2018

The Terrible Doubt of Appearances - The Walt Whitman House and Inclusive Interpretation

John Giganti
The Terrible Doubt of Appearances - The Walt Whitman House and Inclusive Interpretation

Abstract
The Historic Preservation community has prioritized inclusive interpretation of historic sites, but this shift has also presented new challenges. Meanwhile, mainstream historians have downplayed lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) history by casting doubt on sexual identity as a historical phenomenon before the late nineteenth century. Starting with the premise that non-normative sexual practices also constitute LGBTQ heritage before the modern era, that it is a legitimate subset of cultural heritage, and that social stigmatism has suppressed its presence in the historical record, this thesis aims to challenge traditional interpretation. Preservation can open historical interpretation to LGBTQ heritage by embracing ambiguity and uncertainty while still relying on evidence and logic. The thesis uses the Walt Whitman House in Camden, NJ to argue for broadening historic interpretation and normalizing discussions of sexuality. Following a description of the site, the thesis presents an overview of sexuality as historical context. It then discusses feminist and post-modern theories of sexuality and space as well as the controversial arguments surrounding Whitman and his attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Attention is given to the urban context of Camden. It finally argues for the holistic significance of the issues discussed.

Keywords
LGBTQ, sexuality, history, heritage, homosexuality

Disciplines
Historic Preservation and Conservation

Comments
Suggested Citation:

THE TERRIBLE DOUBT OF APPEARANCES - THE WALT WHITMAN HOUSE
AND INCLUSIVE INTERPRETATION

John Joseph Giganti

A THESIS

in

Historic Preservation

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION

2018

__________________________________________
Advisor
Aaron Wunsch
Assistant Professor

__________________________________________
Program Chair
Frank G. Matero
Professor
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge and thank the entire staff and faculty of Penn Design’s Graduate Program in Historic Preservation for creating a space for rigorous, critical, and socially relevant heritage preservation. In particular, thank you to my advisor, Aaron Wunsch, whose patience I have sorely tested, but who has remained encouraging and supportive. Thank you also to Francesca Ammon and Randall Mason for their encouragement throughout this project, and especially Frank G. Matero for his friendship and guidance.

Finally, I’d be remiss not to mention my mother Madeline Giganti, whose courage and compassion is inspirational.
**Sections**

I. Introduction and Purpose ........................................... p. 1
II. Camden and the House on Mickle Street ......................... p. 8
III. Sexuality: Another Layer of Context ............................. p. 35
IV. Furtive Hen, Wily Fox, and the Problem of Interpretation ... p. 48
V. Homosexual or Homosocial ........................................ p. 75
VI. Whit[e]man in Camden and the Walt Whitman Association ... p. 100
VII. Conclusion .......................................................... p. 106
List of Figures

Figure 1. Mary O. Davis in front entrance to the Mickle Street House.

Figure 2. 1885 Map of Mickle Street between 3rd and 4th Street.

Figure 3. Restored Walt Whitman House.

Figure 4. Mickle Street, Camden circa 1890’s.

Figure 5. Aerial Photograph by W. B. Cooper 17 years after Whitman’s death.

Figure 6. Aerial Photograph by W. B. Cooper 17 years after Whitman’s death.

Figure 7. "Slum Alley," Camden photographed by Arthur Rothstein in 1938.

Figure 8. 1906 Sanborn Insurance Map of Whitman's neighborhood to the south.

Figure 9. High density industrial Camden, c.1950.

Figure 10. Current aerial of Camden showing decreased density, broad swaths of parking, and recreational waterfront development.

Figure 11. Walt Whitman’s carte de visite.

Figure 12. First and second floor plan of the Walt Whitman House.

Figure 13. Front Elevation of the Walt Whitman House.

Figure 14. Walt Whitman's curb stone.

Figure 15. Whitman House before restoration.

Figure 16. Kitchen shed below Davis’ bedroom.

Figure 17. Rear Parlor, Whitman House.

Figure 18. Front Parlor, Whitman House.

Figure 19. Illustration of Walt Whitman’s second floor room.
Figure 20. Photograph by Dr. William Reeder of Philadelphia in 1891.

Figure 21. Whitman and companion Harry Stafford.

Figure 22. Walt Whitman and Peter Doyle in 1869.

Figure 23. Mary Oaks Davis in the rear yard.

Figure 24. Walt Whitman and Bill Duckett in Whitman’s roadster, 1886.

Figure 25. Window seat in Adolf Loos' Moller House.

Figure 26. Interior of Moller House.

Figure 27. Lina Loos' bedroom, Adolf Loos' flat.

Figure 28. Walt Whitman and his wolf skin wrap.

Figure 29. Philip Johnson's Glass House.

Figure 30. Philip Johnson's brick Guest House opposite the Glass House.

Figure 31. Le Corbusier's *Immeuble Clarte*, view of the terrace.

Figure 32. Popular image of domestic gender roles.

Figure 33. Living space of Eileen Gray's house E.1027.

Figure 34. Eileen Gray's house E.1027.

Figure 35. Sylvia Plath's London townhouse.

Figure 36. Detail of Sylvia Plath's London townhouse.

Figure 37. Walt Whitman grave.

Figure 38. Detail of monument at the Whitman grave.

Figure 39. Walt Whitman in his front parlor.

Figure 40. Walt Whitman Monument near the bridge that bears his name.
Figure 41. Walt Whitman monument.
I. Introduction and Purpose

When he whom I love travels with me or sits a long while holding me by, the hand,
When the subtle air, the impalpable, the sense that words and reason hold not, surround and pervade us,
Then I am charged with untold and untellable wisdom, I am silent, I require nothing further – Walt Whitman¹

“I never knew a case of Walt’s being bothered up by a woman...His disposition was different. A woman in that sense never entered his head.”² – Peter Doyle

“Although Whitman scholars have customarily deemphasized the celebratory character of his poems of male-male love and dismissed his sexual politics as totally deluded, in the perspective of homosexual emancipation history, Whitman emerges as a founding father.”³ – Jonathan Katz

This study began as a question about inclusion and interpretation of historic sites. Do the frameworks we use, the forms of source material, and the ways material is preserved and viewed, set boundaries for what counts as cultural heritage? Historic preservation developed de facto practices of exclusion from its beginnings in this country with the formation of institutions such as the private, non-profit Mount Vernon Ladies Association, a nationwide collection of socially prominent women. From their beginning, habits of preservation, including the choice of subjects, arose from an elitist

¹ From, ‘Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances’
reading of history and from the perspective of powerful categories of people. However, by the turn of this century, work had begun to untangle memorialization and preservation from existing social hierarchies.

The Walt Whitman House in Camden, New Jersey, presents a variety of opportunities to examine these issues. For one, the house still stands and is remarkably intact. More importantly, Whitman, “the poet of democracy”, had a celebratory, expansive, and romantic view of the United States and its people. However, as historian Jonathon Katz points out (in the above introductory quote), his significance extends beyond national celebration. The impulse in the past seems to have been to cordon off what was perceived to be benign, generally accepted levels of his significance. But his home, which will be our example here, has a latent significance as a site of sexual emancipation, although perhaps indirectly.

This assertion comes with a web of controversy tangled in the following issues and questions. How does one define and describe sexuality in history? Was there such a thing as “homosexuality” in Whitman’s time as we would define it today? Does one’s sexuality matter? If so, how do we access something so internal and as clandestine as same-sex sexuality in history? On a more basic level, what exactly was his sexuality, and what was the nature of his emotional attachments? How central to his significance as a poet was sexuality after all? Most importantly for this paper, what does it mean

---

4 The phrase ‘powerful categories of people’ may seem unfair and misleading. Some, like John F. Watson, were interested in ordinary people, even though I question whether his interest was all that inclusive. More importantly, power, in the sense that I mean, may be exercised at the scale of the home as much as the city or nation.
architecturally, and how does one deal with this in preserving and presenting a monument to his life?

It is difficult to find consensus on any of these questions, which is all the more reason to keep asking them and propose answers. At stake is preservation’s level of purpose. It is likely that a conservative stance on interpretation holds strong precisely because of this difficulty, but if preservation is to lean towards an activist and participatory role in society, then its answers are important to explore and keep open. By extension, Camden and the larger region are part of the material context of Walt Whitman’s life and self-presentation and also deserves some foregrounding. What results is a richer picture of one historic site, which expands his significance.

The complex interplay of elements that make a place is rarely the primary focus of investigations into the lives of cultural figures, unless they are architects or artists of some kind. Indeed, even in these cases, the perceived need to study events or artistic output pushes the more difficult questions of place into a subordinate role as backdrop or scenery. A painting or text, may be analyzed in accessible pieces. Even if the work is represented in photography or in textual print, care is taken by librarians and archivists to make the best possible surrogate. This is not always possible with architecture, particularly more ordinary, everyday buildings, which often undergo repeated alteration without consideration of their material’s historic significance. Place, however, affects cultural output in ways that cannot be easily represented in an archive.
The issue of sexuality is an especially difficult obstacles for heritage preservation because the categories created to define sexual minorities remain unsettled and somewhat marginal. There are no physical characteristics that mark this class as physically different, as in the case of gender, race, or ethnicity. Social membership within it happens when one chooses to “come out” and publicly join. There is no familial or generational structure, and rarely is there any documented lineage with a connection between people and the things they collect. The consequence is that connections between sexuality, identity, and material culture are vague at best, and lack any widely recognized interpretive framework. I don’t suggest that other categorical labels that we impose on kinds of people are themselves essentially simple or settled, but the framework with which we talk about those categories can accommodate a kind of social shorthand for culture and the virtues of inclusion. (Whether or not that shorthand is adequate is also a much bigger and equally important question.)

However, there are common links among sexual and gender non-conformists. What I hope will become clearer below is that while those who experience an alternative dominant expression of what we call ‘sexuality’ have faced (particularly in Western European and American culture) variants of a common experience centered around disruption of a perceived natural order. Outward expressions of alternative sexuality have traditionally been suppressed on moral, ethical, physical health, or

---

5 Resources such as the LGBTQ Theme Study available from the US National Park Service, Susan Ferrentino’s book Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites, and the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project are positive developments.
mental health grounds. This experience, like all experience, has an internal component that is mediated and somehow integrated into the ‘self’. Any traces of self-reflection are expressed incidentally rather than intentionally.

However, that is not to say that this segment of social history is totally inaccessible through material culture. Artifacts, especially cities, are not simply the product of a singular intentional design. They are “living” in the sense that they are part of the reciprocal constructions of self, society, and artifact. Original design is overtaken by other forces and intentions like entropy, obsolescence, rebirth, and reformation through this lived-in quality. As architectural historian Dell Upton explains, students of material culture need to look beyond the “discrete types and well-defined assemblages of artifacts” useful for examining relatively small groups of people. “…[S]uch clarity undermines understanding, for it is precisely the connection between person and artifact that needs the closest scrutiny in studying the urban landscape.”6

If this is the case, then the incidental qualities of the self might also register these forces and intentions, if somewhat obliquely, in the archive and on the landscape. One is forced to look more closely for traces about the people we seek. Walt Whitman’s house on Mickle Street was not designed to read as an artifact of LGBTQ history, but it was nevertheless built, furnished, and used in such a way as to permit a nuanced interpretation of Whitman’s life. By the time Whitman had owned it, it had undergone

---

radical changes not only from changing tastes and technologies, but from a physical and cultural urban context that was also changing rapidly. A part of LGBTQ social history is embedded within this landscape through the upheavals of nineteenth century life.\(^7\) To ignore this interpretation because it is difficult or ambiguous seems to be an abuse against the truest possible narrative and an insult to certain consumers of Whitman’s memory. The best possible outcome of this investigation would be the suggestion of a new model to be developed of inclusive historical threads that illuminate not only obvious sites of LGBTQ significance (Stonewall, for example) but all sites that might have something to contribute to this heritage. Thus, broader ownership of nationally significant places may result.\(^8\)

The first task in this exploration is contextual. What is Camden, and who is Walt Whitman? Later sections of this paper will outline the case for the existence and nature of non-normative gender and sexual presentations as well as its suppression. This exercise was undertaken because there is no broadly accepted characterization of “gay history.” The term itself has a third-rail quality.\(^9\) This lack of consensus is both the original cause of, and perennial tool for, the continued marginalization of the LGBTQ

---

\(^7\) Not only did the Civil War create widows, but increasing armies of unattached rural migrants were living closer together.

\(^8\) If there is any political motive in this paper, this broader ownership is exactly it.

\(^9\) See debates over ‘social constructionism’ versus ‘essentialism’ and the historical origins of homosexuality, in works such as *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, by David M. Halperin, or the ominously named, *The End of the Homosexual?* By Dennis Altman. Much of the debate revolves around refuting or supporting the theories of Michel Foucault who claims that homosexuality must be understood as a modern phenomenon only. If you refute this claim, or wish to revise it, then the material record of places like the Whitman house and earlier examples are essential to explore.
community. And if you want to break the mold and establish sites of significance, if stewards of historic sites want to celebrate LGBTQ history and heritage, surely this must be the point of departure. To firmly state that the history exists, and that the people, as a category of person, existed also, is the first step. Then, for our purposes, Walt Whitman’s place in this history must be illuminated. A discussion of that history occurs in Section V, after a detailed description of his life and house in Camden.

When George Whitman moved the family to rural New Jersey from Stevens Street in Camden, Whitman chose late in life to remain purchasing his own house, a decision that coincided with a rift between the two brothers which lasted for years. It is tantalizing to wonder which came first, the rift or the move. Whitman’s portion of George’s house had a separate entrance, where he hosted his companions, including Oscar Wilde. Was the bachelor’s ‘bohemian’ lifestyle clashing with the Victorian family to which he was related? We can only speculate. The result of that separation, however, was the purchase of a house about one block away on Mickle Street that became a

---

10 Thomas Kocubinski and Page Ayers Cowley, “The Walt Whitman House, 330 Mickle Boulevard, Camden New Jersey. Historic Structures Report” (State of New Jersey, 1993), 39, NJ Department of Environmental Protection. The report cites Walt’s refusal to move as the cause of the rift, but Elizabeth Keller reports that Whitman was difficult to live with. At the same time, the family didn’t move very far, just out to the country. If he was still relatively nearby, then why the rift? “There is no document giving cause for this rift and change of affection,” which adds to speculation (and it is only speculation) that the cause could have been some disapproval of his guests or activities on the third floor.

11 Some, like Gary Schmidgall claim that this was a romantic encounter, while others like David M. Friedman of The New Republic think of it more as a transactional meeting. Friedman believes that Wilde wanted Whitman to explain how to become famous and casts doubt on any possible romance or sexual camaraderie. On the other hand, the Modern Library’s biographical sketch in its “Death Bed” edition of Leaves of Grass claims that Whitman, “made no effort to conceal his homosexuality” (p. vii), a frustratingly cagy statement.
register for Whitman’s lifeway, and for that of his housekeeper Mary Davis, a few other borders, pets and visitors.

In doing so, Whitman followed a model that would be familiar to future generations of sexual and gender outsiders who sought refuge and connection to a community in the otherwise-intended or interstitial spaces of American cities.12 Walt Whitman challenged Victorian Era respectability which unjustifiably constrained both life and literature. He courageously wrote in a way that broadened conscious expressions of what he deemed legitimate love. The controversy it caused in his own time reverberates through the decades up to ours. Along the way, he would show how a new kind of life could be lived in a ‘new’ modern world with common American people leading the way.

II. Camden, and The House on Mickle Street

“It was a coop at best”13 – Thomas Donaldson

Historians of American cities suggest there were great forces at work to create the increasingly cosmopolitan region that enabled and normalized Walt Whitman’s way of life on Mickle Street.14 Demographic, geographic, and economic factors transformed

12 This model, which has served the community for generations, is undergoing unknown changes influenced by technology. Like the broader society, it is yet unclear how, and to what extent, virtual connection is altering such urban communities.
14 Although Whitman was considered odd, he nevertheless blended in.
Northeastern cities across the nineteenth century into industrial centers, altering the visions of earlier town planners. Philadelphia transformed from a “green country town” to a great industrial machine where new workers needed housing and a rising middle class sought distinction in their homes.¹⁵ The process that produced such cosmopolitanism is a complicated social, cultural, and economic web of intentions and realities that make up a city. Falling back on their own traditions and identity, different cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia managed in different ways. For example, Philadelphia championed the narrow lot and small row house, while New Yorkers developed multi-level tenements and flats.¹⁶ As different classes became segregated to varying degrees within a block or neighborhood, they could nevertheless share the same sidewalk, markets, theaters and taverns, introducing social mixing at a scale and complexity with which future city dwellers might be more comfortable.¹⁷ Among the bustle were unmarried men and women who did not fit the increasingly suburban nuclear family ideal.

¹⁶ Stuart M. Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 147. The fact that tenement apartments could be stacked one atop the other, gave New York the edge in density.
¹⁷ Miller and Siry, “The Emerging Suburb: West Philadelphia, 1850–1880,” 146. “In cities like Philadelphia, where... districts were not so distinct, local institutions of leisure were equally accessible to a wider range of social types.” Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900, 178. Blumin suggests, this may be part of a deeper Philadelphia tradition: “Street Dwellers [those who lived in impressive homes on street fronts] and alley dwellers shopped in the same markets, and mingled as well on the commercial streets that ran through each neighborhood. To this extent Philadelphians may have preserved the heterogeneous face-to-face relations of the eighteenth century [in the nineteenth].” The character of these encounters, as well as the participants on the lower socioeconomic end, however, were certainly more novel.
Colonial era Camden provided inns and taverns adjacent to the many ferry points along the Delaware banks to serve a transient clientele. Other cities did the same along harbors, canals, roads, and at trading posts. As time went on, American cities added more and increasingly diverse spaces for single individuals. When the nineteenth century arrived and progressed, boarders were welcomed into the extra rooms of middle-class homes. However, as historian Stuart Blumin details in his 1989 book, other promising options were becoming available. Industrial cities, counter to their colonial antecedents, saw the rise of hotels and boarding houses where young and/or single workers could permanently reside and mix. At a time when good quality consumer goods (clothing, rugs, furniture, and decorative items) were becoming cheaper and more widely available, hotels also introduced many “modern domestic comforts” like steam heat, indoor plumbing, and gas lighting. An inchoate modernity was taking shape as increasing numbers of working and middle-class parlors were altered to accommodate comfort rather than genteel presentation, and became a space where a variety of social relationships could be enacted.

19 Miller and Siry, “The Emerging Suburb: West Philadelphia, 1850–1880,” 120. Though explaining a phenomenon in West Philadelphia, there is no reason to believe it was different in Camden.
20 Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900*, 150. Further, “…businessmen and clerks lived in boardinghouses, which in itself did not distinguish them from even the poorest workers… boardinghouses [suited] various tastes and incomes, and better ones catered specifically to the business class [and] included 4 or 5 different kinds of meat.”
21 Blumin, 150–51. See Miller and Siry, 140-143, for a more detailed description of how newly available consumer goods blurred some social boundaries and class distinctions, while mannerisms, behavior, and hygiene maintained them. For the development of parlors in suburban and urban houses, see: Nancy A. Holst, *Pattern Books and the Suburbanization of Germantown, Pennsylvania, in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, 2008, 249.
Whitman’s “coop” signified a kind of respectable ordinariness. This type of house was substantial but relatively plain looking. Mostly inhabited by working class families by the Civil War, these “second rate genteel houses” as Blumin calls them (quoting James Fenimore Cooper), became available to “clerks and smaller businessmen who probably would not have been able to afford... houses in or near the downtown in New York [or Philadelphia].” Some of these houses, often two and a half stories with one room per floor, were small enough to roughly match the space afforded by architect Gervais Wheeler in his tenement designs for New York, which had “four rooms and a water closet.” In both cities, then, one sees different formal answers developing for the changing social patterns of modern industrial cities, bringing further clarity to Whitman’s situation. Availability of new forms of housing, or transformed older forms, provided new space for the permanent, unmarried city dweller.

