University of Chicago Library

Guide to the Walt Whitman Collection 1884-1892

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Descriptive Summary

Identifier   ICU.SPCL.WHITMANW

Title   Whitman, Walt. Collection

Date   1884-1892

Size   0.25 linear feet (1 box)

Repository   Special Collections Research Center
                    University of Chicago Library
                    1100 East 57th Street
                    Chicago, Illinois 60637 U.S.A.

Abstract   Walt Whitman (1819-1892) American poet. The Whitman Collection
                    contains three autograph manuscript fragments and a photograph of Walt
                    Whitman

Information on Use

Access

The collection is open for research.

Citation

When quoting material from this collection, the preferred citation is: Whitman, Walt.
Collection, [Box #, Folder #], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago
Library.

Biographical Note

Walter Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, in West Hills, Long Island, to Walter and Louisa
Van Velsor Whitman. He was swiftly given the nickname 'Walt' to distinguish him from his
father. Whitman had eight siblings, three of whom his father had named after American leaders:
Andrew Jackson, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson. Whitman describes his childhood
as restless and unhappy, owing to his family's poor economic status. He finished schooling at the
age of eleven and became a office boy for a law firm. He later went on to apprentice at the Long
Island newspaper the Patriot.

In 1835, a 16-year-old Whitman moved to New York City briefly, but returned to Long
Island the next year to work as a school teacher. Unsatisfied with teaching, Whitman moved to
Huntington, New York, to found his own publication, The Long Islander, at which he served
as published, editor, pressman, and distributor. He later sold the publication, though no known
surviving copies of the Long Islander published by Whitman exist. In 1840, Whitman returned

to teaching for a short time. Additionally, in the 40s, Whitman contributed freelance fiction and poetry to a number of publication.

Around 1850, Whitman began to write what would become his most well-known work: Leaves of Grass. By 1855, Whitman published the work using his own money. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a contemporary American poet, praised the work, though it also received considerable criticism for its apparently 'obscene' sexuality. Days after the publication of his work, Whitman's father died on July 11, 1855. Leaves of Grass would be continuously rewritten and republished until Whitman's death in 1892. It continued to receive criticism, but also gained popularity within the artistic community, prompting visits to the poet by other well-known writers, such as Bronson Alcott and Henry David Thoreau.

During the American Civil War, Whitman supported the Union, publishing patriotic pieces such as "Beat! Beat! Drums!" After visiting the South in search of his brother (Whitman has worried that George had been seriously wounded or killed in battle), he was struck by the scenes of wounded soldiers. He obtained part-time work in the army paymaster's office in Washington, D.C. and worked as a volunteer nurse in army hospitals. In 1864, Whitman's brother George was captured by Confederate soldiers, Andrew Jackson (another of Whitman's brothers) died of tuberculosis, and Whitman had another brother, Jesse, committed to the Kings County Lunatic Asylum. Whitman was fired from his position as a clerk for the Bureau of Indian Affairs on June 30, 1865, though he obtained a position in the Attorney General's office from 1866-1872.

In 1873, Whitman suffered a paralytic stroke and was moved into the home of his brother, George, in New Jersey. While there, he continued to revise and republish Leaves of Grass. He later bought and moved into his own home. Though he was bedridden for most of his time there, he produced further editions of Leaves of Grass in 1876, 1881, and 1889. After completing a final revision of his work in 1891, Whitman died on March 26, 1892, as a result of bronchial pneumonia. His funeral drew crowds of over a thousand people and he was later buried in his tomb at Harleigh Cemetery in Camden.

Scope Note

The Walt Whitman Collection contains three autograph manuscripts and a photograph of Whitman. The first of these, written on the back of a page of program or journal of the American Social Science Association (1883-1884), seems to concern his poetry. The second, found in one of Whitman's books in the Rare Book collection at the University of Chicago Library, discusses the speculation on the existence of five races and their corresponding "Adam and Eves." The third manuscript seems to refer to the camps of American soldiers that Whitman visited during the Civil War. Included with all three manuscripts are typed transcriptions. Finally, the collection includes a print of aMathew Brady photograph of Whitman, circa 1862.

The collection was previously part of the Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection.

Related Resources

The following related resources are located in the Department of Special Collections:

http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/findingaids/topics.php

Subject Headings

- Whitman, Walt, 1819-1892
- Poets, American
- Photographs

INVENTORY

Box 1
Folder 1

Manuscript fragments, circa 1884

- 2 autograph manuscripts. Consists of fragments in the hand of Walt Whitman. One is written on the back of a page of a program or journal of the American Social Science Association, 1883-1884. The other was found in one of Whitman's books in the Rare Book collection at the University of Chicago Library.

Box 1
Folder 2

Manuscript fragment, [not after 1892]

- Autograph manuscript. Includes fragment and transcript.

Box 1
Folder 3

Photograph, Walt Whitman, by Mathew Brady (ca. 1862), undated