongst them) of his sufferings from an attack of the gripes (stomach ache); how he had to take ipecachuana (early plant-based antacid syrup) and antimonial wine (a tartar and sherry mixture designed to induce vomiting), the operation of those substances on his stomach; the color and consistency of the fluids and solids ejected from the said



Interior of the Woodbury Schoolhouse somewhat as it appeared during Whitman's tenure.

stomach; how long it was before Epsom salts could be persuaded to take pity on his bowels, with many and singular concomitant matters, which you may well imagine, contributed in a high degree to the improvement of my appetite. I frequently have the felicity of taking my meals surrounded by specimens of the rising generation – I mean little young ones getting out of bed, and as "to the pure all things are pure," the scene, of course is in high degree edifying to my taste and comfort.

Whitman goes on to celebrate his impending departure from Woodbury with even more sarcasm:

My period of purgation is almost up in these diggin's. Thank the pitying fates! In two weeks more, I shall wind up my affairs and, with tears in my eyes, bid a sorrowful adieu to these hallowed precincts. Shady walks, venerable old schoolhouse, dismantled farms, innocent young ideas, all-all, will I look upon for the last time. But I must stop. I cannot carry out the affecting thought any farther. My heart swells and my melting soul almost expires with the agonizing idea. Let me hold out a little longer, O, ye powers!

The subject then turns to politics, and Whitman advises Leech:

Down in these parts, the people understand about as much of political economy as they do of the Choctaw (southeastern American Indian tribe) language. I never met with such complete unqualified, infernal jackasses in all my life. Luckily for my self-complacency, they are mostly Whigs. If they were on my side of the wall, I should forswear loco-focoism (a dissenting faction within the Democratic party) and turn traitor in five minutes.

A photograph of a handwritten note in cursive script. The text reads: "O. how my spirit springs and grows elastic at the idea of leaving this diabolical, and most, particularly cursed locality!"

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Finally, he pleads:

Can't you look round Jamaica and find out whether they don't want a teacher somewhere, for a quarter?

Seemingly not a minute too soon, Whitman's term at Woodbury finally drew to a close in September of 1840. On the 9th, he writes:

My dear L – I perform the thrice-agreeable office of informing you that my purgatory here is just finishing. In a few days, I shall be unbound and unloosed...O, how my spirit springs and grows elastic at the idea of leaving this diabolical and most particularly cursed locality! Shades through which I have wandered, orchards that I have plundered, old school room, dirty-faced urchins, and moth-eaten desk, I bid ye all a long farewell. Pork, cucumbers, and buckwheat bread, we must part, perhaps forever! Solemn thought! Rye-sweetcake, sour milk, and "scented" fish, ye dear companions of the past summer, alas! The mouth that has known you will know you no more.

With this, Whitman packed his bags and left Woodbury forever. Although it is unknown how long his tenure was intended to last, historians question whether Whitman departed voluntarily or was "asked" to leave. Some suggest that his unconventional teaching methods, which involved pupils in educational games and activities that encouraged them to think aloud rather than to simply recite facts, were too advanced for the agrarian Woodbury community of 1840. For this reason, it is entirely possible that Whitman's aversion to Woodbury may have been mutual. In fact, upon taking over Whitman's class in the autumn of 1840, his predecessor sneeringly remarked that "the pupils had not gained a 'whit' of learning under Whitman."

Regardless of how the young, swaggering Whitman may have felt about Woodbury during the brief time he spent there, he likely used his experience as inspiration for some of the classic poems later included in *Leaves of Grass*, his most famous work, whose themes are based on the lives and trials of common people. Still, the Whitman-Leech letters should serve as a warning to anyone aspiring to fame and fortune. *Always* be careful what you put in writing!