The phenomenon of the hotel, the boarding house, and the back-room renter would have consequences and would provide an urban model around which specific non-normative sexual identities could be built and consummated. Concurrent with these changes in the domestic sphere, the number of accessible locations of collective entertainment and socializing increased so that a social system developed. The space

---


23 Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900*, 151.

24 Blumin, 155. “plumbing” became important because easier cleaning meant improved living standards rose across the board.
that was once the hotel and the tenement, became the urban apartment in the next century. Again, reiterating regional differences, some of the older row houses, so quintessential to the Philadelphia cityscape, could adapt similarly to the hotel and New York tenement. It could accommodate a single person of moderate means or who didn’t need much space. Someone, like Walt Whitman.25

The Walt Whitman House is perhaps a curious choice to study this phenomenon for different reason. Whitman was well into old age and afflicted with partial paralysis when he bought the house in 1884. His most active sexual years would have been behind him. However, Whitman was a nomad through much of his youth, navigating the above noted interstitial kinds of spaces in places like New York, New Orleans, and Washington. We know he experienced these changes in nineteenth century urban life first hand because he lived through most of it, and travelled widely. The “rude” men Whitman called his cameradoes, which he saw and met in the upper balconies of the bowery theaters and in basement taverns of New York, were the same workers benefiting from the consumer goods revolution. Whitman saw the subversive element of these men (and women to a lesser extent) as they benefited from industrial growth and expressed modernity on their own terms, perhaps while being victims of it at the same time.26 Although Whitman would never fully let go of his love for wild rural spaces, he was no longer the young country school teacher either. He had grown comfortable

25 While it seems logical, discovering the validity of this claim would take a great deal more research.
26 The squalor that tenement life became by the twentieth century is well documented. See for example, Petersson, Dag, The Making of the Other Half: Jacob A. Riis and the Mutation of Tenement Poverty.
with urban life, and readily declined to move with George Whitman to rural Gloucester County. However, Whitman never owned a home before moving to Camden and any of the material evidence of his younger adult life, or what remained of it, is collected there. Despite this loss, the development of one’s sexuality later in life does not negate earlier periods and aspects of his full life remain there to be studied.

Whitman spent seven years in Camden during which time he entertained young men, professional and literary friends, and developed intense emotional relationships.\(^{27}\) He would sit near the front window in his bedroom or in the front parlor and reminisce or discuss issues of the day with his many visitors, companions, and biographers. He would occasionally drop pennies from the parlor window to the neighborhood children playing below.\(^{28}\) The cellar hatch was a convenient device to keep nosy and judgmental neighbors at a safe distance from the “odd” poet while the children could climb up and greet the old man, as they often did.\(^{29}\) The social complexity of this interplay on Mickle Street was replicated on the edges of cities where infill and small scale development meant less-rigidly segregated neighborhoods.

The mixing that was evident in Camden, made even richer by the streetcar and the ferry, opened a desirable kind of space for someone like Whitman. He did not simply end up on Mickle Street, as the rift with his brother suggests. Rather, it was a place in

\(^{28}\) Keller, 40.
which he lived intentionally, being cognizant of its location and environment. In the same way that he loved the Brooklyn ferries and New York Harbor, he also loved the Delaware waterfront and was known to enjoy the bustle of Philadelphia by taking streetcar rides down Market Street. An eyewitness and friend named Thomas Donaldson published the following account:

“From 1873 to 1889 horse cars were run on Market Street...in Philadelphia. ...Mr. Whitman was accustomed to come over from Camden and ride the length of Market Street and back on one of these cars. With his back to the car, his feet on the fender, and cane in hand, he would enjoy this ride of eight miles or more, watching the passersby, but seldom speaking during the ride... Some of the drivers noticing this, asked me who he was. A ‘poet’ was a new trade to many of them. So, finally, Mr. Whitman became known as ‘Whitman, the Camden poet.’ All the drivers liked him, but thought him ‘odd.’”

Before his confinement to a wheelchair in 1888, Whitman would wander in both Camden and Philadelphia and take joy rides in a type of carriage given to him by his friends. His stroke didn’t stop him, as health aids, friends, and assistants often accompanied him.

---

30 Thomas Donaldson, *Walt Whitman the Man* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1896), 67. Donaldson writes, “[Whitman] preferred Camden. The Mickle Street house, a frame one of six rooms, was cramped and full of cracks. It contained no furnace, and his bedroom ceiling could be easily touched with the hand. He enjoyed it, nevertheless. It was situated in a commercial part of Camden, and was the last place one would expect a poet to select for a home.”

31 Thomas Donaldson, *Walt Whitman the Man* (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1896), 42. Donaldson continues: “He has a habit when at home of coming over to Philadelphia, each day, toward the evening, across the Delaware on a ferry boat, and ride on the Market Street cars... to the Centennial Building. Rain or shine he rides outside the car.” It is noted in the 1993 Historic Structures Report that the paint scheme, wallpapering, and eclectic arrangement of objects were probably influenced by the 1876 Centennial Exhibition, as were many homes of the time. This period of Whitman’s life overlaps with the exhibition.
Since the time he lived there, the house on Mickle Street has been appreciated as a landmark associated with the writer, but mostly overlooked as a work of vernacular architecture. Though today it stands restored and prim on an isolated block in downtown Camden, most of Whitman’s associates never saw it that way. They understood the house to be an extension of the man: shabby and time-worn. Despite improvements initiated by Whitman and largely carried out by Mary Davis, the house remained a work in progress. Neglect after his death caused the house to fall further into disrepair. The “frame, weather beaten shack” had a “smoky, somber clapboard front with a tall chimney bending a bit with years,” remarked one reporter on the occasion of its dedication as a city monument in 1923.32

The Walt Whitman house is currently painted primarily in a warm gray color, while accented with red trim and yellow panels on the first floor. (Fig.3) The HSR, which recommended these colors based on paint analysis and tonal guesses from photography, also suggests the influence of Andrew Jackson Downing, who’s popular pattern books of romantic architecture suggest nature’s colors such as tans, grays, and browns.33 The façade is capped by a plain shallow cornice and standing seam metal roof.

The Whitman House’s development from a free-standing structure along a village street (albeit a major village street), to a row house in a dense urban block is

---

32 Charles N. Sampson, “Whitman’s Camden Life Marked by the Stings of Illness and Poverty,” Daily Courier, November 17, 1923, Boyer Scrapbook, Camden County Historical Society. Incidentally, Whitman’s house was not the only clapboard frame house on the block as can be seen at the left edge of Fig. 4.
instructive of the development and growth of Camden, which parallels to greater or lesser extent, other areas of metropolitan Philadelphia. Camden falls into the category of neighborhood in Philadelphia, like areas of West Philadelphia and Germantown, that began as colonial era outposts, that then developed into early suburbs. These exclaves experienced accelerating growth through the nineteenth century as early iterations of land planning, but were finally overtaken by increased demand for quick housing, and eventually absorbed into the modern urban metropolitan system.

Even before the work carried out in the 1990’s (which included restoration of the house’s clapboard siding and reconstruction of the basement hatch), the house had significance as a complete example of both this kind of dwelling, and as an intact Whitman domicile.

“The significance of components of the house cannot be easily separated [and ranked] for unlike other historic properties, the small size and compact plan of the house which was used in its entirety by Walt Whitman, makes all of the spaces important. [Further,] the overall design, quality of architectural detail and construction, and the quality of workmanship become secondary as the house stands as a complete example of an early Victorian middle-class house. Because all of these components, with the exception of the siding and back yard landscaping, are virtually intact, the building attains a high overall significance rating as few of these house plan types survive in this condition.”

34 The extent to which you could call Camden a suburb of Philadelphia at any point is debatable and defining that is outside the scope of this paper. It’s clear though that Camden’s fortunes were inextricably linked with Philadelphia’s.
35 Kocubinski and Cowly, 115.
The legacy group, The Walt Whitman Foundation believes the house to have been built in 1848, as recorded in a letter to Adam Hare, who is its earliest documented owner, and who bought the 20 by 100-foot lot from a New York investor in 1847. The house as well as its landscape (which radically changed over time) exemplifies the versatility, resilience, and popularity of both orthogonal street planning and the narrow double pile (meaning two rooms arranged front to back) side passage town house fronting directly onto a street.36

The house’s clapboard skin and formal 3 bay façade of six over six sash windows fronts directly on the sidewalk, like its neighbors, with a shallow stoop of three steps. Rather than marble or granite, which is typical of Philadelphia area row houses, Whitman’s stoop was wooden. The house’s timber frame rests above grade on a brick and fieldstone basement, apparently accessible from the street through the already mentioned board and batten hatch, where coal and wood would have been delivered to Whitman. (Fig. 1)37 The house’s six-paneled front door and transom light is slightly inset and framed by a dentiled cornice and Doric pilasters. (Fig. 7)

All windows in the house are materially and formally consistent with the time of Whitman’s occupancy. The first-floor arrangement of openings is completed by two bays of sash windows to the left of the front door. Each first-floor window is secured by solid-panel operable shutters, conventional for the time, which seem to be mostly

---

37 This hatch however is a dummy, or “false bulkhead” as the HSR calls it. The cellar is actually accessed through a door under the stairway off the hall.
closed now. The second floor repeats the three-bay arrangement also with double hung sash windows, each flanked by slatted shutters. The windows do not quite align vertically with the first-floor openings, which common in this type of row house. The first-floor had to accommodate an enclosed exterior passage to the rear yard.

The first-floor plan of the Walt Whitman house is divided into three volumes of diminishing size from front to back. (Fig. 6) The main volume containing the two parlors and side passage fronts Mickle Street. A two-story addition, referred to as an ‘ell’, follows to the south, which Kocubinski and Cowley assume to be a part of an earlier structure. The final section is a one story shed containing the kitchen. 38

The house’s the parlor range is entered through a narrow hallway/ side passage that opens onto the front and rear parlors back. 39 The hallway leads directly to a stairway up to the second floor, while the first-floor hallway continues around a quarter-turned corner of the front parlor, consistent with side passage dwellings. A second door off the hall after the turn leads to the smaller rear parlor which is also connected to the front parlor through a large opening in the wall between them. Each parlor and bedroom had operable fireplaces that were closed prior to Whitman’s purchase, leaving the mantles for decorative purposes. Instead, he heated all spaces with small iron stoves

39 The presence of a front and rear parlor may be indicative of an early hall/parlor folk tradition. This process is explained by historian Joseph Bigott in From Cottage to Bungalow (Chicago: 2001). Adam Hare may have used one parlor for his clerking duties, and the other for family living, likely for cooking and eating prior to the ell addition. The presence of two parlors represent the “multiplication of parlors” in nineteenth domestic space once trade and business functions were segregated from the home.
burning wood or coal. Smoke was channeled through a “thimble” to the flues formerly connected to fireplaces.\textsuperscript{40}

A doorway at the back end of the hall leads to the ell which was used for dining when Whitman was healthy enough to move freely. The second-floor ell room was used as lodging for Whitman’s housekeeper Mary Oaks Davis.\textsuperscript{41} Her bedroom, which would be further subdivided in 1886 by the introduction of plumbing and a washroom, overlooked the third volume through a single rear window. This third volume is the single-story lean-to kitchen, which may have been a porch at an earlier time.\textsuperscript{42} Finally, the kitchen leads to a back yard with a small privy that was eventually converted to a shed. A pear tree in the back yard was said to be a main selling point for Whitman.\textsuperscript{43}

The second floor may have been expanded in the few years before the brick neighbor on its western side was constructed in 1855-56.\textsuperscript{44} According to the HSR, evidence of a change in foundation material, as well as the presence of clapboard gable siding visible in the attic, indicates that the house was smaller, then extended while still free-standing, which is consistent with archival evidence as well as the later (and grander) architectural style of the neighbors. Cantilevering the second floor on the

\textsuperscript{40} Kocubinski and Cowley, “The Walt Whitman House, 330 Mickle Boulevard, Camden New Jersey. Historic Structures Report,” 171. Boiler heat with thermostatic control was added in the twentieth century prior to restoration.

\textsuperscript{41} Keller, 26.

\textsuperscript{42} Kocubinski and Cowley, 34.

\textsuperscript{43} Keller, 19.

\textsuperscript{44} Architect Stephen Decatur Burton lived at 332 Mickle Street from 1856 to 1873.
western side made space for the rear access passage, which is currently enclosed by a board and batten door with a lattice transom above.45

The Whitman House is the oldest structure on the block, dating from the late 1840’s.46 Camden itself formed from a set of land development schemes that emerged from the colonial struggle between the Swedes, the Dutch Republic, and finally the English Crown, under which it became a haven Quaker refugees. Four individuals, William Cooper, William Royden, Archibald Mickle (from whom Whitman’s street name derives), and John Kaighn, purchased the arable Jersey land from the Crown and capitalized on its proximity to Philadelphia, William Penn’s great land development scheme across the river. Irish Quakers settled along the three waterways of the area: Cooper Creek, Newtown creek, and Timber Creek. From its earliest days under the auspices of a loose confederation of villages known as Newtown (or Newton) Township, ferry service to Philadelphia enabled the area’s cooperation, consolidation, expansion and industrial growth.47

45 Ultimately it is unclear if the house was expanded over this passage, called a “grocer’s alley” in Philadelphia parlance, at the time of the neighbor’s construction. It seems logical that it was, given the arrangement of windows and the fact of the enclosed passage. The most plausible explanation for the clapboard in the attic and the foundation change is that Adam Hare built an earlier house and reused part of the foundation when constructing the Mickle Street House. But there is no record of an earlier house, and very little time for two construction campaigns. The evidence is inconclusive and the HSR is noncommittal.

46 Thomas Kocubinski and Page Ayers Cowly, “The Walt Whitman House, 330 Mickle Boulevard, Camden New Jersey. Historic Structures Report” (State of New Jersey, 1993), 27 and 49, NJ Department of Environmental Protection. According to this document, Adam Hare (or Hair) purchased the Whitman lot for $350 from Robert Stevens of New York in 1847. Mickle Street by then was established, during the period recorded as the seventh subdivision. Further, “The 1850 Ferris City Directory lists Adam Hare, Clerk at Mickle Street below 4th. The present house could well have been built by Adam Hare for his family.” Rebecca Jane Hare, who inherited the house in 1873 sold it to Walt Whitman in 1884.

Jacob Cooper, great grandson of the first William Cooper, divided 40 acres of his share of land into 167 lots for development.\textsuperscript{48} He envisioned a future town with “soil fitted for gardening... the diversion of fishing and fouling and the pleasure of sailing on water in summer [to] suit many persons [who would] reside there and carry on different occupations, as in Philadelphia.”\textsuperscript{49} This statement shows the influence of the “suburban” ideal of incorporating nature that was gaining widespread currency in the United States, and particularly in Philadelphia’s outer settlements like Germantown and West Philadelphia. While interest in his lots was lukewarm, the Cooper name remained with the next generation who continued development.\textsuperscript{50}

A power struggle between nearby Haddonfield and the Newtown communities resulted in Camden’s consolidation and incorporation as a city in 1828. The city was divided into three voting wards, north, central, and south.\textsuperscript{51} Joshua Cooper, nephew of another William Cooper (descendant of the first), sold a sizeable parcel to Edward Sharp in 1820, who drew on Philadelphia for the development of Camden’s urban form. “Sharpe continued to subdivide and layout streets within the new city limits... [showing] the influence of Philadelphia [on] Camden’s streets and alleys.”\textsuperscript{52} Similar land subdivision and speculation continued this way in Camden from the early nineteenth

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Camden Historic Survey: Prepared for the City of Camden, New Jersey.}, 20. It’s also this Cooper who named the village after Englishman Charles Pratt, Earl of Camden.

\textsuperscript{49} Kocubinski and Cowley, 17.

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Camden Historic Survey: Prepared for the City of Camden, New Jersey.}, 20.

\textsuperscript{51} Kocubinski and Cowley, 18. The Camden Historic Survey, on the other hand, claims it was the town of Long-A-Coming (now Berlin), and NOT Haddonfield that vied for the county seat.

\textsuperscript{52} Kocubinski and Cowley, 27.
century onwards. Despite the crisscrossing of earlier roads, Camden shows demonstrates the attractiveness of the grid for developers. The Whitman House’s Historic Structures Report traces the history of grid form to the 1785 Land Ordinance enacted by Congress, describing its influence on urban as well as rural agricultural form. Historians Roger Miller and Joseph Siry explain that this form “[eliminated] the possibility that odd shaped lots might become white elephants on the hands of developers or builders.”

Architectural historian Nancy Holst has demonstrated that there was a tension in Germantown’s development between the desire to avoid the rigidity and formality of the grid with its relentless rectilinear lots, while taking advantage of its simple and economical multiplier effect. Andrew Jackson Downing tried to reconcile the two impulses, but ultimately an aversion to irregular (i.e. difficult) lots and resale for further sub-subdivision became the modus operandi of developers to the chagrin of purveyors of the picturesque like Downing. There was often no financial will or ability to build detached houses on speculation, resulting in the higher density twins and rows. As Holst explains,

> Although some developers hired carpenter-builders to erect a few speculative houses that would set the tone for the new street, most developers sold vacant lots (employing both fee simple and ground rent)

---

53 Holst, *Pattern Books and the Suburbanization of Germantown, Pennsylvania, in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, 102-104. Piecemeal development was an attribute of Germantown development too, and was indicative of the nineteenth century regional economy. Says Holst, “Small scale entrepreneurship was the norm. Individual developers began opening new roads in Germantown in the 1840’s. The basic unit of development was the subdivision, usually a tract of several acres or more laid out in building lots by the developer.’”

to a wide variety of buyers as well as secondary builders and developers, who occasionally further subdivided or combined contiguous lots into a single larger property.\textsuperscript{55}

This closely describes the transaction between Edward Sharp and various other developers in Camden. After declaring bankruptcy in the 1830’s, Sharp had apparently flooded the market with subdivisions, selling to small investors like Robert Stevens of New York, who sold Adam Hare a small lot to build (at least part of) the future Walt Whitman house.

The ever present orthogonal (or roughly orthogonal) plots in American planning, from the urban lot to the rural farm accommodated these changes in scale and enabled cities to almost seamlessly grow into their early suburbs. Individual properties and streets in Germantown were forced to conform to the grid, and were adjusted like braces on teeth. Updated surveys meant owners were occasionally forced to move walls and fences.\textsuperscript{56} This idea also relates to the Whitman House in that Kocubinski and Cowley believe the front of the house may have been reversed with the coming of established streets.

Nancy Host further explains that the grid was not simply economical, but was a familiar blank slate upon which middle-income Philadelphians, well versed in the social signals of the town house, could inscribe their status along the street front. Interestingly, Holst also shows how building height in the Philadelphia context of narrow

\textsuperscript{55} Holst, 103.
\textsuperscript{56} Holst, 88.
lots demonstrated advancing social status. In both a literal and symbolic sense, the Mickle Street house lost its stature when the neighbors were constructed in the 1850’s. Like in Germantown, “the tall profile conveyed social messages. In an urban context where narrow lots forced houses to expand vertically, height became equated with status.”

Nevertheless, houses like Adam Hare’s (later Walt Whitman’s) exhibited an extraordinary versatility to changing context as roads and “subdivision” advanced around it.

Unlike New York or Germantown, where the grid necessitated grading, marshy South Jersey land easily lent itself to this kind of abstract and efficient development strategy. This happened despite early angular roads to interior land by way of crisscrossing turnpikes. As such, there was no ‘spine’ to deal with like Broadway or Germantown Avenue, yet Camden developers still adopted a patchwork grid oriented towards the bend in the river rather than a ‘spine’ road. Mickle Street in its own right became a relatively major thoroughfare connecting industry, inner neighborhoods, and markets to the port. For a port city like Camden, an efficient transition to the waterfront from roads to wharfs was just as important as orthogonal building lots.

