

Long Island: The Birthplace of America's Greatest Poet

The Walt Whitman Birthplace State Historic Site and Interpretive Center is the native home of the famous poet Walt Whitman, widely recognized as America's Greatest Poet. Whitman was born here in 1819 in a farmhouse built by his father circa 1810.

In Whitman's time, the Birthplace homestead was approximately a 20-acre farm, but despite Whitman's national prominence, the property was sold off until only approximately two acres were left by 1940. The site in West Hills faced the continual threat of suburban encroachment. So in 1949, a group of poets, business people and concerned citizens founded the Walt Whitman Birthplace Association (WWBA) to help raise awareness and funds to preserve this historic treasure. Long Island's primary newspaper, Newsday, launched a fund-raising campaign that inspired students across Long Island to collect pennies for the cause. After three months of widespread community support, WWBA was able to purchase and protect the property.



In 1957, the Birthplace was designated a New York State Historic Site and since 1985 the property has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The US Millennium Council named it an "American Treasure" in 1999. The Birthplace was restored in 2001 and the restoration was filmed for the TV series, "This Old House." A modern Interpretive/Visitors Center was built in 1997. In 2004, the old barn was replaced by a new structure, The Gathering House, which retained the original barn beams as flooring.

The Birthplace farmhouse is an excellent example of native Long Island craftsmanship – simple in line with pleasing proportion. The Birthplace was constructed with hand-hewn beams that are held together by wooden pegs and laid on whole tree trunks supported by a foundation of small boulders. It is notable for several unusual architectural features, such as its corbelled chimney and storage closets in fireplace walls. Much of the hardware in the home is original.

Though Whitman's family moved to Brooklyn when he was four years old, Whitman always felt a closeness to his ancestral Birthplace and returned to the region often. He referred to Long Island as his beloved "Paumanok", which is the Native American name for "fish-shaped" Long Island. Celebrated for

capturing the nation's spirit during the nineteenth century, Whitman's writings examined some of the era's most significant events, including the nation's Westward Expansion, immigration, slavery and the Civil War. Whitman's career spanned over 40 years and thousands of works.



Not only does WWBA remain committed to preserving the actual Birthplace as a Museum, it also remains dedicated to promoting the voice of Walt Whitman by celebrating the poet's vision of democracy, diversity, and creativity through its programs and events. WWBA offers site tours and over 16,000 people visit annually. WWBA also sponsors a wide array of literary events, cultural programs, and family activities. Their extensive educational programs attract over 7,000 regional students per year.

Along with the Birthplace Museum, the Interpretive Center contains a series of engaging exhibits whereby visitors can delve deeply into Whitman's life and times. The exhibit incorporates artifacts, original manuscripts, letters and over 130 portraits of Walt Whitman. Poster panels trace Walt's development from his boyhood to his international prominence. An interactive children's table holds toys and games from the era. Visitors can listen to Whitman reading his poem "America" which was recorded on an Edison cylinder. Among the museum's most important pieces is a first edition of Whitman's epic book of poetry *Leaves of Grass* and his autobiographical *Specimen Days*. A short stroll across the grand lawn brings visitors to the Gathering House which offers rotating art exhibits.

Thanks to the continued commitment and support of New York State Senator Carl L. Marcellino and Assemblyman Steven Englebright, the preservation of the Birthplace State Historic Site is helping visitors, writers, scholars and children better understand and appreciate the life and times of Walt Whitman.

The Birthplace State Historic Site is open daily from June 15 to Labor Day, and on Wednesday to Sunday from Labor Day to June 14. Guided tours are offered during opening hours and private group tours can be arranged. A museum gift shop is available. Picnic tables and park benches are situated on the grand lawn. The facility is fully-handicapped accessible. Facilities are available for rental. Major events include monthly poetry readings, a student poetry-writing contest, a Whitman Family Reunion, a May Birthday Celebration with a famous Poet-in-Residence, and an annual Benefit Gala Dinner Dance at Oheka Castle.

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<http://www.waltwhitman.org>

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