Camden’s sub-urbanity therefore would prove to be brief, as demonstrated by Jacob Cooper’s failed development scheme. By the time Whitman arrived, industry and commerce needed a higher density system much more than suburban commuter estates, and it had embraced Sharp’s impulse instead: higher density, cosmopolitan

---

57 Holst, 250.
urbanity, and major transportation hub.\textsuperscript{58} Again, the form of both the Whitman house and its neighbors adjusted and adapted to this advancing change. The street’s heterogeneity can be explained by the fact that it was an older street, which meant a few earlier detached houses existed in its earlier iteration, before the increasing velocity of development.

The heterogeneity contrasts with nearby blocks that were developed later with more repetitive brick rows to varying degrees of style. The example of the Stevens Street block between Second and Third, only a block or two away, (not coincidentally) developed tight identical rows near the rail yards. (Fig. 8) The block would be further divided by an interior alley of even narrower rows showing how individual block forms sorted their inhabitants.

Mickle Street experienced infill with higher style brick townhouses showing greater variety while still conforming to each other, mimicking the patterns on Chestnut and Walnut Street in Philadelphia. But these two phenomena indicated the ways that older and newer block development were incorporated into a system that integrated, while at the same time, increasingly sorted, urban dwellers as the area grew.\textsuperscript{59} Whitman’s Mickle street house, being on a major east/west road, and being relatively


easy to alter and fit into these new urban patterns, perhaps saved it from being overtaken and demolished.60

Just as in Philadelphia, houses facing major streets were attractive to those with greater wealth and status. The less-well off were sorted into smaller streets and alleys which were often adjacent or perpendicular.61 Where one lived in the mid to late nineteenth century was increasingly determined by socioeconomic factors such as ethnic grouping, nearness to factory work, or nearness to the market. The curious mixing of a squat clapboard house and tall brick houses that survived on Mickle Street until urban decline and renewal resulted from this complex array of historical, cultural, and social forces.

But the grid had greater meaning to early civic engineers. As Dell Upton maintains, the grid seemed well suited to democracy, enabling regularity and orderliness as well providing ‘cells’ of individual freedom.62

The transparency and articulation of the grid set the self in a particular relationship to its surroundings, a relationship that was described in the ubiquitous early republican language of classification and separation. Classification created order and unity by organizing the otherwise chaotic juxtaposition of individual selves, substituting random access for the merely random. If classification promoted flexible, rational control, separation connoted liberty; it permitted the free operation of each citizen in his own sphere.63

60 It should be noted that the Mickle Street house was passed down in the Hare family for two generations before being sold to Whitman.
62 The grid could also be projected ‘infinitely’ across a vast landscape like North America.
“Orderliness” was not only a functional concept, but a socially prescriptive manifesto which aimed to make American cities better than their predecessors. “[Early] nineteenth century Americans assumed that the grid could create the ideal urban society by guiding citizens’ actions into socially beneficial channels.”

Along the streets of the separated city, each person could carry on her business on her private property without interference. The gridded early republican city, then provided a spatial scaffolding for the articulation of self and setting, which might be expressed in a variety of specific terms, ranging from those of the republican social vision of individualism within a general similarity of condition and interest, to those of economic or administrative convenience.

This idea would become crucial in later periods for the articulation of a private self that could perform in public byways that connected them and their public spaces. City dwellers discovered that the grid provided freedom, anonymity, and looser connections, rather than mere orderliness. To put it another way, the grid failed to undermine the qualities cities have always exhibited.

With the advent and arrival of the railroad in 1830, Camden became an important link between New York and Philadelphia, revolutionizing the urban spatial scaffolding. Camden’s industrial growth and infrastructure development hit a fast clip by mid-century. In 1854 the Water Works Company was formed. By the 1870’s the city boasted plumbing, paved streets, and municipal sewage, which protected citizens from

---

64 Upton, 56.
65 Upton, 56.
recurring cholera, small pox, and malaria outbreaks. City-wide gas lightning was available by 1884 with electricity quickly following the next year.  

The interior fabric of the Walt Whitman house is currently characterized by an eclectic but orderly composition of wallpaper, painted plaster, painted trim, plank floors, rugs, furniture and objects of art. Most of the interior pieces come from the period after Mary Davis moved in, in 1885, which marks the end of the “bachelor” period. Kocubinski and Cowley divide the Mary Davis period (a little curiously) into “pre-invalid” (from 1885 to 1888) and “post-invalid” (1888 to 1892).

According to the Kocubinski and Cowley report, the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia influenced the eclectic and exuberant interiors of many late nineteenth century American houses, including the Mickle Street house. However, they warn that the arrangement’s significance in a cultural, social or historic framework was compromised long ago. Nevertheless, photographs of the parlors show some level of careful arrangement, which closely relate to what was considered good taste at the end of the nineteenth century (although they do not represent the finest examples). The 1990’s restoration of the interiors included researching the known catalogs of the period, from which the interior color ensemble could be apprehended. Photographs made it possible to find the exact pattern and color present during Whitman’s

---

66 Kocubinski and Cowley, 19.
67 Some of his items were left in the house, while others were transferred to the extended family. Jesse Whitman turned some items over to the city in 1928 when it bought the property, while the Walt Whitman Foundation began re-acquisition and preservation of artifacts in 1946.
occupation. In particular, Whitman’s wallpaper and borders, which characterize the
increasing mass production of taste, can be seen in black and white.68

General changes in the production, cost, and availability of domestic furnishing
make locating Whitman and Davis on the class scale a little difficult. Whitman
occasionally made money on sales of *Leaves of Grass* but more often, a system of
“subscriptions” (essentially gifts) from his admirers and friends produced needed
income.69 There is a stark difference between an image like Fig. 20 and those of Figs. 17
and 18. The former could be interpreted as Whitman in squalor (not only is the room in
disarray, but his beard is overgrown. He sits covered in a blanket, perhaps indicating a
lack of heating fuel.) The fact that Whitman was a careful editor of his photographic self,
makes the true nature of his condition difficult to apprehend precisely. He did own the
things in Figs. 17 and 18, but decorations also need not register wealth, as we see in
Miller and Siry, and in Blumin.

Whitman’s parlor (a somewhat functionally fluid space) falls under the new
concept of “domestic visiting,” as Blumin calls it, that evolved in the nineteenth century.
The middle range of society, within which we could place Whitman, “were largely
indifferent... to the kinds of domestic furnishings and spaces that business men were
coming to value so highly [. They] were less interested in using the well-furnished parlor

68 Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900*, 139.
“...and the general diffusion of wealth and comfort render the difference between the furniture of the rich
and that of the poor much less [in the nineteenth century] than formerly.” As Blumin also explains, the
“sanctification” of the parlor redefined gender roles, and the decorative arts of the house may have as
much, or more, to do with Mary Davis’ choices as Whitman’s.
as a private (and status enhancing) meeting place for the family and acceptable
visitors." This is consistent with how Whitman used his front parlor. Whitman
accepted most visitors but valued the content of the conversation, rather than
displaying his own social stature. It is no doubt, the objects and furnishing of Whitman’s parlors created a
comfortable space for Whitman’s ‘domestic visiting’ but they may also have been
indicative of Mary Davis’ effort to fulfill her gendered role of ‘domestic manager.’ “It
was the function of women to combat this rude male behavior, to refine and, more
specifically to domesticate personal habits formed in less elegant surroundings.” Keller
reports repeated efforts by Davis to domesticate Whitman. This strange performance is
indicative of larger changes in society that would lead to twentieth century images of
domestic life, such as those depicted in Figure 32. In that image, nineteenth-century
forms of male domestic leisure are shown to be superseded by the television and other
trappings of modern life. Home is where men and women confirmed and projected their
roles to each other and their neighbors through open windows and over the yard fence.
This picture has its origins in social/material forces initiated in the nineteenth century.
Other important aspects of that connection will be explored further on in Sections IV
and V.

70 Blumin, The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900, 162–
163.
71 Traubel, Donaldson, Bucke, and others all separately describe visiting Whitman this way.
72 Blumin, 183.
One must be careful, however, not to draw to direct a connection between these ideas of domesticity and the Whitman/Davis relationship, which was outside the norm. The Kocubinski and Cowley HSR wavering on the appropriate appearance of each space in the current museum. Although Davis provided Whitman with some structure and interior decoration, the they remind us that “furnishings should [still] be indicative of [his] life within the house rather than be museum pieces.” They propose an element of “clutter and disorderliness” that should prevail in Whitman’s spaces to present his “bohemian” lifestyle in opposition to Davis’s orderly influence. (Fig. 18) The important effect, however, is that Whitman and Davis could project the appearance of a more typical domestic relationship. To put it in modern parlance, Whitman could “pass,” a critical idea in this thesis.

The front room on the second floor, Whitman’s “coop”, runs the length of the façade and served as his bedroom and main workspace. (Fig. 6) In the same way an artist might use a studio loft, furniture marked general and fluid areas for sleeping, sitting, and working. A messy array of objects, papers, books, and photographs kept these distinctions loose and the boundaries blurred. Whitman’s bed is set against the western wall opposite integral shelving and one of the home’s enclosed fireplaces on the eastern wall.

---

Kocubinski and Cowley, 69. A detailed set of interior photographs, room plans, and interior elevations that catalog the house’s objects can be found between page 70 and 107 of the HSR.
A fact which will become significant in a later section, involves the middle room between Whitman’s space in the front and Davis’ in the rear. This space has a strangely high number of doors which allows for relatively fluid movement between the two spaces and the corridor. Warren Fritzinger, the son of a lost sea captain, and given the nickname “Warry” by Whitman, would occupy this space and act as Whitman’s companion and nurse.74 A small colored glass fixed window exists above the opening leading to the bathroom and finally Davis’ bedroom.

Paint and plaster analysis in the 1993 HSR showed relatively little change, as not many layers were found.75 The plaster system found by the HSR team was typical of the time, being composed of lime aggregate and animal hair. A thin finish coat was applied and appears to be pure lime plaster with a small proportion of clear quartz sand. Much of the woodwork was “grained” (i.e. painted) to imitate mahogany.76

Whitman’s house lacked the tidy, snug, and substantial feeling it now conveys. While both Mary Davis and Elizabeth Keller may have exaggerated their descriptions, they claimed the house was so flimsy it needed to lean on its brick neighbors to remain standing.77 The house was “dirty, forlorn, and untenable.”78 At the time of purchase,

74 Fritzinger is believed by Schmidgall and Shively to be a romantic companion of Whitman, which makes multiple access points between their respective bedrooms intriguing. However, any secret movement between them is, of course, impossible to know.
75 Kocubinski and Cowley, 129, 132.
76 Kocubinski and Cowley, 133.
77 Keller, 18-27. Most of the house’s frame is heartwood, which is very resilient by today’s standards, and resistant to pests, making Davis’ and Keller’s appraisal confusing. Stepped masonry foundations were found to be in good stable shape. Additionally, mortar analysis shows that while the house was constructed in stages, each section exhibits the same general technology and material characteristics, suggesting more historical continuity than might be assumed.
78 Keller, 18.
water from a ruptured water pipe froze in the back-door threshold keeping the door from closing.

A bustling neighborhood of working-class families and merchants mixed with port commerce, street and rail traffic, and industry grew up around the Mickle Street house by the time Walt Whitman arrived. Among its neighbors down the street was an enormous Methodist church with a choir that according to Keller needed a lot more practice before each Sunday. Camden was a small but active and growing industrial city in the nineteenth century, being part of the larger ‘workshop of the world.’. The array of offensive smells Whitman would have encountered emanated from a variety of local and regional sources. A large butcher and farmer’s market did business at the other end of the block from the Methodists. A porcelain teeth manufacturer in the middle of Whitman’s own block surely kept fires burning. To add insult to injury, the guano plant on the Philadelphia side of the river assaulted Mickle Street with its own rancid smell when the wind blew a certain way.79

Elizabeth Keller gives us a direct impression of life in the house in her memoir on the subject. This perspective, though highly subjective and frank, has the benefit of first-hand testimony. She believed Whitman’s unconventional way of life was strange and pitied Mary Davis to a certain extent. It is Davis that reminds us that however forward-looking Whitman’s poetry, or his way of life was, this was a transitional period for

---

women and barely the beginning of longer-term feminist struggles.\textsuperscript{80} Keller specifically aimed to give Davis credit for years of faithful and underappreciated service. She oscillates between two opposing conclusions, sometimes in the same paragraph. On the one hand, she accuses the poet of supreme selfishness and disregard for his housekeeper, and on the other reports a unique and mutually respectful bond between the two.

Being a “strong rosy-cheeked Jersey woman,” Davis was able to make the house livable, wielding an axe against the ice at the back door and installing a kitchen stove on her own, in addition to an array of traditional housework.\textsuperscript{81} As a novice homeowner, and in keeping with bachelor stereotypes, Whitman dined on a packing box before Davis moved in. As the first couple of years passed Davis helped Whitman upgrade the furniture. Keller’s account shows how traditional gender roles were altered and flipped in this household. Keller and Donaldson show that while Whitman and Davis were met with ambivalence and skepticism by the neighbors, this discomfort was nevertheless moderated by the privacy of domestic architecture.

\textsuperscript{80} This is an important facet of the life of gay white men. Their status as an invisible or “passing” minority as opposed to women or people of color enables them to benefit from the system that privileges their race and sex. Though it is arguable that (psychologically) this truly is a benefit, it surely complicates their relationship to women, visible minorities, and multifaceted minorities.

\textsuperscript{81} Keller, 14.
III. Sexuality: Another Layer of Context

If you ask a previous generation of poets and writers about Walt Whitman’s sexuality, some (like Allen Ginsberg and Langston Hughes) would have said he was gay. Others might have responded that he was likely bisexual. Social constructionists would argue that modern categories of sexual identity are irrelevant and anachronistic, and therefore conclude that speculation would be ahistorical. Skeptical Whitman biographers such as David S. Reynolds will point to his well-known denial in a letter written to fellow poet and critic John Addington Symonds in 1890, in which Walt Whitman offers as proof that he had an affair during his Southern travels and fathered several children (this passage will be further analyzed below). Others, like biographers Gary Schmidgall and Charley Shively, will see this denial not as truthful, but as clear evidence of a guilty conscience, leaving us exactly where we started... uncertain. It can be said for certain, however, that Whitman lived an increasingly present kind of life (increasingly present in the ways outlined in the previous section) which was open to a free expression of affection that included both men and women. It was inclusive of the acts, feelings, and motives that constitute what we would call alternative, non-

---

82 After visiting Whitman in Camden, Oscar Wilde was convinced as well, apparently professing “The kiss of Walt Whitman is still on my lips.” During a March 1992 appearance on the Charlie Rose television talk show, Ginsberg explains that Whitman was gay. In the collection Whitman Noir, Ivy G. Wilson shows that Whitman afforded Hughes a “queer smile” through ‘Calamus’ and Leaves of Grass.

83 In fact, Symonds, who was Whitman’s admirer and friend, is credited with being the first to use the term ‘homosexual’ in his book A Problem in Greek Ethics, Being an Inquiry into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion. London, 1901.
normative, or free sexual expressions and orientations. After Whitman’s life, these orientations would undergo serious scrutiny, categorized in different ways, and to varying degrees in space and time, would be feared, accepted, celebrated, or derided.

In that sense it is perhaps better that we don’t specify Whitman’s sexuality too concretely because ultimately that is not the point. I will proceed with the assumption that Whitman was at least a bisexual man with strong homosexual tendencies. Like all of us, Whitman was on a spectrum of sexuality. Later on, I will outline the case for his homosexuality in order to balance and challenge heterosexual assumptions. Again, this is not to claim definitive proof, or to limit interpretation of his rich emotional life, but to allow a specific reading of the issues. I will use words like gay, homosexual, and homosexuality for the sake of simplicity. Where it is proper and useful, I will resort to more general terms like sexual or gender non-conformist. In doing so, I am following conventions employed by historians.

This investigation about Walt Whitman highlights his non-conformist sexuality and how he lived out the later life of a single man in the late nineteenth century. An examination of the issues reveals a more complex, more challenging and more interesting picture than the overly simplified ‘poet of democracy’ narrative. The story of Whitman, his experiences, his poetry, his ideas of the individual, and his demands upon democratic society serve as a call to arms for anyone shamed upon the basis of polite expectations, moralizing attitudes, or perverted religious dogma. He does not represent an end, but in hindsight embodies the romantic notion of a new beginning for the world.
on the open landscape of North America. Now, as much as ever, this idea needs to be interrogated, clarified, and perhaps revised.

Walt Whitman’s presence in the cannon of American literature is well established. Book after book has been published ranging from biography to literary interpretation (which almost always overlap and entangle themselves like his famed lovers of the *Calamus* and *Children of Adam* poems). The same can be said of Whitman’s historical stature. He stands alongside revolutionary heroes Ben Franklin and John Barry in being honored with a major span of the Delaware River (not without controversy) as the poet of democracy. The issue of who he was and what he means seems settled, or at least contained within an acceptable (i.e. respectable) version. But the case will be made that a more inclusive story over the question of Whitman’s sexuality in combination with an analysis of his house in Camden reveals a richer story than the one currently told in the house museum dedicated to him. The significance of Whitman and his house in Camden expands beyond the iconographic value of a famous poet or local pride in a famous citizen. Our own changing social values and emerging sensitivities to marginalized categories of people (the so-called protected classes in

84 The Walt Whitman Archive (https://whitmanarchive.org/criticism/bibliography/index.html), a digital resource at the University of Nebraska, edited by Whitman scholars Ed Folsom and Kenneth Price, lists “thousands” of biographical and critical resources on Whitman. Resources include early biographers Dr. Maurice Bucke, Horace Traubel, and Anne Gilchrist. Current scholars like Andrew Lawson explores sex, class, and industrialization. We shall meet Gary Schmidgall and David Reynolds who debate Whitman’s attitude towards sex. Ivy Wilson explores Whitman and the black community, while Joan Krieg looks at his relationship to the Irish, and Walter Grunzweig constructs “the German Walt Whitman”. Jimmie Killingsworth focuses on nature in Whitman’s poetry in *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics*. Whitman’s “live oak, with moss” shows how sexual metaphor and nature interact in the poetry.
American civil rights law) demand that our treasured historical sites open their interpretation not just to a wider group of people, but to a more nuanced, accurate, and messier vision of history. New interpretations have the corrective benefit of revealing the physical and social structures that undergird entrenched repressive ideological systems and provoke visitors to rethink their assumptions and to view historical figures in multiple contexts. Avoiding the contentious issues serves only to maintain the status quo and compromises historic sites’ relevancy.

The Whitman house at 330 Dr Martin Luther King Boulevard in Camden, where Whitman spent the last years of his life, was saved from neglect long ago and has been painstakingly restored to the late stage of Whitman’s occupation.\(^85\) The modest rooms are furnished with his own possessions, which were claimed by his family after his death, and include his deathbed. The house’s urban context during Whitman’s life has been destroyed. It stands now, along with its immediate neighbors, as a kempt and disembodied token of late nineteenth century Camden, set in a broad expanse of failed urban renewal projects, road widening, and building clearance. As if to clearly mark the boundary between past and present, a five-foot wide edge of MLK Boulevard in front of the Whitman block is paved with cobblestone, while the rest of its width contains a multi-lane asphalt artery divided by a concrete median. Its neighbor across the street is an enormous courthouse and jail complex.

\(^{85}\) What Cowley and Kocubinski call the “post-invalid” period 1888-1892.
The Whitman House site has been preserved because it is the most intact residence associated with him and because it is the only such building he owned.\textsuperscript{86} Whitman was born in Huntington, Long Island, in May of 1819. In 1823, the family moved to Brooklyn, where Whitman would receive his only formal education. After having moved back to the Long Island hinterland, he apprenticed with a printer before teaching in several schools while honing his writing skills. Throughout the 1830s and 40s Whitman wrote newspaper articles, poetry, and a temperance novel called \textit{Franklin Evans}, which was partly inspired by Walter Whitman (Sr)’s drinking.\textsuperscript{87} From January to June 1846, he traveled across an expanding United States, then south to New Orleans where he worked for the newspaper, \textit{The Crescent}. Upon his return, he developed a love for opera and worked as carpenter. In July of 1855, he experienced both the publication of the first edition of \textit{Leaves of Grass} and the death of his father, which brought greater responsibility and pressure to act as the family’s paternal figure.\textsuperscript{88}

With the coming of the Civil War, Whitman’s life took a well-known and drastic turn. He travelled to Virginia to find his wounded brother George and wound up staying in Washington to become an unofficial nurse in several military hospitals. He then worked as a clerk in the Indian Bureau until he was fired for the supposed indecency of \textit{Leaves of Grass}. In 1873, Whitman suffered the first of a series of strokes that would

\textsuperscript{86} Whitman’s family lived at 99 Ryerson Street, Brooklyn, in the 1850’s, which still exists in an altered form. This is where he wrote the first edition of \textit{Leaves of Grass} as a young man. The Landmarks Commission of New York City declined to designate the site due to low material integrity.


\textsuperscript{88} “Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, ‘Walt Whitman’ - The Walt Whitman Archive.”
effectively end his nomadic lifestyle. To cope with the long-term effects and recover, he moved in permanently with his brother George on Stevens Street in Camden. When George and his family decided to leave in 1884, Whitman chose to stay in Camden, buying the frame cottage at 328 Mickle Street (now 330 Dr. Martin Luther King Boulevard). He lived out his final years there, dying on March 26, 1892. He was buried in his self-designed mausoleum in Harleigh Cemetery, Camden.

This brief biography outlines what many high school students have been taught about Walt Whitman. However, even as a summary, it is inadequate. If students are taught to be comfortable with ambiguity and to question their assumptions, why is the experience of visiting his house reduced to a set of simple facts? It is unclear if the motivation for the curatorial team’s strategy is self-consciously normative or based on the difficulty of clearly identifying the truth, neither of which is excusable. We might excuse squeamishness on the subject of sex, but not romance and friendship.

One could easily (and correctly) argue that, in Whitman’s lifetime, there was neither a meaningful identity tied to homosexuality, nor a gay community in any sense with which we would be familiar in the twenty-first century. As historian Jimmie Killingsworth observes, “Before such a phenomenon becomes a recognized set of rhetorical strategies and linguistic conventions [like gay, queer, homosexual, etc.], it exists only as a set of vague trends emerging on the fringes of social awareness. In this
vague stage, we can say it is ‘pre-historic.’” 89 The same or similar psychological tensions that many modern sexual non-conformists recognize in their own lives existed within individuals who consistently partook of non-normative sexual practices and gender roles. 90 These tensions may have been resolved among documented types of spaces, made visible to the historical record in outward presentations and secret practices that were situated architecturally. Some of these survive and collectively form the basis and precondition of the community that would aggregate and crystalize (with the help of those rhetorical strategies and linguistic conventions) in later periods in gay ghettos and ‘gayborhoods’.

Whitman’s house, I argue, is an example of this emerging model of LGBTQZX life on the edges of a large cosmopolitan city, which would become familiar to future generations seeking a self-determined dignity and a sense of community. This self-positioning in Camden’s cityscape was likely unintentional on Whitman’s part, but his well-known influence on a small group of emancipation poets and artists point to the beginnings of new urban social structures that found a physical home in the tenements, mechanics’ cottages, apartments and row houses of American cities that were slowly being discarded by upwardly mobile labor and merchant classes in favor of roomier

90 Difficult to substantiate, this is an assumption based on the expected tensions that would arise from any act deemed officially immoral and punishable by public humiliation and incarceration.
suburbs. Remining in the city were the forgotten and the oppressed of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, left to battle each other for decreasing resources, blame of the situation, and access to some kind of equality and cultural assimilation. In keeping with this conviction, studying the built environment offers an important perspective on Walt Whitman’s life and work. I will examine related material culture in a range of scales, from the urban, architectural, to objects and furnishings.

In order to understand the Whitman story, we must first understand the context of homosexuality’s emergence as an identity and changing attitudes about it over time. If we are to claim Whitman as a visionary of American society and its progressive arc from colonial frontier into the epicenter of modernity, then let’s look at homosexuality across the sweep of American history. It must be understood first of all that same sex intimacy (meaning sex acts) and non-normative gender expressions were rarely seen in a positive light before the late twentieth century. At best, the rebellious soul (sin is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as a transgression against God’s will) was viewed with pity as someone morally, and later psychologically, sick. A deep

92 Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey, eds., Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past (New York: Meridian, 1990), 21. These writers insist on understanding social context when interpreting any minority history.
93 I use these broad terms to encompass the idea, because the word “homosexual” was unfamiliar to anyone before this time and because it limits our understanding to male-male intimacy.
investigation of these complex and still-disputed ideas is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is useful to outline some of the history of same sex practices and attitudes before, and up to, Walt Whitman’s time.

There is scant but significant evidence on the subject of alternative sexual and gender practices in the early period of the United States. Historian of gender and sexuality Claire Lyons has used innovative reading of popular and sensational transatlantic literature and press accounts, including sales figures and availability of certain volumes in libraries and bookstores, to show how Philadelphians learned about sodomy and gender non-conformity. They learned about the emerging clusters of people based around male prostitution rings and bawdy houses in Paris, Amsterdam, and London. She argues that although Philadelphians in the colonial and early national period were loath to acknowledge the existence of alternative sexual practices in their city, they almost certainly knew how such activity manifested in the dark corners, saloons, gardens, and inns of large port cities like Philadelphia.

Lyon’s methodology is instructive for historians and curators looking for evidence of knowledge, belief, and interest in this kind of non-conformist behavior. Questions, like the knowledge of certain types of behavior can be left unresolved if convincing evidence is presented. In Lyon’s scholarship, one might not be able to tell who behaved in such a way (because few prosecutions can be found in the record), but


95 Lyons, 120.
the interest in sensational reports shows that many were interested and knew of these activities in a place like Philadelphia. This observation gets to the heart of the Whitman/sexuality issue. *Inductive reasoning, clearly stated, is preferable to ignorance or mis-characterization through omission.* My argument, then, is that this history exists, and is a part of our heritage. We may argue over the nature of sexual identity, but this need not be the basis to ignore the varied phenomena altogether, particularly regarding our prominent historical figures. How can we know the inner nature of a silent and anonymous eighteenth, or nineteenth-century sodomite? We can’t, but the phenomenon can be sufficiently recognized so as not to be ignored.96

Appendix II of this paper contains a selection very early responses to sodomy among colonists and early republicans who were often hysterical by today’s standards but weren’t to Anglo-American Protestants. That disgust for the behavior continued into the nineteenth century, which deemed the offense just as abhorrent, but developed theories of causation that at least treated the offender more with violent pity rather than violent fear. The 1880 and 1890 census still included homosexuality in its report of “crimes against nature and public morals.” The offense was usually punishable by hard labor or jail time, which was thought to reform the transgressor. Critically, the Scientific Revolution created a class of intellectuals who sought to catalogue and explain nature (including human nature) in hierarchical taxonomies. Positivists of the *Industrial*

96 Lyons suggests that scandalous volumes, that include sodomy, were accessed by many Philadelphians. Besides Lyons, see also: Benemann, William. *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships.* New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006,
Revolution sought to master natural order and make it ‘correct’ based on dubious views of social and economic Darwinism, and on the Christian existentialist position in general.

The catalogue of malevolent/benevolent violence is best summed up by Katz as follows:

During the four hundred years documented here [in Katz’s historical account], American homosexuals were condemned to death, [and] characterized by the terms “abomination,” “crime against nature,” “sin,” “monster,” “fairies,” “bull dykes,” and “perverts.” Heterosexual society [also] conditioned homosexuals to act as the agents of their own destruction, to become victims of themselves. But always, finally, they were oppressed, situated in a society that outlawed and denied them.97

This statement underscores the value of interpreting Whitman’s place in this history. By the time of Whitman’s death, his home had become a place of pilgrimage among a group of admirers, some of whom who were instituting something like a first wave of sexual (including homosexual) emancipation in modern times, a movement led by Edward Carpenter and John Addington Symonds. The dignity which Whitman gave to the act of physical love enabled this movement. Whitman himself encouraged these writers in extant letters, and through dialogues that were recorded by Horace Traubel (another close comrade) and others. These documents show Whitman making clear his

---

97 Katz, 11. Continuing, he lists state sanctioned punishment: “choking, burning and drowning; [homosexuals] were executed, jailed, pilloried, fined, court-martialed, prostituted, fired, framed, blackmailed, disinheritcd, declared insane, driven to insanity, to suicide, murder, and self-hate, witch-hunted, entrapped, stereotyped, mocked, insulted, isolated, pitied, castigated, and despised. (They were also castrated, lobotomized, shock-treated, and psychoanalyzed…) The vicious judgements… sometimes internalized by Lesbians and Gay men with varying results – from feelings of guilt and worthlessness, to trouble in relating to other homosexuals, to the most profound mental disturbances and anti-social behavior. External judgements internalized became self-oppression; re-externalized this might result in behavior destructive to self and others.”
affections while still carefully maintaining plausible deniability about any physical actions that might have accompanied them.\textsuperscript{98}

The negative environment for homosexuals persisted throughout the twentieth century when a recognizable community finally emerged, with a more easily definable history. After the horrors of conversion treatment in the 1940’s and 50’s, homosexual emancipation rode the wave of social justice movements in the 1960’s and 70’s that radically challenged existing social structures. This shift culminated in 1974 with the America Psychiatric Association removing homosexuality as a fundamental disorder from the DSM-II.\textsuperscript{99} Success would be followed in the 1980’s by arguably the darkest period in gay history since the days of public execution.

Finally, a century after Whitman’s death (and beyond), scholars began to challenge the very idea of binary sexuality. An individual’s sexual desires, they now insist, exist on a spectrum. Recalling Whitman’s ambiguous interplay of subjectivities, his deliberate conflation of male and female perspective, the distant and the near, one now need not be deemed absolutely masculine or feminine and need not be limited by the biological sex they were assigned at birth.\textsuperscript{100}

This gambol through Katz’s history of homosexuality in the United States provides some context for Whitman’s radical ideas of sexuality, the individual, and democratic society. Poetry was a useful vehicle for his ideas because of its ability to

\textsuperscript{98} Katz, 337–65.
\textsuperscript{99} The DSM is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, the primary reference of mental health professionals.
\textsuperscript{100} Whitman, Sex and Gender. (Camden, NJ: Walt Whitman Association, 1989), 35–37.
complicate and mystify the explanatory logic of journalistic prose. In some ways, poetry is closer to collage, which allows suggestive ambiguous juxtapositions. Perhaps out of youthful confidence, or perhaps out of a desire to distinguish his voice from his more classically educated competition, Whitman did not shy away from provocative sexual imagery, especially before the Civil War.101

His writing after the war was different. Modern scholarship traces his transition from dangerously overt descriptions of male-male sex and male bodies in general to more general and oblique phrasing in the later editions of *Leaves of Grass*.102 It should not surprise us that he became more conservative as he aged. The broad context of gay American history reminds us of what would have been at stake as he entered middle age. A key factor in this shift may have been his *de facto* blacklisting by federal officials on account of the “immoral” nature of his work.103 Likewise, *Leaves of Grass* was effectively banned in Massachusetts under the 1873 Comstock Law, which made it illegal to deliver descriptions of sex through the mail.104 This is not to say that fear of prosecution, public humiliation, or familial estrangement were his only reasons, or even his primary reasons, for his retreat, but it is plausible to think that it was a major part of his calculus.

101 Schmidgall.
102 Schmidgall.
103 Sampson, “Whitman’s Camden Life Marked by the Stings of Illness and Poverty.”
104 Comstock Laws (named for US Postal Inspector Anthony Comstock) prohibited the use of the U.S. Postal Service for shipping anything deemed immoral, including personal letters. This meant orders for *Leaves of Grass* could not be transported in Massachusetts.
IV. Furtive Hen, Wily Fox, and the Problem of Interpretation

“Every strong personal impulse, every cooperating and unifying impulse, everything that enriches the social background, everything that enriches the individual, everything that impels and clarifies in the modern world owes something to Whitman.”105 -Van Wyck Brooks

“To live is to leave traces”106 – Walter Benjamin

What are the determining factors for revealing sexuality and space? What kind of framework can we build to find our bearing? For these difficult questions, I will rely here on scholars who have looked at these issues over longer stretches of time. From the outset, one must understand that the answers represent a multidimensional moving target, subject to larger forces of history. I propose we start by reducing to basic elements, each of which I have touched on to some extent already, and will be further examined here. The first element is the person or people (meaning the gender or sexual non-conformist); the second is the architecture (buildings, structures, elements of buildings); and third is context (including cultural, political, economic, and sociological context).107 Time, or more specifically, chronological order, governs all of these variables if we are to construct a history and establish historic places to be preserved. Therefore,

change over time, is a special focus. The question of self-consciousness is key. The final section of this report focuses on the evidence of Whitman’s sexuality because otherwise we cannot make the connection between the evidence and LGBTQ history. The question may remain open to a certain extent (as Whitman wanted it), but a reasonably convincing case must be built.  

As suggested, one way into this subject is to take analytical methods and insights of the last few decades of modern architect-designed houses as points of departure for a reading of the Whitman House. Building on the material analysis of the Mickle Street House in Section II and the historical context of sexuality in Section III, this section will outline some of the ways architectural historians and cultural theorists have analyzed domestic space. It is an attempt to synthesize previous sections under the scholarship of modern examples to answer our basic questions. The examples are not directly related to the Walt Whitman House, yet they open an avenue of inquiry.

Productive analyses have come from Philip Johnson’s Glass House (Figures 18 & 19) investigated by art historian Alice T. Friedman; the Weston Haven House, analyzed by architectural historian Annmarie Adams; artist Katarina Bonnevier’s analysis of Eileen Gray’s house cryptically named ‘E.1027’; and architectural historian Beatriz Colomnina’s analyses of the houses of Adolph Loos and le Corbusier. These sources can be used as comparative analytical models to advance a limited, but significant, reading of the Mickle Street house as a site of LGBTQ heritage. Particular attention will be given to

\[108\] A fourth consideration might be how to integrate LGBTQ history into general history.
Friedman’s analysis of Edith Farnsworth and Philip Johnson, because it is such a complete analysis of these issues in a given context and with a particular set of characters. Freidman directly addresses the core issues of domesticity for gender and sexual non-conformists, while avoiding the pitfalls of stereotypes and cliché.

Much of the research done on the “queering” of architecture involves modern architecture, likely because the modern period was a time of novelty, and experimentation.¹⁰⁹ This period experienced access to an unprecedented variety of building materials of good quality. Heavy consumer goods were mass produced at a reasonable cost. Technological advances (significantly in glass production), increased material plasticity and strength, and industrial diversification, including complex mechanical systems, gave architects new formal possibilities that helped eschew many of the physical limits of construction and historical rules of stylistic composition.¹¹⁰ As in the case of concrete and glass, some material could be plasticly shaped in new ways, while retailing of standard parts meant the possibility of novel arrangements.

¹⁰⁹ “Queer” is a modern term with a complicated history. LGBTQ theorists use the term as part of an activist idiom that was nonexistent in the nineteenth century. To the extent that “queer space” or “queering” of space, in this context, means to impose unintended uses on architecture and create unintended meanings does it relate to a theory of the Whitman House. Whitman did not have a queer theory of his own house, but we may see how he deviated from its intended familial use.
In reviewing the positions presented on Modern architecture, we see that a few themes emerge as most relevant to this discussion. The anachronism of modern architecture compared to this ordinary pre-modern house, hinders easy comparison. However, I argue it is worth exploring anyway, particularly in the light of Van Wyck Brook’s observation that Whitman was a modern cultural visionary, but also because the issues of gender and sexuality raised in the Whitman House have a longer history than modernism.111

Whether he intended to or not, Walt Whitman found ways to free expectations of masculinity and femininity in thought and in space. The roles Mary Davis and Walt Whitman adopted at the Mickle Street house hint at the ways gender expectations could blur out of necessity in the homes of the nineteenth century urban households, but this phenomenon is overlooked in the house’s current interpretation.112 According to Alice Friedman, who’s analysis will be discussed at length, one’s home is a series of “episodes in an unfolding story”.113 Walls, openings, furniture groupings, objects, flower arrangements, artwork all offer clues, although often obscure, of a household’s life. Home is not a mere function of shelter, but a set of social and psychological expressions and aspirations that unfold over time. Whether found space, or (ground-up) designed

111 This raises an interesting question on the origins of change. Do cultural changes lead material changes, or the other way around. I suspect it is a gradual and reciprocal process.
112 Classifying Whitman’s socioeconomic level is difficult. He was certainly cash-poor, but neither did he fit the working-class image of a manual laborer with limited education. He had a housekeeper, certainly as sign of some stature, but he paid her in free lodging alone, as Keller explains.
space, the decisions about where and how we live are never neutral. They are always guided by the social and cultural situation of the people who live there as much by the idiosyncrasies of style and personal preference.

The difficulties are compounded by the limitations of the evidence. One must recognize and acknowledge, if not overcome, architectural history’s reliance on reproduced drawings and photographs. Like other forms of mapping, these are mere prescriptions or traces of what once was, and must be questioned as well. Furthermore, trying to find an essential element in gendered space is a fool’s errand. Rather, gender and sexuality are actualized in performance. Architectural historian Annmarie Adams continues the line of argument in an attempt to precisely locate where queer theory intersects architecture.\textsuperscript{114}

Like any performance, sexuality has a stage to accommodate it. Setting aside cultural and political context for the moment, this story depends upon its measured revelation in space and time. Finally, the architectural tools in this performance are based in form and material, transparency and opacity. The inchoate lifeway I am trying to illuminate, in the sense that we see in the Whitman House, had to fit in while at the same time challenge social expectations.

The desire is to avoid falling into meaningless relativism. Is the reading of gender and sexuality into a work of architecture relative to any subjective viewpoint? This is a

legitimate concern, but Adams offers guidance on how to settle it. Although she focuses on a modern house, her introduction of the subject opens the possibility of reading queerness into any common or found space, as it is shaped or transformed in performance. Queerness is manifested in a certain gender performance and architecture is but one part of “a constellation of forces that shape gender performance.”115 Queer theorist and architect Aaron Betsky also intuited this connection to a certain extent. One does not determine the other, but form part of a whole. It is not relative, but in concert with other forces.

As Freidman maintains regarding Mies van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House, “Many works of architecture, built for a variety of clients and purposes, have similar histories: there are often persistent and unresolved questions about power, professional status, money, and ultimately about who has control of the project.”116 We saw how early planners and developers guided and shaped urban form, and domesticity by extension. Who had control in the design of the Walt Whitman House? Clearly Adam Hare did initially, and whoever initiated subsequent changes (probably Hare as well). Minus professional status, he nevertheless (either depending on his own skills, or on the skills of another builder) relied on the traditions of building he inherited, which as we have seen, became increasingly gendered as the nineteenth century proceeded.

115 Adams, “Sex and the Single Building.” The term “performance” like “queer” can be tricky as it is also part of theoretical idiom. Performance could be misinterpreted as deceit or deception, but rather means acting-out in this context.
This, and more, was the historical context for the evolution of Freidman’s inquiry and is why I contend that the comparisons are valid. The differences between the Farnsworth House (which she examines first) and the Walt Whitman House are great, but both still represent in their own way the expectations of ‘one who is designing’ (not necessarily an "architect" in the professional sense) and the wants and needs of those who will inhabit it. Though a modern term, there is no such thing as a client-less building. The “client,” or “end user” to use a more general (although still problematic) may be oneself or one’s family. However, they may also be general rather than specific, many rather than few, or unknown rather than known (which is obvious in the case of surviving historical buildings that are still used). Well-being and comfort may be a focus to wildly varying degrees in different buildings, but none are designed as an abstract box without any thought to who might inhabit the space or how it might be used. Whitman and Davis were not specific clients in the “design” of the Mickle Street House, but they benefited from a general attention to the very purpose of a dwelling, modifying it. It is in the context of this logic that I wish to draw a connection between the modern and pre-modern.

The problems of this comparison are also worth exposing in order to bring attention to possible new avenues of research. Scholarship on how non-normative or alternative sexual practices interface with the built landscape before the twentieth century is very rare. Historian Rictor Norton, and others, have examined and theorized its social or political history. They often cite the case of London’s ‘molly house’ as a clear
pre-modern example that gives us a physical setting to examine, but can this be the only
evidence? The following examination will be awkward, and will raise many objections,
but consider it an opening attempt for the purpose of highlighting the enormous gaps in
the pre-modern material history of sexuality.

Freidman also contends later in her piece that gay architect Philip Johnson
incorporated “elements of the vernacular” in his own “autobiographical” Glass House,
essentially through decorative objects and furniture arrangement, which act as a
connective thread. Its specific design and technology sets the Glass House apart from
the Walt Whitman House, but the biographical, or lived-in, quality of the two sexual
outsiders, is a connecting thread. Mies and Johnson’s willingness and ability to invent
marks the Farnsworth and Glass House projects as "modern" but Whitman was forced,
as have countless others outside the family ideal, to make do and find other was to
transform existing (particularly urban) dwellings. The differences are also in the physical
landscape. The iterative and highly variable nature of these problems/solutions on a
cultural landscape (that also changes) complicates the explanation I am trying to find.

Tantalizing coincidences arise when metaphors are employed to explain gay
culture, keeping suspicions of connection across great gaps in time alive. Section III set

117 Farid Azfar, “Beastly Sodomites and the Shameless Urban Future,” The Eighteenth Century 55, no. 4
(London: GMP Publishers, 1992). Pfaff’s tavern in New York, where Whitman socialized, is another
example cited.

118 Friedman, 319. Freidman contends this is irony to a certain extent, but it also made the house livable.
She discusses role of “camp” in homosexual culture at length, as seen in Johnson’s 1953 renovation of the
Guest House. However, there is more to gay culture than camp.
out to establish a continuity of experience, rather than genealogical connection, across
time as the connective thread. Freidman in her study invokes theater, and fiction in
describing “the unfolding story” of domesticity. Both Whitman and Johnson had to pass
and belonged to a period with a heightened suspicion of homosexuality. We shall see in
the next section how Whitman identified himself as a ‘furtive hen’ in responding to
questions of sexuality, meaning he admitted being cleverly secretive (not to mention
feminine). Freidman, on the other hand, details he ways in which Johnson employed
camp and wit to cope and inhabit a world of coded signs and signals. She intuits another
metaphor for her subject’s slyness and shrewdness, “that of the wily fox leading a pack
of hounds farther and farther off his scent.”\textsuperscript{119} The closeness of meaning between the
two is uncanny and grounds for some connection.

Furthermore, their differences show that the interaction of class and
heteronormativity include dynamic and time-specific variables. Popular images in the
twentieth century of an ideal form of domesticity, plus the availability of heavy
consumer goods, and cheap plentiful gasoline, drew families out to affordable suburban
tracts, opening a space in the cities for those left out. As Mies, Farnsworth, and Johnson
were able to challenge the suburban domestic ideal in the artist/patron dynamic,
Whitman inadvertently showed (and continues to show) us how discarded urban
dwellings could be re-imagined by those without financial wealth. By the final quarter of
the twentieth century, the suburban ideal was beset by recurrent problems like gas

\textsuperscript{119} Friedman, 331.
shortages, traffic congestion, and visual blandness. These problems inspired a revival of urban dwelling by the end of the twentieth century into the twenty-first (bringing the idea full circle). Places like Greenwich Village, DuPont Circle, and Rittenhouse Square, show the influence and intelligence of reusing older stock housing that had long since become the domain of outsiders and “bohemian types”.

After the Second World War, this newfound flexibility plus the sociopolitical relationship of the individual and the collective would lead architectural analysis into the vanguard of cultural criticism. It is no accident that personal identity became a major social issue with expanding leisure and consumerism. The additional sources I will rely on are also unquestionably modern, but as architectural historians Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Kenneth Frampton, and others show, the origins of twentieth century Modernism lie in the nineteenth century. These analyses of Modernism have the potential to add knowledge to the seeds of transition, showing that perhaps the significance of the Whitman house becomes clearer when put in the context of the twentieth century as well.

In writing about modern glass houses Friedman observes that:

“...many of the most original ideas in the domestic architecture of [the twentieth] century were forged in a crucible of contested values about gender and sexuality, and that what heated up the mixture, so to speak, making the transformation from old to new modes of thinking possible, was the realization that conventional building types and patterns of domestic planning were inadequate responses to the needs, both programmatic and ideological, of atypical clients.”120

---

120 Friedman, 320.
In other words, there is a cultural lag among architectural expression, in particular among the development of Modernism. We have seen, and we will look further, at how atypical a figure Walt Whitman was. Therefore, the Whitman House can be read from the perspective of twentieth century theory because its ‘atypical’ inhabitants created a problem, so to speak, in adapting to an urban type they had no hand in designing. Whitman shows that housing of the density and forms described in Section II of this report, though problematic, was flexible enough to accommodate these alternative lifeways. This, I argue, should be understood as part of the crucible Friedman is identifying in a later period. The twentieth century inherited the situation, which opened a space for the so called ‘atypical’, or modern cosmopolitan, client to emerge.

Class also complicates gender relations and expectations in residential arrangements. Architect, designer, and feminist theorist Katarina Bonnevier suggests such arrangements as that which Whitman and Davis had may challenge heterosexist norms, but on the other hand uphold existing gender expectations.121 Whitman was never wealthy, but it is clear that Davis was being put in her place as a housekeeper and as a woman. Whitman’s source of power derived not merely from his fame or any meager income, but from his name on the building’s title. The stepping stone at the curb labelled “W.W.” puts a fine point on this arrangement. (Fig. 13) We can’t fully know

how Whitman perceived Mary Davis, but she was clearly viewed as secondary, supporting Whitman around his own lifeway, not hers.  

Bonnevier employs a traditional approach through reading the conventions of architectural representation and historic photographs. (Figure 22) Opposition and transgression of normative orders marks one out as “queer” space. Lillian Chee, however warns us not to rely too heavily on traditional architectural hermeneutics based in plan. Though spatial arrangements, siting, and material are critical to the analysis, significance is equally established by the words and poetry of Whitman and the plaque that mark’s the site, what Chee calls “an architecture of twenty words” referring to the Sylvia Plath’s higher-grade townhouse in London. (Figures 24 & 25) “We enter the interior of the house not through a masterly reading of the plan, but through the peripheral reading of Plath’s biographical documents and poetry.”

Living space is not just determined by the social function of the house, but the cultural context within which it is situated. Bonnevier particularly disavows any essentialism. She contends, correctly I think, that we are reading queerness into a cultural object rather than the object manifesting queerness innately. That is, a wide array of material culture can be read in queer terms, given certain actors and context. She says, “To think about [Eileen Gray’s house] in queer terms brings forward queerness

---

122 Keller, *Walt Whitman in Mickle Street*. Keller explains the relationship in this way throughout.
123 Gray’s house in plan is marked by conventionally incongruous spatial juxtapositions while superficially fitting in to its context in an acceptably modern way. Eileen Gray’s house “hides and reveals simultaneously. It is out in the open but still closeted.”
in the building. This does not mean that queerness is some sort of essentialist core, the only truth; the point is, as queer theorist Alexander Doty writes (albeit concerning mass culture), that ‘only heterocentrist/homophobic cultural training prevents anyone from acknowledging this queerness.”

Ordinary urban houses are attractive from a queer (that is, unconventional) perspective and build a conceptual bridge between low and high design. The domestic arrangements famously problematized by architects Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson in their respective ‘glass house’ projects are critical outcomes of traditional American domestic values. However dense urban dwellings such as the Mickle Street house, are forced by spatial and economic factors into an adaptability unintentionally suited for fluid types of use that may have aided such cosmopolitan architects in re-imagining domestic space.125 Friedman examines Johnson’s novel arrangements in his glass houses as a set of relationships in space: performance and reality, security and comfort, material and transparency, privacy and exposure.126 Philip Johnson himself deflected questions of sexuality by focusing on the architectural lineage of his formal ideas. He presented this as the meaning of the house, while sexuality and space were not discussed in mid-century architectural criticism.127

Again, there is nothing inherently ‘queer’ or ‘straight’ in any building, except in the performance of life within adaptable space. Most become queered through reflexive

---

125 I admit this is speculation, but it’s also a hypothesis to pursue.
126 Friedman, 336-337.
127 Friedman, 331.
Queerness emerges not as a fixed category, but from a variety of site-specific factors that are lived-in. Its very purpose is to acknowledge the differences that exist in real space outside the conventional. In other words, queer readings acknowledge and reveal overlooked people at the margins or indeed hidden in plain sight. Though general strategies can be gleaned, concepts of queer space are always manifested by the specific place and people. Location of outsiders is dependent on the mainstream (or the location of cultural insiders), but not simply relative.

Both Adams and Bonnevier go further to describe the ways in which these ideas come into being. Ways of acting become mainstream, or normalized, through repetition and affirmative feedback. “By repeating the same principle over and over again, these principles [of space] are naturalized. At the same time, an escape route presents itself in the fact that an exact repetition is impossible.” This process, reminiscent of biological mutation, is the basis of both assimilation and rebellion, or change. We take for granted that the “everyday” is a natural or somehow a permanent element. Urban spatial experiences cycles of entropy and reinvention which enable architectural change and help it overcome an established order. Every system carries with it the seeds of its own subversion, which is the point of departure for the avant garde.

Buildings are neither neutral nor static in this process. Cultural change has a way of being opportunistic, so that a building form may not be essential to an idea but could

---

128 Adams.
129 Bonnevier.
be transformed through use. Bonnevier describes an iterative process by which many buildings play an opposing role to the inhabitants. Repeated normative “performances” are never exactly the same either and change over time. The Whitman House, likewise, plays out in the social lives of Walt Whitman and Mary Davis. Buildings bear traces of the past but also hint at possibility and play a role in future changes. Furthermore, architectural change carries the lingering forms of the past along the way. We can look at the Whitman House as a mark in time on the way to the idea of a modern avant garde.

The problem of relativism is addressed by the process of iteration, and what appears to be a problem is just another example of theory reinforcing homophobia. “We need to acknowledge that sexuality also matters [as much as gender]. We need to... think about the ways in which buildings reinforce heterosexuality as a social and cultural norm and... think about the ways that scholarly discourse has often supported that cultural project by assuming sexuality is not an issue.”131 The boundaries of criticism is a matter of the mode of discourse. It’s establishment in design schools and professional journals has had the effect of divvying a legitimate way of seeing from illegitimate ones.

Adams explains in “Sex and the Single Building” how architect Harwell Harris queers the Havens house in Berkeley, California through non-hierarchical bedroom space. A sign of queer space according to Adams is identically (or near identically) sized

131 Adams, 83.
bedrooms obscured or closed from view. But there is no confusion over hierarchy at the Mickle Street House. It is clear that Mary Davis’ room was kept hidden in keeping with Victorian standards. We see images of Davis in a rocking chair in the rear of the house just off the kitchen, precisely mirroring Whitman’s place in the front parlor in view of the street (Figures 12 & 28). Davis’s room on the second floor is one or two steps lower than Whitman’s space in the front of the house. The middle room between them clearly reinforces the separation.

Whitman’s domain within the house is where this reading begins to make even more sense. Both the Havens and Mickle Street House prioritize a view out to a particular landscape. Both resist compartmentalizing function. Again, the Whitman house was not purpose-built for a gay man, but intimacies are comingled with “professional” functions in his writing space(s).132 Furthermore, in neither case is there such a thing as a “master bedroom”. Whitman’s upper floor was as much of a free plan that one could expect in an adapted urban dwelling of this kind, where Whitman could mix his social and private roles. One could argue that this room was in itself a master bedroom, but it functioned practically and socially as something more than the kind of private space where private heterosexual roles are consummated.

Alice Friedman outlines how the Farnsworth House (Mies van der Rohe’s glass house) was not received publicly as an opening up of architecture to non-normative

132 Donaldson, Traubel, and others describe how Whitman wrote letters and edited *Leaves of Grass* in his bedroom, where he also hosted intimate conversations. The HSR also supports this observation.
lives but a totalizing (and anti-American) artistic vision. In this respect certain elements or aspects of the Whitman House, including: the binary front/back arrangement of the house; a full width front room on the second floor; and public extension to the street through slightly elevated windows, accommodate privacy while mitigating public exposure. Solid/opaque walls may be anti-modern, but they achieve the sense of calm Edith Farnsworth was hoping for in her country escape.

Farnsworth gained insight into Mies’s literal interpretation of the “free” space ideal through the reality of her “fixed” (as in rigid) life within her glass house. “Much of what was said against the [glass] house and Modern architecture generally focuses on its departure from the traditions of the American home.” Further, “Americans are preoccupied with privacy, consumerism, and family.” Whitman’s concealment behind an opaque wall, or raised above the vision of the pedestrian, allowed him to comfortably project the life of an eccentric without upsetting the sensibilities of his neighbors or his onlookers. Further, Friedman explains that this visibility took away what opacity gave to Whitman. The paradox appears that literal openness represses the individual in the modern American context, while a controlled opaqueness, in some ways, frees the individual.

The projection of art in one’s own home need not have literal meaning. In many modern homes, art is especially likely to have no direct connection to those who live in

---

134 Friedman, 327.
135 Friedman 327.
the house. More likely, a person’s decoration is aspirational or it projects the individual feeling or character of the person who lives there. So, to have a portrait of Lincoln for Whitman can be both a patriotic sign and could represent a deep and abiding love for Lincoln the person.

Both Friedman and Lynn Spiegel trace the issue (of the “vision impulse”) to television in the 1950’s. Television and magazine advertisements illustrate the “typical” American couple (Figure 21). Recalling Leavitt’s description of the domestic arrangement, Whitman and Davis simulate the married couple with Whitman playing the lazy inconsiderate husband and Davis the nagging “domestic manager” housewife. Keller, as we have seen, presents Walt Whitman and Mary Davis as the nineteenth century version of this narrative.

Philip Johnson expressed a thrill in exhibitionism, referring to “that little edge of danger in being caught.”[136] The danger impulse was manifested in each figure’s specific medium. What the Wily Fox achieved in architecture, the Furtive Hen surely achieved in his poetry. *Leaves of Grass*, is a literary glass house. Just as Whitman was forced to play language games, so did Johnson employ similar deflection strategies in the interpretation of his own glass house. This domestic “quotation” enabled Johnson to leave coded message to those who could understand.[137] Both used collage as a starting point for riddles of deeper meaning. Both were looking to free the individual from the

---

[137] Friedman, 334.
limits imposed by polite society. Their cultural contexts were different but their aim was similar. Both are strategies of the public “mask” of closeted gay men.\textsuperscript{138}

The truth of Johnson’s house, Peter Eisenman observes, is revealed at night. The cylinder springing from the base of the same material reveals the true motif, the burnt village where nothing is left but foundations and chimneys. Eisenman believes this to be a sign of psychological conflict brought about by modernity. “It is at once a ruin and also an ideal model of a more perfect society.”\textsuperscript{139} Again, there are formal similarities between the two men. Traces of this approach in Whitman appear in the letters and rewriting of \textit{Leaves of Grass} after 1860, which will be addressed further on. Each element in Johnson’s house is a poetic phrase deconstructing the domestic ideal. Both reveal post-war anxieties that perhaps vie for attention with the inner conflict of the homosexual.

On the other hand, this reading of the two men may constitute a heterosexist distraction from their individual intentions. Like Whitman’s poetry, it does not represent anxiety, but rather a yearning for freedom. Historical attitudes of male-male intimacy link the critical assessment of both men. Friedman in her essay aims to “restore” Johnson’s homosexuality with the inclusion of the (often overlooked) Guest House in

\textsuperscript{138} It’s worth noting also that both men died in their own beds, in their own place of refuge: Whitman at the Mickle Street House, and Johnson at his Glass House. Both are house museums today. Apropos of the introduction to this paper, Johnson’s late coming out occurred a full century after Whitman’s death. There are other ways to interrogate this question of opaqueness. After a certain point, Whitman retreated from the parlor window. His disappearance from view points, not only to his immobility, but also to modern anxieties over the aging process. His paralysis and frailty were comfortably hidden away.

\textsuperscript{139} Friedman, “People Who Live in Glass Houses: Edith Farnsworth, Ludwig Mies van Der Rohe, and Philip Johnson.”
any critical assessment of the Glass House complex. The opaqueness is more of a response to suburban mores than with Johnson’s psychology. Both Walt Whitman and Philip Johnson lived through periods in which moralizing heterosexuals proposed ‘fixes’ to what they saw as a corruption of order manifested in their sexuality. It is the modern idea of order that link the two. Though styles of poetry and architecture changed, the same cultural limitations (in terms of sexuality) activated their art. Johnson could liberate the real-world life of the homosexual through architecture.

“Thus, the cylindrical brick chimney at the core of the Glass House makes an obvious and clearly ironic reference to the architecture of the traditional American family home and to the sentimentalized view of domesticity that had gained widespread currency since the late nineteenth century.” 140 Whitman had been abandoned by most of the architectural options available to him. It is clear to anyone who has scratched the surface of Whitman historiography that Whitman would have probably found Johnson’s suburban retreat too refined for his taste. But this superficial reading misses the point that both men were challenging the conservative constraints of their time through artforms that (while elitist to certain extent) benefited from popular print media. In both cases, expression (which is perhaps a way of coming out while passing) becomes the liberating and empowering force.

High-style architecture would never fully intrude on the domestic space of most American homes and sensibilities. But it is partly the urbanism of the Mickle Street

---

140 Friedman, 335.
house that sets it apart from Johnson’s Glass House and mid twentieth century
American architectural concerns. Johnson, in his automobile-driven century, could
separate the public and private world into two separate and distinct buildings in a
suburban landscape. For what is suburbia, if not the further segregation of function into
discrete space. Whitman and Johnson needed buildings that accommodated both a
special kind of individual performance (for Whitman, framed by the sash window, for
Johnson the steel framed glass box) and a hidden place of refuge where intimate
relations could be explored more freely (see Figure 28). They exemplify two points of an
evolution of gay men and domestic space. Neither are representative of the whole
culture of gay men during their respective time periods, but have become publicly
known figures for other reasons.141 The accessibility of their lives, albeit limited, perhaps
helps us understand an evolution of alternative domesticity parallel to the mainstream.

Theorists of queer space have drawn on the image of the closet as an
appropriate metaphor for hidden life. The closet in modern architecture is an expression
of the messier, less respectable ‘self’ one would rather keep out of view both physically
and metaphorically. This reading breaks down at the Whitman house. Closets were not
a universal element of bedrooms at that time. Whitman and Davis both had moveable
furniture rather than closets to store their belongings. Perhaps there is another way to
see the concept of the closet at play in the Whitman House. Both Friedman and Adams

141 This would be a good place to acknowledge problematic aspects of both men, so as not to lionize
them. It will become clearer in Section VI of this report that Whitman had a complicated view of African
Americans, which is still debated. Philip Johnson, on the other hand, was a vocal supporter of Hitler in the
1930’s. Later in life, he considered that position to be his biggest mistake in life.
discuss the importance of privacy in queer space as a counterpoint to visible space. The Mickle Street house itself is Whitman’s proverbial closet, as it shows the original unity of the Glass House/Guest House duality. In other words, his urban space contains a carefully choreographed scenography which functions to reveal and obscure on cue.

Whitman biographers have explained the significant role the opera played in his life. A theoretical connection can be drawn between Colomina’s interpretation of the window seat in Adolf Loos’s Moller House in Vienna (Figure 14) and Whitman’s habit of sitting by the window in his parlor. In both cases light plays a crucial role. The Whitman house, or a key part of the house becomes a theater box. Though it is not the refined ‘home/theater’ of Loos, it is perhaps more in line with the working class upper balcony of Whitman’s opera-going days. Colomina explains how small changes in floor height at the Moller House sort functions into a familial and gendered hierarchy. In Whitman’s case, his height above the street protects him from close gaze. Again, the cellar hatch beneath the window reinforces the defensive position. Only children, who are nimble enough to climb, can get close to the window. The socialized adults on the other hand are kept at just enough distance.

Colomina details the psychological dimension of the window seat, how it prescribes a sense of security from a place of privilege. There is both intimacy and

142 Schmidgall, 15–66.
control in both the theater box and the window seat. Light also obscures an “invader’s” vision in the window seat reinforcing a sense of control.\(^{143}\) The position at the edge of Whitman’s window allows him to surveil the interior as well as the street. As a frame, the window makes Whitman both actor and spectator. When light falls on Whitman from the window, the arrangement shifts and the man in the window becomes the object of one’s gaze (either from the sidewalk, or from the small entrance hall). In this we see Whitman’s theatricality, his performance. In Colomina’s words, “Architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupant.”\(^{144}\) The idea of the stage set is reinforced on Whitman’s carte de visite with the image of the man bathed in window light set against a curtain drawn over the domestic view (Figure 5). The new art of photography and portraiture gave new meaning to the frame and the window.

Interestingly, Colomina ascribes the window seat as feminine space whereas male spaces are libraries and lounges. Very rudimentary versions of these spaces appear at the Whitman house. For all the radical aspects of his poetry and his life, Whitman is still maintaining elements of mainstream domestic life. But the delineation of these spaces is designed for the traditional nuclear family. In the Whitman House, Whitman again occupies both the feminine and the masculine, depending on whether he is in his

\(^{143}\) Colomina, 76–79.
\(^{144}\) Colomina, 83.
upstairs ‘study’ or in his downstairs parlor at the ‘window seat’. Nevertheless, these spaces maintain the possibility of transformation based on use and are aided by furniture arrangement. The upstairs bedroom is either a study or a theater box, depending on whether the window is used for gazing or for natural light. Visitors to Whitman describe a street tree right in front of the house, which suggests that the upstairs window was used primarily for light while the first-floor window was primarily his urban ‘theater box’.

This arrangement gives an advantage over the bourgeoise ‘designed’ spaces of Mies, Loos, or Corbusier in its fluidity. House and occupant occupy a ‘both/and’ arrangement consistent with the fluid psychology of sexual non-conformists like Walt Whitman. Whitman again uses ambiguity to his advantage, both upholding and subverting the social expectations of his time from a defensible position.

His femininity is reasserted in a famous photograph attributed to Thomas Eakins for the 1898 edition of Leaves of Grass. Here a wolf skin is draped over the back of Whitman’s chair (Figures 16 & 17). The affect is to blur the distinction between the man and the space, especially on the shaded side of the photograph. The chaos of the floor is reflected by the chaos of fur. With a full beard obscuring his face, the subject blends into an encompassing surface of fur. (Both curtain and fur recall Loos’s feminine space for Lina Loos.) At the same time, the usual parlor trappings like wallpaper, or framed pictures, are either blurred, cut off at the frame, or out of site completely. The window is reduced to an abstract box, merely a lite source.
To Colomina the modern period reckoned with the ornate nineteenth century but, only on the surface. Modernity in the twentieth century and modernism in artistic production still maintained a traditional binary relation between male and female, at least in its representation of itself. What appeared on the surface to be a radical change wound up being the same arrangement. Typical of the time, representations often depicted the man surveying his domain (of both male – urban, and female – nature) while the walls of the house protect the woman’s purity and body. Even in le Corbusier’s radical work, representations depict “…the woman in the kitchen look[ing] over the counter toward the man sitting at the dining room table. Here again, the woman is placed ‘inside’ the man ‘outside’, the woman looks at the man, the man looks at the ‘world’.\textsuperscript{145} (Figure 20)

The private space of a public figure is explored further by Bonnevier. In Eileen Grey’s house called E.1027 (she used an industrial style identifier rather than a traditional house name, as if it were a consumer product), elements of private space invade the public realm. It is as if the space itself is as interchangeable as standard parts in an industrial product. In this way the building could be both a house (representing life) and a salon (public performance). “There is a blurred distinction between the theater and life as the audience, consisting of friends and acquaintances, were also the

\textsuperscript{145} Colomina, 104.
actors, and the place for the salon was the house where the saloniere lived. The salon is the public sphere but takes place in the private sphere.”

One final element in the transition to twentieth century Modernism regards technology. Colomina points to Manfredo Tafuri’s reading of the periscope in the Le Corbusier’s Apartment Beistegui. The fragmentation and separation of Corbusier’s walls are overcome by a technological device (a periscope). Whitman of course had no such thing but relied on what was afforded by his wheel chair and cane. Whereas the periscope is an instrument of war, signifying conflict by completely obscuring the voyeur from the urban landscape, Whitman can only operate his “technology” with the help of a comrade. In his pre-filimic time, he is brought out to view the city rather than obscured by tools of surveillance (wall and periscope). Thus, the alienation indicative of the modern project in Corbusier’s work is reduced in the Mickle Street House.

Finally, Whitman’s language of sex and emotion had a peculiar setting in nature. The urban sphere could provide connection and anonymity, but nature could provide the isolation necessary for intimacy. Feminist thinker Laura Mulvey draws a distinction between the home as site of melodrama (feminine space) in opposition to (masculine) outside space. This explains Whitman’s use of both the home and the outdoors in his realization of himself. Whitman inverts this relationship identified by Mulvey by applying emotion, not just sex, to the outdoors. The adventurous expressions of sex in

---

146 Bonnevier.
his poetry coincided with his nomadic life, while refinement occurred once he settled in Camden. Mulvey points to this as a mythical process, referring to “...the hero’s journey, as he follows a road or path of adventure, until he comes to root in a new home, a closing point of the narrative, a new point of stasis, marked by the return of the feminine and domestic space through the function of marriage.” Walt Whitman never consecrated marriage in the home, but rather had an asexual domestic partnership that could appear like one. “Home is a signifier of stable space.”

The poem in section eleven of “Song of Myself” about 28 nude male bathers “sousing” each other, Whitman writes from the female voyeur’s perspective. Voyeurism is here associated with femininity, home, and danger as well as attraction in danger. There is an interaction between security in knowledge, and attraction in danger, again recalling Johnson and his glass house. Why write from the feminine perspective? Why write about sexual frustration? Challenging simplistic interpretation, riddle-making was the mode in which Whitman operated to great effect, except when he felt he had gone too far. Whitman’s transition to a point of stasis in Camden from his adventurous youth is the subject of the next section, which posits more specifically what kind of life he lived.
V. Homosexual or Homosocial?

“For the human animal, sexuality is not an urge to be obeyed as it is an enigma to unravel.” – Victor Burgin148

“The other difficulty with my position, of course, is that this is all a keyhole business. One has to peep and pry and be, well, prurient. There is a constant danger of looking inept, comical, or merely gutter-minded as one goes about one’s task.” – Gary Schmidgall149

Critical theorist Peter Coviello has written that Whitman’s visceral and urgent experience during the Civil War provides the essential clues on how to decode his sexual program, if one can call it that. As he explains, “what finds strange replenishment in the war, even as Whitman’s expressive utopianism shatters and dissolves, is his vision of sex.”150 Just as it is difficult, yet worthwhile, to argue gender and sexuality at work in the architecture of the Walt Whitman House, so is it worthwhile to argue gender and sexuality in Whitman’s life and poetry, which was the subject of some controversy during his lifetime, and certainly ever since. As stated earlier, we cannot know with certainty where to place him on the spectrum of human sexuality, but Coviello makes the case to ignore the idea of a spectrum altogether. To speak in terms of labels denoting masculine and feminine, male and female, is only to reinforce an oppressive

148 Colomina, 239.
149 Schmidgall, 93.
and false binary. He explains further, “Whitman confirms what we might call his ‘Calumus’ vision of desire as an adhesive, world-making power, uncontained by socially scripted limits or roles...”

Biographer Henry Seidel Canby considered a similar argument in 1943 to elevate Whitman’s position, invoking the heterosexual/homosexual binary (intuiting its inadequacy) that was established by that point. To him Whitman was “intermediate” and capable of the intense feeling one finds in creative types, who “are very seldom homosexuals in the vulgar sense of the word.” Walter Rivers also appealed to the apparent unorthodox nature of “creative types.” Whitman’s membership in a loose group of men at Pfaff’s tavern in Manhattan called the Fred Gray Association, openly explored male-male affection. The overriding message is dismissive, which has long since been a strategy of denial, but Whitman’s intermediacy may turn out to be the precise framework with which to present ‘adhesiveness’ without more politically charged and misleading labels. To the extent that this paper is a prescription for interpretation at the Walt Whitman House, this indeterminacy presents an opportunity for multiple discussions of gender and sexuality.

Whitman had a problematic relationship toward women, not because he may have been homosexual, but because he was so strongly and almost exclusively

---

151 Coviello, 74.
154 “Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, ‘Walt Whitman’ - The Walt Whitman Archive.” Pfaff’s was a favorite hangout of creative types.
homosocial. Donaldson says, “children always attracted him, women seldom. I do not think that he personally cared much for them as a rule. He was respectful and considerate toward them, but not fulsome in adoration.” In his poetry he seems to want to express women on an equal footing but can’t bring himself to fully immerse himself in love for women as he does his male comrades. It is interesting to note that on his 72nd birthday there were five women and twenty-seven men.

On the other hand, literary scholars Emory Holloway and David Reynolds were convinced Whitman was bisexual, while Whitman scholars Gary Schmidgall and Charley Shively have separately written bold and unequivocal book-length arguments for Whitman’s homo-sexuality. A third unequivocal book-length testament of Whitman’s homosexuality comes from one Dr. Walter Courtenay Rivers, published in 1913 exclusively for legal and medical professionals. While Rivers’ account and reasoning are alternately laughable and horrifying by today’s standards (he was a proponent of eugenics) it is worth noting the doctor’s opinion in the context of gay history, claiming that Whitman’s homosexuality was “obvious.”

Rivers explains, “Almost immediately the strong similarity in sentiment to that of confessions of homosexual subjects recorded in textbooks on the human sex instinct became astonishingly evident.” Further on Rivers paraphrases Bliss Perry saying, “The real psychology of Walt Whitman would be enormously interesting. I think a keynote to

---

155 Donaldson, 39.
156 Donaldson, 88.
157 Schmidgall, 85.
158 Rivers, 1.
it would be found a staggering ignorance, or perhaps willful non-perception, of the real physical conditions of his nature. But the truth about him (the innermost truth) escapes from almost every page for those who can read.”\textsuperscript{159}

The fact is so obvious to him that River’s entire second chapter merely reprints a selection of the Calumus poems. The evidence is clear enough to barely expound a thesis. “It will be allowed that the [reprinted Calumus poems] make out a case for investigation. Walt Whitman’s personal character is almost completely in accordance with the tone of the extracts just cited, and typical of the male invert”\textsuperscript{160} River’s suspicion of rows of ‘X’s appearing on Whitman’s letters to Peter Doyle (representing tender kisses after a supposed argument) suggest that perhaps Whitman’s emotional character exceeded even the typical ‘romantic friendships’ and close male-male contact apparently common in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{161}

Arguments in favor of Whitman’s inversion are open to counterargument of course, as they always will be. Whitman himself deflect the rumors and criticisms only when forced into a corner. More importantly, again, is the model of life Whitman demonstrated on the urban landscape. Whether we call him and his activities homosexual or homosocial matters less than showing his redemptive view of adhesiveness. Moreover, labeling someone as possibly homosexual should no longer seem defamatory or controversial. This in fact is the underlying homophobic premise in

\textsuperscript{159} Rivers, 3.
\textsuperscript{160} Rivers, 19–20.
\textsuperscript{161} See Lyons, “Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture.”
all counterarguments and historical editing. Polite scholars have explored Whitman as a poet and a thinker, but writers like Schmidgall and Shively contend that sexuality was not just an element of his writing but instead was “the paramount influence upon his oeuvre.”162 This is a perspective that deserves attention.

Schmidgall makes the case that one need only look at the Manhattan environment in which Whitman was living his youth to understand his poems. There is evidence that tolerance of the activities at the city’s many brothels probably extended to homosexual activity. The very places that Whitman sang so passionately about, Broadway and the Bowery, had carnal establishments numbering in the hundreds. Whitman plays out the typical discovery of this environment in his temperance novel, *Franklin Evans*.163

When he was a young man, Whitman would take the ferry to Manhattan to take in a show at the opera house on 14th street. Schmidgall identifies his regular attendance in the balcony as a formative period both in his construction of “manly” American spirit and his flair for the dramatic. Performance, both on stage and in the audience, would mark his life. The sheer number of Whitman portraits that exist (in the hundreds) attest to this. (His moniker, “the good gray poet”164 also signifies his image as part of his character.) Here Whitman is with his people, the rabble, the “roughs”, from the working-class balcony of the opera house, to *Mardi Gras* and voodoo, through to the

162 Schmidgall, xxix.
163 Schmidgall, 100.
working-class streets of Camden. “The first question must not be whether but when and how did Whitman begin loving men so intensely? That is, when did he come out – at least to himself – and realize he was different. [Shively’s] own belief is that he did it early and often; his life was one long continuous string of bar, street, streetcar, back road, and casual encounters with young men.”165 This journey began in the balcony of the opera house and followed him west and south to New Orleans in 1846.

Whitman combined sexual awakening physically these movements in the 1840’s, in what Shively calls his own “manifest destiny.” The ebb and flow of the nation’s waterways always attracted Whitman. Recalling other modern works of literature, this river-journey into wilderness was Whitman’s inward turn, his chance to investigate the interior of both the country, and perhaps his own “enigma to unravel.”166

In talking about prairie grass, Schmidgall is convinced of its sexual implications.

“Demand the most copious and close companionship of men, demand the blades to rise of words, acts, beings...Those with a never quell’d audacity – those with sweet and lusty flesh, clear of taint, choice and chary of its love-power...” This line, open enough in meaning, according to Schmidgall, hints at male-male sexual encounters. “Those of earth-born passions, simple, never constrained, never obedient, those of inland America.”

These lines appeared in the 1856 edition of Leaves of Grass but were edited out of later editions. Lines about sexual confusion (“I too felt the curious abrupt questions stir within me... I too received identity by my body”) were removed after 1871.167 It is fair to

165 Shively, 10.
166 Conrad’s Heart of Darkness comes to mind, which uses the metaphor of wilderness and river travel to represent a decent into the mind.
167 Schmidgall, 106.
ask why these lines would go. This practice of softening the sexual connotations in the poetry is strong evidence for a carefully veiled secret, according to some.

Schmidgall and Shively both indicate that Whitman began to speak in code about homosexual contact and liberation. Calumus #1’s 1860 evocation of the concealed but substantial life could be the lyrics of a gay anthem:

Long I was held by the life that exhibits itself,
By what is done in the houses or streets, or in company,
The usual adjustments and pleasures – the things which all
Conform to and which the writers celebrate;
But now I know a life which doesn’t exhibit itself, yet contains all the rest
And now escaping, I celebrate that concealed but substantial life,
I celebrate the need of the love of comrades

The phrase “concealed but substantial life” was eliminated in later editions. Both also suggest that the horse imagery in Whitman’s poetry (“A gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh and responsive to my caresses…”) symbolizes sexual energies and Whitman’s intense emotions.

Schmidgall outlines several examples of Whitman’s self-editing. Included in his editing are references to loins and sexual copulation. Perhaps the most telling example of Whitman’s self-censorship is in a ‘Song for Occupations’:

Come closer to me,
Push closer, my lovers, and take the best I possess,
Yield closer and closer and give me the best you possess.

This very physical and emotional opening (of a poem about occupations!) does not appear in the 1881 version. Also disappearing from the earlier editions: “Thruster
holding me tight, and that I hold tight! We hurt each other as the bridegroom and the bride hurt each other.”\textsuperscript{168}

Whitman anticipated the arguments to come about the poetry in passages such as this in Calumus #16:

Who is now reading this?

May-be one is now reading this who knows some wrongdoing of my past life
Or may-be a stranger is reading this who has secretly loved me
Or may-be one who meets all my grand assumptions and egotisms with derision
Or may-be one who is puzzled at me.

A recurring image for Whitman is of men “inarmed” hanging on each other’s neck. The self-censorship of later editions implicates the erotic and taboo nature of the physical contact. The poet will “hang on its neck with incomparable love and plunge his semitic [later corrected to seminal] muscle into its merits and demerits.” While unclear where the metaphorical muscle is plunging, Schmidgall suggests “merits” indicates male-male genital contact.\textsuperscript{169} In Calumus #4 and #5, which Whitman broke apart in later editions of \textit{Leaves of Grass} are both empowerment poems. “Those who love each other shall be invincible.” And again, invokes arms around the neck as a sign of liberation. Schmidgall calls this a “plank in his urban political platform.” For Schmidgall, Whitman is casting a vision for future neighborhoods where two men or two women can walk hand in hand on the sidewalk.

\textsuperscript{168} Schmidgall, 148.
\textsuperscript{169} Schmidgall, 71-73.
In Calamus #29, Whitman indicates love expressed through silence.

One flitting glimpse, caught through an interstice,
Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room, around the stove,
   Late of a winter night – And I unremarked, seated in a corner;
Of a youth who loves me, and whom I love, silently approaching,
   And seating himself near, that he may hold me by the hand;
A long while, amid the noise of coming and going –
   Of drinking and oath and smutty jest,
There we two, content, happy in being together, speaking little, perhaps not a word.

Perhaps this is “romantic friendship” and nothing more, but the tenderness and feeling expressed is thoroughly recognizable. This notion is reinforced in his 1870 letter to a young war veteran later in life:

“Dear loving comrade... Sometimes after an interval the thought of one I much love comes upon me strong and full all of a sudden...I have been and now am thinking of you, dear young man, and of your love, or more rightly speaking, of our love of each other, so curious, so sweet, I say so religious, - We met there in the hospital – how little we have been together- seems to me we ought to be some together every day of our lives – I don’t care about talking or amusement – but just to be together, and work together, or go off in the open air together...”

Perhaps the most damning of textual evidence was discovered by literary scholar Emory Holloway in the poem, ‘Once I Passed Through a Populous City,’ where Whitman changed the male character in manuscript form to a female in published form.

ONCE I PASSED THROUGH A POPULOUS CITY

Once I passed through a populous city imprinting my brain for future use with its shows, architecture, customs traditions,
Yet now of all that city I remember only a woman I casually met there who detained me for the love of me,
Day by day and night by night we were together – all else
has been forgotten by me,
I remember I say only that woman who passionately
clung to me,
Again we wander, we love, we separate again,
Again she holds me by the hand, I must not go,
I see her close beside me with silent lips sad and tremulous.

These changes make more sense when understood in the context of
contemporary critics. Whitman knew he was going too far when the critical voices
became harsher and more direct. Both Schmidgall and Shively outline how the “civilian
critics” (Shively uses the term “cleanser critics”) have spent the decades following
Whitman’s death reforming the interpretation of his poetry and suppressing this
evidence. Schmidgall testifies to another homophobic denial. Whitman could be rather
explicit about sleeping with men in his diaries and journals (though not explicit about
sex). Some attribute his lists of men to his collector’s mentality and to the “homosocial”
sleeping arrangements of the nineteenth century, rather than to some bed-post
notching that Whitman might be up to.

Early critics on the other hand, both friends and foes, had no problem
interpreting his homoeroticism. Longfellow called him the most Greek (i.e. gay) of
modern writers. Dr. Rivers again said Whitman’s inversion was “obvious” just based on a
reading of Leaves of Grass. Whitman’s contemporary, Bronson Alcott, also noted that
among the decorations on Whitman’s bedroom wall in Camden were illustrations of
Hercules (heroic strength), Bacchus (pleasure, freedom), and a satyr (sex), iconography
which also appears in the poetry. In addition to revealing Whitman’s rather obvious obsession with the phallus, it hints at a one-sided sexual focus.  

Rufus Griswold, one of Whitman’s first reviewers referred to *Leaves of Grass* as a “mass of stupid filth” and “gathering of muck.” He was the first to notice the homoerotic implications of the poetry, Schmidgall says, “but out of respect for ears polite he refused to be more explicit than at the end of his review using the legal Latin boilerplate for sodomy: *Peccatum illud horrible, inter Christianos non nominandum.*” The poems were duly banned at Harvard, and later from all of Massachusetts (under Anthony Comstock’s law against delivering indecent literature through the U.S. mail). “For many of Whitman’s own time, there was no question of Whitman’s sexuality. He was ‘degenerate’, ‘inverted’, ‘Monstrous’.”

These accusations must have cut deep, especially if you recall Jonathan Katz description of how these terms work on the homosexual’s psyche. In the Calamus sequence, Whitman evokes two vaults in Pfaff’s (Whitman’s favorite hangout in his Manhattan days). One is full of light and full of boisterous carousing, and the other is dark. The metaphor of life in the light and a life in the dark is clear: “These yearnings why are they? These thoughts in the darkness why are they? I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish with themselves... (sullen and suffering ours!). I am ashamed – but it is useless – I am what I am.” These lines may not specifically point to

---

170 Schmidgall.
171 Schmidgall.
172 Schmidgall, 9.
alternative sexualities (we cannot know this), but whether intentional or not, they are strongly aligned with Katz’s description. If so, then why shouldn’t the *Leaves of Grass* be a meaningful part of an LGBTQ canon of literature? Why shouldn’t the home of the man who so acutely and poignantly voiced the inner struggle of queers in the age of Christian morality be celebrated as a site of liberation? It is.

Whitman scholar David Reynolds identifies the popular literary context of Whitman’s time, which falls into two general categories. The first group consist of polite emotional novels aimed at a female readership that explicate and reinforce feminine moral codes. Women were expected to suppress sexual impulses and manage a household through strong character and managerial skills. These novels present a code of conduct for women and girls in a paternalistic society. He identifies the second group of popular novels as those that exploit taboo and sensation, and that superficially aim to expose the rotten core behind the very same polite society. This group includes popular writers like George Lippard.

Reynolds identifies a “third way” where we might place Whitman. Alarmed by both types of literature, Whitman aimed at a novel concept, that the whole body and its functions deserved dignity rather than shock or horror. The urban landscape is not a rotten debased core, over which a polite veneer is drawn. Furthermore, loving a person was rooted in physical awareness and celebration of the natural instincts of pleasure and affection.\(^{173}\) Whitman also appears to have enjoyed challenging the moralizers of

\(^{173}\) *Whitman, Sex and Gender*, 9–16.
both camps, giving humanity and legitimacy to the “rude” set. You can almost sense his pleasure in poems such as this:

NATIVE MOMENTS

Native moments - when you come upon me – ah you are here now,
Give me now libidinous joy only,
Give me the drench of my passions, give me life coarse and rank,
To-day I go consort with Nature’s darlings, to-night too,
I am for those who believe in loose delights, I share the midnight orgies of young men,
I dance with the dancers and drink with the drinkers,
The echoes ring with our indecent calls, I pick out some low person for my dearest friend,
He shall be lawless, rude, illiterate, he shall be one condemn’d by others for deeds done,
I will play a part no longer, why should I exile myself from my companions?
Oh you shunn’d persons, I at least do not shun you,
I come forthwith in your midst, I will be your poet,
I will be more to you than to any of the rest.

In addition to the Leaves of Grass, Whitman gives clues in his surviving notes and notebooks, where he recorded and interpreted the Platonic dialogue in which Socrates expresses the love of friends. Again, ‘Greek’ was a way of identifying a person with less constrained physical relations with friends. The evidence is incomplete, but the redactions are telling. Horace Traubel was often horrified to walk in on Whitman burning his old notes rather than turn them over to his biographer/friend. “Some believe on two occasions, in 1873 and 1888, Whitman destroyed letters he had received
from Peter Doyle, one of the most important of his loving ‘comrades,’ and the Traubel conversations make it clear he was not shy about burning potentially compromising material.”  

In the 1920’s Emory Holloway became the first to try and find evidence to support Whitman’s famous (and rather unbelievable) story outlined in correspondence to J.A. Symonds of a love affair in which he fathered six children in a matter of a few months. Holloway is also the one who discovered that the woman loved by the poet in ‘Once I Passed Through a Populous City’ was a man in at least one version of the manuscript. Holloway, who refused to believe Whitman was a homosexual passed off the discovery as Whitman’s professional responsibility. That is, an author must be able to write from the perspective of both male and female reader. If so, he didn’t put much effort into imaging a woman’s emotional life. He also first discovered (though wasn’t the person who cracked) the code by which Whitman used to signify Peter Doyle, the number 16, or 164. ‘P’ is the sixteenth letter of the alphabet and ‘D’ the fourth.

Regarding John Addington Symonds, it is difficult to place him exactly. According to both Katz and Schmidgall, he is at least a neutral figure and certainly and admirer of Whitman’s work. Shively takes a harsher view and places him in the context of Whitman’s alleged children. Symonds had revealed fathering three children of his own to Whitman, to which Whitman responded with double the number, which might

---

174 Schmidgall, xv.
explain the absurd number six.\textsuperscript{176} Shively is suggesting that Whitman was playing with Symonds, who wanted Whitman to come clean about his homosexuality. Furthermore, Shively darkly suggests Symonds may have been attempting to frame the old poet, being part of an earlier controversy that outed one of his old headmasters in England. It is not clear what his motive would be, but he threatened “violent attack on Whitman’s literary executors” if his own correspondence with the poet should be exposed.\textsuperscript{177}

Edwin Miller also suggests he found the code for another of Whitman’s intense friendships. In a letter to his friend and admirer Anne Gilchrist he says, “At least two hours forenoon, & two afternoon, down by the creek – Passed between sauntering – the hickory sapling & honor is the subject of my story.” Hickory sapling, and honor subject, underlined by Whitman himself, could mean Harry Stafford, with whom Whitman spent a great amount of time.\textsuperscript{178}

A word that keeps coming up to describe Whitman’s attitude is ‘furtive.’ “Where his poetry is most difficult, it is often because of the methods of furtiveness, calculated ambiguity, and closeted concealment with which Whitman cushioned, so to speak, many of his most strikingly bold assertions about sex and sexuality in \textit{Leaves of Grass}. Whatever helped to complicate the texture, double meaning and syntax.”\textsuperscript{179} Schmidgall describes it as Whitman metaphorically hitting with his sexual image and running away. Whitman referred to himself as a furtive hen that lays an egg then nonchalantly moves

\textsuperscript{176} Shively, 25.
\textsuperscript{177} Shively, 27.
\textsuperscript{178} Shively, 28.
\textsuperscript{179} Schmidgall, xvi.
along as if nothing happened. “There is something in my nature furtive like an old hen!
You see a hen wandering up and down a hedgerow, looking apparently quite
unconcerned, but presently she finds a concealed spot, and furtively lays an egg, and
comes away as though nothing has happened!” This is the poet himself toying with our interpretations. Is the hen’s egg the sexual taboo underlying his poetry, does it symbolize our own doubt, or is it something else? Whitman confesses “calm demeaner” (i.e. being measured and conservative about what you say) as the best way to keep secret things secret. This is how Whitman described his strategy in *Leaves of Grass* and Schmidgall believes we would be naïve to dismiss this as a clue to his sly approach to sexuality.

Thomas Donaldson suggests that this weighed on his mind, and for good reason. His livelihood depended on it. Having been shut out of employment twice in Washington already, Whitman needed his poetry to sell. “I met him on Ninth Street in Philadelphia on July 24, 1882, a very hot day. He said that the recent efforts to keep his books from the mails [via Comstock] had given him some trouble. In February of 1882, some Boston Brahmans had complained to the Attorney general of the State, that Whitman’s book or works, as published by Field, Osgood & Co., were immoral.” The firm discontinued publication. Adding insult to injury, “Sometimes he received vile and abusive letters from religious or other fanatics, denouncing him and his work.”

---

180 Donaldson, 44.
181 Donaldson, 65.
Shively further contends that Whitman was concealing *something* in his poetry. In conversations with Horace Traubel, Whitman says, “What lies behind *Leaves of Grass* is something few, very few... are in a position to seize. It lies behind almost every line; but concealed, studiedly concealed; some passages left purposely obscure.” Again, this does not conclusively point to Whitman hiding homosexual subtext, but combined with his assertion that sex (“sex sex, the root of roots”) is the wellspring of Whitman’s poetry, the suggestion cannot be ignored. Still, Whitman can be quite overt.

CALAMUS #36

I now suspect there is something fierce in you, eligible to burst forth; For an athlete is enamored of me – and I of him, But toward him there is something fierce and terrible in me, eligible to burst forth, I dare not tell it in words – not even in these songs.

As highlighted by Schmidgall, “[The phallus] does burst forth in a number of colorful phrases in his poems: thumb of love, man-root, love-root, Calumus root, slow rude muscle, firm masculine coulter, sharp toothed touch, tooth-prong, manly maple tooth.” But even these phrases became diluted after the Civil War.

By the time of *Gods* (1871) Whitman was well on his way to withdrawing from the phallus and the sexual arena to the higher and purer regions of Platonic forms. He began to delete his genital impulses – even cut the line about the “genital impulse of These States”... There is no new talk about “love-flesh tremulous aching” or “mad sweet drops” of semen or the arched, thrusting torso with its “pendant” phallus or the “sensitive, orbic, overlapp’d brothers” that hang below it. The “perfect Comrade” becomes bodiless and “divine.” Whitman’s “dilation” is bloodless now.¹⁸²

¹⁸² Schmidgall, 79.
They do not contend that Whitman became asexual as he aged, but instead chose to live his homosocial life rather than write about it. Not only did the Mickle Street house become a gather place, Whitman encouraged others to do the same. Evidently some of the like-minded soldiers he met in Washington followed his lead and lived together after the war.183

Politicians, journalists, Whitman “friends”, and literary experts who we might label denialists set the bar for later obfuscation at the day of the Whitman House dedication in 1920. Even those who felt they couldn’t deny the possibilities latent in his poetry and demonstrated by his life tried. The Courier says, “As for the memory of our Good Gray Poet... [may] the evil merge itself and become lost and dead, while the good in him steadily hastens steadily hastens to immortality.” His last doctor stated,

“I knew Walt Whitman twenty years and he was my friend as well my patient. I admired his thought and wrestled with the forms in which some think he deliberately tried to conceal his thought. ...He was entirely natural, serene and well balanced at all times. I saw him in health and in sickness, on social occasions as well as on private visits. I frequently called on him in a casual way, when I was not expected, and I owe it to his memory to disarm, as far as I can, those whom, buzzard-like, are forever looking for the morbid qualities which they politely call ‘the eccentricities of genius.’ I never heard Walt Whitman utter an obscene word and I never knew him to be guilty of an obscene act.” 184

183 Shively, 23.
The good doctor goes on to denounce the accusations of Whitman’s supposed atheism. It is odd to focus on such issues in remembering a friend. One gets the impression that Dr. McAllister is more worried about the mark upon his city than in remembering his friend. It is rather plausible to believe that he feared the morbid qualities of the eccentric genius and that he was committing a political act from a place of authority over the homosexual diagnosis.

We know from earlier in this paper that the medical profession meted out corrective punishment on the homosexual in this period. Rather than confront the ambiguity, he negates the possibility of any kind of emancipatory interpretation. He further hijacks the ambiguity in Whitman’s poetry from those who have “yet begun to get at the beginning of Whitman” by claiming the “true” understanding of his poetry. Rather than entertaining the idea of sexuality, McAllister, like many to follow, aims to forever obscure an alternative reading by pushing it to some ever-distant future analysis, one that will ultimately reveal the true purity of Whitman’s poetry. In this sense one wonders what his true feelings were on the subject.

Returning to Peter Coviello’s point, ambiguity could restore the currency of sexual interpretation, if not the way some expect. “Confounding the roles of stranger, comrade, lover, and reader in ‘Calamus’, Whitman labors to dislodge sex from its narrow enclosure in dyadic heterosexuality and the reproductive family... Whitman seeks to release sex into every register of sociability.” By extension, Whitman’s

---

185 Coviello, 74–75.
“children” referred to in the letter to Symonds are not biological but, “evidence of a species of queer generation” a lineage that challenges the exclusivity of biological reproduction.186

Coviello writes at length about Whitman’s disparity with our Foucauldian/Freudian zeitgeist, choosing instead to focus on his adoption of ‘both/and’ relationships in his role as surrogate caregiver in army hospitals (e.g. mother and father, friend and brother). “By refusing to draw a perimeter around sex, to make it the province of one exclusive set of attachments, Whitman contests, unobtrusively but powerfully, the turning of sex into a mode of relation, among others. What emerges instead is an insistence on sex as the foundational drive that undergirds all relationality, in all its expressions.”187

The author contends there is no need to distinguish high or low, pure or impure, straight or queer, in the text. Sexuality, outside of state surveillance and policing of acts of sodomy, had yet to be sorted, labelled, and contested in Whitman’s time. “[He] occupies a peculiar, illuminating place in the American history of sexuality – a dynamic moment extending from before the coding and coordination of modern sexuality (e.g. ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘homosexuality’) took hold to the scene of their near emergence at the end of his life.”188 If it is not yet clear, this is precisely why an inclusive interpretation of sexuality is valid, maybe even imperative, at the Mickle Street House.

186 Coviello, 84.
187 Coviello, 78.
188 Coviello, 75.
However, Coviello advances a strange contrarian argument. “[Whitman] is neither ‘representative,’ a cipher-like embodiment of his moment, not a kind of prophet of sex, a writer who with visionary foresight traces the outlines of what will, in later years, come to be visible as an early iteration of queer identity.”\textsuperscript{189} However, the basis for this argument is unfounded, and feels like intentional muddying. History is littered with important figures that had no clear conceptions within themselves of a singular “vision”. Furthermore “queer identity” is not monolithic, fitting into rigid definitions of ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ (which is the point of the word ‘queer’). So, what is the basis for this conclusion? Coviello’s summation of Whitman’s view of desire is clearly valid and can be supported by the text, but in statements like the above he begins to appear like the denialists, perpetuating heteronormativity, while only superficially appearing to challenge it.

The above series of arguments are valid and actually support this project of inclusive heritage, particularly the assertion that a life-affirming progenitor relationship need not rely on biological regeneration. However, Coviello’s reliance on critical theory, his insistence on radical ambiguity and perpetual incompleteness of Whitman’s ideas of sex, does little to \textit{actually} resist the repressive system we still live with. Sexual non-conformists did not necessarily choose to be non-conformist. The clarity and directness of historical terms like lesbian, sodomite, homosexual, invert offer a counterpoint to

\textsuperscript{189} Coviello, 75.
heteronormativity and something more concrete than academic ambiguity as a defense of social justice.

What outrages people like Schmidgall and Shively particularly is how this retreat from clarity was carried forward right through the twentieth century and how inadequate it remains. The phallic interpretation of Whitman’s poetry became twisted by the very type of academic critic that Whitman despised. Whitman’s playful furtiveness became an indictment of his audience, not the poet himself. The elite keepers of literary legacy turned the accusation outward. To critics like W.H. Trimble, “intimating the physical metaphors, the sexual aspects of *Leaves of Grass* reveal the moral baseness of the individual reader, not that of Whitman the author. Going against Whitman’s own disdain of academic moralizers, Trimble in 1905 asserts that only higher intellects understand the ‘true’ purer meaning in the poems.”

Schmidgall refers to this as the “extraordinary reader syndrome”, where the pure one is above descriptions of rank sexual organs. The syndrome, which is really Protestant in nature, afflicted well-known literary figures such as Thoreau who believed only the purest readers could consume Whitman without harm.

Shively explicitly describes what appears to be direct evidence of Whitman’s homosexual love-making with Edward Carpenter. As always with the topic of Whitman’s sexuality, this passage has stirred some controversy. The deniers assert that

---

190 Schmidgall, 82.
191 Schmidgall, 83.
192 The letter describes Whitman performing oral sex on Edward Carpenter.
the story has been recounted so many times and is so distant in time (it was recorded second hand after the fact in a memoir) that it cannot be trusted. Martin Murray argues, however, based on his own research, that Carpenter explained the sexual nature of his relationship with Whitman in writing, and thus carries greater validity. Carpenter has this to say, “There is no doubt in my mind that Walt Whitman was before all a lover of the Male. His thoughts turned towards men first and foremost, and it is no good disguising that fact.” The very suggestion of ‘disguise’ implicates this statement in the relationship of sexual non-conformists to the mainstream. It is the essence of meaning of ‘the closet’ so familiar to homosexuals. It is clear and simple, from a first-hand contemporaneous source. It seems one need not look much further.

What it comes down to for Schmidgall and Shively, is a reclaiming of their own history. These homosexual academics feel they have been pushed into a corner waiting for heterosexual society to broaden its understanding of sexuality the way Coviello would like. At the end of a litany of circumstantial evidence, Schmidgall reveals the underlying point: that he, simply as a homosexual, qualifies him to legitimately interpret the meaning of Whitman’s sexuality. Furthermore, that many other gay men (who come from rural or suburban places, spend their youth in exciting and loose cities, and gain wisdom through being in the thick of it) are just as qualified as any literary or social critic produced since Whitman’s time.
In passages on Reynolds’s dismissal of Whitman’s homosexuality as merely ‘intense emotional friendships’, Schmidgall’s outrage fairly leaps off the page.\(^{193}\) I share his disdain for the argument that these relationships were never consummated fully but were merely socially acceptable hugging and kissing. I share his objection that the full picture of private sex lives is totally unknowable and does not foreclose sexual contact. Furthermore, those of us who believe in a “pre-historic” homosexuality, meaning precisely the feeling of intense love between members of the same sex, find this kind of denial transparently homophobic. IN any event, Schmidgall rejects the notion (as do I) that Whitman’s sexuality “has been done to death.”\(^{194}\) It appears that sexuality of any kind is as much a central theme of Whitman’s poetry as democracy, American geography, friendship, war or anything else. The implications of it deserve more attention, not less. Schmidgall asserts we have heard enough from “civilian” critics like Brooks, Bloom, and Reynolds, but not enough from readers, Whitman’s real target audience.\(^{195}\)

\(^{193}\) Schmidgall, 91.


\(^{195}\) There are problems with Schmidgall and Shively’s analyses. At moments Schmidgall lapses into colloquialisms, homosexual clichés and stereotypes. Like a true New York transplant, he transparently interprets as if New York were the only gay male geography worth discussing. Yes, Whitman came of age in New York, but once he left, he never really went back. We do a disservice to both the men Whitman admired and to current queer people to hold New York up as the center of the universe, even the gay-male universe. That is elitist, and simply not true.
Among academics, the need to label one specifically as “homosexual” is wavering in the cultural project of inclusion. Science is showing just how fluid sexuality really is and how near the differences are to one another. In the same way that the term ‘African American’ reinforces otherness and separateness, so does the word ‘homosexual.’ They represent a liberal frustration with labels, perhaps with some merit. Though both designations are meaningful and important to those marginalized by the mainstream, the labels also impede reconciliation to a certain extent. This is one reason to use the term ‘homosocial’ instead of homosexual. You can argue that he wasn’t homosexual, but it is hard to deny that he much preferred the company of men to women.

In the end, both Shively and Schmidgall impose too much of their own times, their own community’s colloquialisms and their own urban experience (much too narrow, and even now outdated) to mark their conclusions as a definitive homosexual response. That would be committing the same sin as the denialists. But behind the drawbacks there is painstaking research and their analyses reveal an important truth. No matter how you attack it, the homosexual question in Whitman’s poetry will not go away. The evidence, though mostly circumstantial, cannot be swept aside. What is more important is that Whitman presented adhesiveness (manly love) as a redeeming quality, one not only worthy of respect within society, but to be celebrated as a saving grace. Both Symonds and Whitman turned the traditional view on its head. Traditional family structures for them were the baseline, merely functional, but ‘adhesiveness’ celebrated
love for its own sake and was therefore a higher way of acting (or at least not a lesser one). This is the potential message of Whitman’s legacy. It’s socially healthier, more honest, and still relevant.

**VI. Whit[e]man in Camden and the Walt Whitman Association**

“Long after the centuries have crumpled our great factories, shipyards, and public buildings, the fact that here were the last home and grave of Walt Whitman will endure.” - Boyer Scrapbook

“Whitman prefigured much of the crisis of modern world systems where polities are trying to negotiate the relationship between individualism and collectivism.” – Ivy Wilson

“Such a museum will attract much visitors to this city.” – Camden *Daily Courier June 1, 1920 on the occasion of the Whitman House dedication.*

On October 13, 2017, the State of New Jersey released a Request for Proposal (RFP) for an estimated $4,000,000 project to restore and rehabilitate the properties adjacent to the Whitman house (also owned by the state), to expand the capabilities of the site, upgrade visitor services (including barrier free accessibility), and develop new interpretive strategies as a continuous and enlarged museum space. All these properties constitute the ‘Walt Whitman Neighborhood’ which is listed as such on the National Register of Historic Places. The RFP outlines “interpretive emphasis” in a section about content. It is perhaps not surprising that it focuses on democracy, America, and the

---

196 Boyer Scrapbook, Camden County Historical Society
American people while remaining vague about the issues explored in this paper. The RFP twice lists “Whitman’s guests and friends” in thematic groupings, leaving one to wonder if his sexuality will be discussed at all.

Also absent is any specific reference to the enormous economic and demographic changes experienced in Camden in the decades following the house’s dedication as a monument and museum in 1920. Whitman’s attitudes and ideas about race are just as controversial and inconclusive as his attitudes about sex. Given his experience in New Orleans and later the Civil War, this absence in the RFP is curious. However, it does use very general terminology and it remains to be seen whether it will be absent in practice and implementation. From the start, it seems, the state is reaffirming the underlying message that these issues are taboo and contentious, and that they are better left to unofficial (less legitimate?) voices.

However, the proposed changes to the Whitman site have the potential to open a space for fresh voices that expand Walt Whitman’s poetic litanies and make him more relevant. Its mission, explained as “fostering an appreciation for his life work, Leaves of Grass, and on interpreting his legacy through the preservation of his home in Camden, New Jersey” could transcend idolization of the poet or heroic notions of democracy to present his home as the site of (at least) three unfinished projects: the annihilation of

---

baseless taboo, the equal treatment of everyone under the law, and the sanctity of all
voices, however few or misunderstood they may be.

Whitman is a frustrating character for twenty-first century progressive attitudes.
In the collection *Whitman Noir*, myriad writers interrogate Whitman’s changing attitude
on race over time, not always for the better, from the perspective of our time. However,
the point of keeping heritage alive and present on the landscape, as we now
understand, is not primarily to make us feel good about ourselves, but also to remind
ourselves of the failings of cultural icons. The connection between homosexual and
African American experience and their relevance to Whitman’s writing lies in the
complicating nature of mixing that modern life brings. Whitman’s democratic vistas are
not only sweeping, they are particular and full of detail. Some particularities, the
mysterious attraction of members of the same sex, the violent collision of old cultures in
a “new” land, upset the traditional order of Western political philosophy.

Though generally punctilious, Whitman is ambiguous on most of the topics on
which we would like him to be specific. We will never fully know his view on race,
sexuality, women, or capitalism. His constant revision of his own poetry tantalizes with
potential expressions latent in the verse, but that never fully bloom. His retreat from
issues of race and sexuality in the post-Civil War era could be read as his wavering
courage as a writer. But the record of his manuscripts over the course of the nineteenth
century also show a desire to blur obvious distinctions, to go where others dared not,
and to complicate the most divisive issues the nation has faced. We however, need not
be so ambiguous and perhaps Whitman’s greatest gift, if we are being generous, is that he prefigured the agonies of the next century, as much as the agonies of his own. This is not to give Whitman a pass, but to humanize him.

The place of the Whitman House in the context of Camden gives the community a chance to revise *Leaves of Grass* into something radical and empowering. Few places within the Delaware Valley embody the desire for redemption and the heartbreaking failure of those efforts than Camden. The Whitman House and its proposed visitor center have the potential of broadening the geography of democratic discourse, to pull its center of gravity a little to the east of Independence Mall, to include one of the most dismissed and abandoned corners of the region. It is legitimate to ask what the role of editing will play in presenting his life and poetry. It may be imprecise to say with certainty that Whitman is an “emancipation poet” for queer people or that he forced white Americans to think about African Americans. But we know enough that we can take his legacy in those directions.

The ambiguity surrounding Whitman’s sexuality can be understood as an asset rather than a liability because it expands rather than limits the meaning of place. It forces us to open our interpretation rather than close it off, while still maintaining its significance as a site of inspiration for sexual liberation movements. An element of confrontation is useful here. It may be difficult but perhaps fruitful to encourage white gay men out of the complacency of the gayborhood into a less comfortable neighborhood. It could be useful and productive for differing social, racial, and ethnic
groups to engage with each other. It is also powerfully symbolic that a site of emancipation and awakening stands directly opposite from a jail. This is not easy territory to enter. The relationship of different forms of oppression has the potential to arouse bitterness, especially along racial lines. Furthermore, sexuality played a critical role in reinforcing racial subjugation, which complicates the relationship. Neither clear boundaries between them, nor any real equivalency in experience can be drawn yet they are entangled. According to research by Alliyah Abdur-Rahman, the conflation of the issues pitted sexual minorities against racial minorities well into the modern period. However, conflict could be useful, if it leads to real awareness and positive action. Regardless of what Whitman intended, it has this higher potential.

A discussion of Whitman’s attitude about race is outside the scope of this paper, but in fact it can be argued the two issues in Whitman’s life are not unrelated. There exists “a spectral presence of Whitman in African American literary production, a presence that has assumed different configurations and materiality throughout the twentieth century to the present moment.” Matt Sandler in his essay “Kindred Darkness” has argued the precise location of their confluence is in Whitman’s infamous stint in New Orleans. He first of all notes that Peter Doyle was in fact a southerner and may have complicated the issue for Whitman; and he entertains the possibility that Whitman’s man/woman in “Once I Passed through a Populous City” was of African

---

descent, citing “moments [in *Leaves of Grass*] in which Whitman appears to revel in the visual pleasures of black male bodies.”

Ivy Wilson’s introduction to *Whitman Noir* points out that Whitman’s litanies, or “inventories” of the American scene within his poetry is not only a strategy to invoke an equalizing cadence, and break traditional metrics, but also represents an attempt to show both the sweep and inherent contradictions in American society. It is in this sense that Whitman continues to loom large. Rather than view him with rose colored glasses, or for that matter, view his house as a random isolated monument in an unfortunate city, he’s one of many important focal points for the continuing tension between inclusion and identity.

Ed Folsom discusses Whitman’s association with race in a way similar to the way he is mis/understood around sexuality. Through what Folsom calls “ghost” speakers, Whitman is frustratingly equivocal and vague on both fronts. Those that want to see him as racist can find plenty of evidence, as do those who see in his poetry the desire to “cross” racial lines or mix subjectivity. Folsom convincingly suggests that in some cases Whitman writes in the poems “The Sleepers” and “Reconciliation” from the perspective of a black man, thus betraying a desire for empathy. In the case of both race and sexuality, it seems, Whitman is cracking open the door for the social liberation

---

199 Wilson, 57.
movements to come. Whitman’s shortfall as a visionary, however, is his seeming acceptance of national back peddling after the end of Reconstruction.201

VII. Conclusion

“...desire emerges not as the mode of relation solely proper to the marital bed but as the ground note to all human attachment.”202 – Peter Coviello on ‘Calamus’

“All right; but what kind of poetry can be expected from such surroundings? Advise your friend to move, and at once! His poetry is diseased from residing where he does; and he will probably die of blood poisoning if he continues to live there.” – a visiting acquaintance of Thomas Donaldson203

This was not meant to be a paper exclusively about Whitman or his house. Rather it is trying to connect a specific heritage to a place and its physical fabric. Intended to be a case study in revealing the suppressed and dispossessed elements of our national story (with the hope of re-integrating those elements), it is also about dislodging patterns of thinking about historic places that support the oppressive systems which move other citizens to vote in alignment with discrimination.

201 Folsom concludes, “Erasing race from his work during the final twenty-five years of his life was one of Whitman’s occupations, as he became increasingly silent about one of the defining issues of American history. He left behind however, enough traces that we can still glimpse his brave new vision, his attempt to imagine a democratic subjectivity open enough to speak black experience in often subtle and moving ways, a vision that began with his first notes towards Leaves of Grass but lasted, sadly, only until soon after the Civil War ended, when the real work of building a multiracial society was just getting underway.”

202 Coviello, 74.

203 Donaldson, 69.
The Whitman House has an opportunity to engage visitors, not with the exact nature of his sexuality, but with their relationship to ideas of love, society and citizenship; and to challenge the heteronormative ideal. That Whitman was primarily concerned with love (of one’s self, and of another) is the one thing upon which everyone agrees. This is what activates the domestic space of the Walt Whitman House, rather than the morbid fact of the deathbed, or his empty writing chair. The space comes alive when one thinks about the conversations had within the walls of this little house. Here, as in everywhere else he lived, Whitman laid out a new vision for society that necessarily broke with the Victorian past and foreshadowed the complexity of the next century.

If Whitman was on a gay spectrum, you might say that he followed a familiar pattern of friendship and love into old age. It has been suggested that gay men have a more difficult time adjusting to aging than either gay women or their straight counterparts. The familiar markers of a heterosexual life, such as the stages of a child’s growth (birth, schooling, first job, marriage, etc.) are simply not there for many, if not most homosexuals (especially before Stonewall). This is not to suggest maladjustment was certain, but it can be more difficult for gay men to let go of youth, perhaps explaining the youth of Whitman’s companions. Many homosexuals still find themselves desiring the company of young men, as they fail to see themselves passing

---

life’s typical signposts. This may have been the case with Whitman. As Keller reports, “...there was no fundamental infirmity of mind, no childishness of senility; he was essentially young in his habits, thought and manner, and remained so until his death.”

Donaldson caught on to this idea of Whitman’s connection to youth in general in an effort to reclaim Whitman’s ‘morality’. “It always has seemed to me, through life, that children are gifted with an almost supernatural intelligence in discovering who are there friends; and I have made up my mind that a man who loves children, and they him, cannot be a totally bad man. Children constantly, [when] in season, brought him flowers. When he died there were many sad-eyed children in Camden and other cities.”

Children exhibited an unblemished vision prior to being socialized through school, church, and employment. Whitman tried to reclaim that vision:

“His imagination could and did, convert the narrow walls of the Mickle Street house, in Camden, into boundaries of nations, seas, oceans, mountain chains, landscapes, vistas of Eden, forests, cities, palaces, hovels, homes of the rich, and art galleries, so that Mr. Whitman was thus of the great world, while out of it. When he pictured from memory or imagination, he had the peculiar faculty of giving to whatever he depicted a form and local coloring – positive realism, a gift possessed by few, and marking its owner a child of the universe, in touch with nature, and a visible exponent of its beauties...an empire within one’s self.”

George Hutchinson’s afterword to Whitman Noir repeats the same conceptual meaning of Whitman’s little urban cottage. Whitman’s grave, which is actually a family mausoleum, has the effect of an unadorned primitive temple, perhaps a ruin. Made of

---

205 Donaldson, 38.
206 Donaldson, 33–34.
rough-hewn stone it is half-embedded into the slope of a berm. As Hutchinson suggests, the true impact of the tomb is not experienced by looking at it, but by looking out from it, much like his spot in front of the parlor window. He notes that the grave is sited in a gully, a spot that receives little maintenance attention because of frequent flooding, which lends a little sense of wildness to the place (Figure 26). If one looks attentively, one can see the old poet at work. Hutchinson notices that the grass is unmowed, tall enough to be seeding. He notes a squirrel scurrying, a couple of mallards mating, and some graffiti. Whitman’s critique of Victorian Camden and Philadelphia extends to the cities of the dead. He seems to be saying, fine, visit me at my grave, read my poems, look at my humble house, but don’t forget to look around you. There’s more than you may realize.
Bibliography


Appendix I: Figures.

Figure 1. Mary O. Davis in front entrance to the Mickle Street House. Source: Henry Bryan Binns, A Life of Walt Whitman. (London: Methuen, 1905).

Figure 2. 1885 Map of Mickle Street between 3rd and 4th Street. Source: Comden County Historical Society.
Figure 3. Restored Walt Whitman House. Source: Creative Commons

Figure 4. Mickle Street, Camden circa 1890's. Source: Camden County Historical Society.
Figure 5. Aerial Photograph by W. B. Cooper 17 years after Whitman’s death. Source: www.dvrbs.com website.

Figure 6. Aerial Photograph by W. B. Cooper 17 years after Whitman’s death. Source: www.dvrbs.com website.

Figure 8. 1906 Sanborn Insurance Map of Whitman’s neighborhood to the south. Note the greater uniformity of design and materiality of Stevens and Benson Streets compared to Mickle Street, as worker housing changed. Source: Princeton University Libraries.
Figure 9. High density industrial Camden, c. 1950. Source: www.drivb.com.

Figure 10. Current aerial of Camden showing decreased density, broad swaths of parking, and recreational waterfront development. Whitman house near center of the image. Source: Google Maps.
Figure 11. Walt Whitman’s carte de visite. Portrait by Frank Harned. Source: Ohio Wesleyan University, Bayley Collection.
Figure 12. First and second floor plan of the Walt Whitman House. Redrawn from Historic American Building Survey.
Figure 13. Front Elevation of the Walt Whitman House. Redrawn from Historic American Building Survey.
Figure 14. Walt Whitman’s curb stone. Also called an "upping stone" or mounting block. Source: www.waymark.com.

Figure 15. Whitman House before restoration. Source: Library of Congress
Figure 16. Kitchen shed below Davis’ bedroom. Source: Library of Congress.

Figure 17. Rear Parlor, Whitman House. Source: Binns, A Life of Walt Whitman.
Figure 18. Front Parlor, Whitman House. Source: Binns, A Life of Walt Whitman.

Figure 19. Illustration of Walt Whitman’s second floor room. Source: Welcome Images. CC BY.
Figure 20. Photograph by Dr. William Reeder of Philadelphia in 1891. Source: Walt Whitman Archive.
Figure 21. Whitman and companion Harry Stafford. Source: Augustus Morand, Edward Carpenter Collection.
Figure 22. Walt Whitman and Peter Doyle in 1869. Source: M. P. Rice, Ohio Wesleyan University, Bayley Collection.
Figure 23. Mary Oaks Davis in the rear yard. Source: Keller, Walt Whitman in Mickle Street.

Figure 24. Walt Whitman and Bill Duckett in Whitman’s roadster, 1886. Source: Lorenzo F. Fisler, Ohio Wesleyan University, Bayley Collection.
Figure 25. Window seat in Adolf Loos’ Moller House. Source: Colomina.

Figure 26. Interior of Moller House. Source: Colomina
Figure 27. Lina Loos’ bedroom, Adolf Loos’ flat. Source: Colomina.

Figure 28. Walt Whitman and his wolf skin wrap. Source: Thomas Eakins, Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.
Figure 29. Philip Johnson’s Glass House. Source: eArchitect.

Figure 30. Philip Johnson’s brick Guest House opposite the Glass House. Source: eArchitect.
Figure 31. Le Corbusier’s Immeuble Clarte, view of the terrace. Source: Colomina.

Figure 32. Popular image of domestic gender roles. Source: Lynn Spiegel.
Figure 33. Living space of Eileen Gray’s house E.1027. Source: Bonnevier.

Figure 34. Eileen Gray’s house E.1027. Source: Bonnevier.
Figure 35. Sylvia Plath’s London townhouse. Source: Lillian Chee.
Figure 36. Detail of Sylvia Plath’s London townhouse. Source: Lillian Chee.

Figure 37. Walt Whitman grave. Source: author’s own image.
Figure 38. Detail of monument at the Whitman grave. Source: author’s own image.
Figure 39. Walt Whitman in his front parlor. Source: attributed to Thomas Eakins, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.
Figure 40. Walt Whitman Monument near the bridge that bears his name. Sources: Wikimedia Commons.
Figure 41. Walt Whitman monument. Source: Wikimedia Commons.
Index

Art (in the home), 64
Betsky, Aaron, 53
*Calamus*, 37, 83, 85, 91, 93, 106
Camden 7, 8-34, 38, 41, 101, 103
Canby, Henry Seidel, 76
Carpenter, Edward, 45, 96
*Children of Adam*, 37
Civil War (The), 11, 39, 75, 91, 101
Class, 9, 29, 41, 56, 58
closet, 68, 89, 97
code (speaking in), 81, 88, 89
Colomina, Beatriz, 69-73
Comstock (Anthony) Law, 47, 85
Coop 8, 11, 31
Davis, Mary Oaks, 28-34, 58, 63, 65
Donaldson, Thomas, 8, 14, 34, 77, 90, 106, 108,
Eileen Gray, 49, 59
Essentialism, 59
Farnsworth House, 50, 53-56, 63, 64
femininity 51, 71, 74
*Franklin Evans* 39, 79
furtive hen, 48, 56, 65, 89
gender, 4-8, 30, 41-43, 51-53, 57-58, 62, 75, 76
Glass House, 49, 55-57, 60-69, 74
Greek, 84, 87
Griswold, Rufus, 85
Guest House, 66-69
Harleigh Cemetery, 40, 109
Harris, Harwell (Havens House), 62
historic preservation, 1
homosexuality, 2, 36, 40-46, 77, 89, 98
inarmed, 82
invert, inversion, 73, 78, 84, 85, 95
Johnson, Phillip, 49, 50-68, 74
Keller, Elizabeth Leavitt, 30-34, 65, 108,
*Leaves of Grass*, 29, 39, 47, 65, 66, 71, 80-96, 101, 103, 105
Loos, Adolf, 49
Manhattan, 76, 79, 85
masculinity, 51
Massachusetts, 47, 85,
Mickle Street, 8, 13, 15, 18, 24-28, 33
Modern architecture, 50, 51, 64, 68
*Once I Passed Through a Populous City*, 83, 88, 104
Pfaff’s, 76, 85,
Philadelphia, 9, 11-14, 16, 17, 20, 21-25, 28, 33, 43, 44, 90, 109
Plath, Sylvia, 59,
queer, 40, 50, 52, 53, 59-62, 68, 69, 94, 95, 103
race, 104, 105
respectability, 8
Reynolds, David, 35, 77, 86, 98,
Rivers, Walter Courtenay, 76, 77, 84
Rohe, Mies van der, 53, 55, 56, 60, 64, 71
Schmidgall, Gary, 35, 75, 77, 79-84, 88-89, 90, 91, 96-98
self-editing, 81
Shively, Ed, 35, 77, 79-81, 84, 88, 89, 91, 96, 97, 99
sodomy, 43, 44, 85, 94
Stafford, Harry, 89
Symonds, John Addington, 35, 45, 88, 89, 94, 99
Traubel, Horace, 45, 87, 88, 91
vernacular (architecture), 15, 55
Washington, DC, 12, 39, 90, 92