

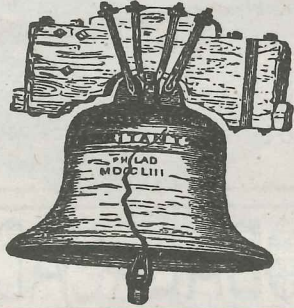


Center City Philadelphia's Community Newspaper

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Ring in Spring with CultureFest!
Nowruz Celebrating the Persian New Year – Saturday, March 30

City Safari: Whitman at 200: Art and Democracy

By Thom Nickels
Contributing Editor

April is Poetry Month and this year all eyes will be on Walt Whitman, the poet of American democracy who would be 200 on May 31st. Philadelphians especially will be able to experience a host of cultural (and even culinary) activities promoted by *Whitman at 200: Art and Democracy* the brainchild of contemporary art curator Judith Tannenbaum.

Walt Whitman is much more than a bridge that spans the Delaware River. The former journalist and newspaper editor has been called the foremost American poet who first



Walt Whitman

published his masterpiece, *Leaves of Grass*, in Brooklyn in 1855 and who spent the rest of his life expanding and improving the text.

Whitman spent his twilight years in Camden in a small house on Mickle Street, currently a world-famous house museum. Whitman's poetry was controversial in his lifetime. His fans ranged from Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula*, to Oscar Wilde but he also had many detractors: Irish poet W.B. Yeats didn't think Whitman's stature should have been raised to that of a national poet, and both Edgar Allan Poe and Ambrose Bierce did not like the poet's work. Whitman's chief literary competitor during his lifetime was the formidable poet and

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Developed and presented in partnership with the Shabahang Iranian Cultural Society of America and the Middle East Center at the University of Pennsylvania, the Penn Museum will celebrate spring with *CultureFest! Nowruz*, Saturday, March 30, from 1:00 – 8:00 pm.

Part of the Penn Museum's new *CultureFest!* series, which features family friendly activities in the afternoons and adult-focused programming in the evenings, Nowruz, or "new day" in Persian, is an ancient festival that marks the beginning of spring, a season of rebirth, and good luck in the Persian New Year. Nowruz has its beginnings in Zoroastrianism, an ancient Persian religion that traces its roots to long before the rise of Christianity or Islam. Observed by millions of people in the Middle East, Central and South Asia, southeastern Europe, Africa, and other locations around the globe, Nowruz varies from region to region, but it all begins with an intense "spring clean-

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18 New State Historical Markers Approved

By Haywood Brewster
Staff Reporter

Singer/songwriter Jim Croce, Pulitzer Prize-winning author John Updike, and the Bethel Burying Ground, an early African American cemetery, are among the subjects of the 18 new Pennsylvania Historical Markers approved by the Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission (PHMC).

The new markers, selected from 55 applications, will be added to the nearly 2,300 familiar blue-with-gold-lettering signs along roads and streets throughout Pennsylvania.

Since 1946 PHMC's historical markers have chronicled

the people, places and events that have affected the lives of Pennsylvanians over the centuries. The signs feature subjects such as Native Americans and settlers, government and politics, athletes, entertainers, artists, struggles for freedom and equality, factories and businesses, and a multitude of noteworthy topics.

Nominations for historical markers may be submitted by any individual or organization and are evaluated by a panel of independent experts from throughout the state and approved by the agency's commissioners.

More information on the Historical Marker Program, including application infor-

mation, is available online at www.PAHistoricalMarkers.com.

The Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission is the official history agency of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

The following is a list of the newly approved Pennsylvania Historical Markers with the name of the marker, location, and a brief description:

Alien Gun Law of 1909
Hillsville, Lawrence County
Following the 1906 murder of Deputy Game Protector L. Seeley Houk, allegedly by members of the Italian Black Hand organization, legislation was passed to disarm



Anna T. Jeanes

noncitizen immigrants in the commonwealth. The Pinkerton Detective Agency conducted the investigation. Although the law was challenged, it was upheld in the Supreme Court and remained in effect until 1967.

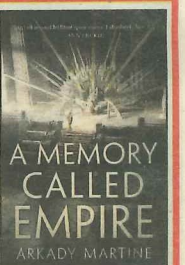
Anna T. Jeanes (1822–1907)
Philadelphia

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SCI-FI

The Science Fiction Society will have its next meeting on April 12th Tom Purdom, a Hugo nominated author, will speak...

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WHITMAN

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writer, Bayard Taylor from Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. Taylor took a perverse delight in attacking Whitman in print whenever he could.

Whitman's genius, however, has outlasted the slings and arrows from his detractors.

Tannenbaum, the former Curator of Contemporary Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, says that the idea of a city wide 200th Whitman birthday celebration occurred to her about 4 or 5 years ago.

"I was aware of the relationship between Camden and Philadelphia, Tannenbaum said. "This connect and disconnect, such as how the people in Philadelphia never went to Camden. That did peak my interest." The fact that Whitman spent his last years in Camden was another factor that inspired her to see if something couldn't be done about the poet's 200th birthday in 2019. Tannenbaum said she thought about all the art projects that had been inspired by Whitman as

well as his importance to musical composers.

"The more I thought about it, the whole outlook about his being so universal and his connection to democracy and social engagement, I started to think how relevant he was to today."

A meeting with Bill Adair, director of Exhibitions & Public Programs at the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, and consultations with poet Thomas Devaney helped sketch out a plan for the Whitman bicentennial. The University of Pennsylvania Libraries Kislak Center agreed to come on board as a sponsoring organization.

Whitman at 200 was finally launched with Philadelphia poet Leonard Gontarek joining as Poetry Consultant. Gontarek will highlight a *Whitman at 200* event at Parkway Central Library called Monday Poets where he and poets from the Poetry in Common Workshop will read their work.

"We want there to be something for everyone," Gontarek told me. A Walt Whitman look-alike contest will be held on

April 13 at the Philadelphia Brewing Company, famous for its Walt Wit beer. "This contest is not just for bearded males," Gontarek said.

"If someone wants to interrupt Whitman, that's fine." Two prizes will be awarded, one for a literal likeness and another for symbolic interruption.

Among the many innovative *Whitman at 200* exhibitions and performances throughout the region, there will be a Pastry Bake off and Tea Party with Pastry Chef Nick Malgieri at the Culinary Literacy Center at Parkway Central. Malgieri, an internationally famous chef and author, will bake three treats from the 19th century. An *Art at Lunch* lecture at PAFA will feature a Whitman talk. I will present my lecture, *Walt Whitman in Camden and Philadelphia* at Historic Strawberry Mansion on Saturday, May 29 and at the City Institute Library, Rittenhouse Square on May 29 at 6:30 PM. The Historic Strawberry Mansion event comes with a wine reception, so don't miss it.

Whitman was not a

perfect man and he had to deal with a bevy of personal prejudices and biases. His tempestuous relationship with the Irish, for instance, is well known. It took Whitman a while to work through certain misconceptions about the Irish that may have been handed down to him from his childhood in Long Island. As a young, 'agenda-ridden' newspaper editor in 1855, Whitman showed his faulty human side when he criticized the Irish in a St. Patrick's Day editorial. Entitled, "Insult to American Citizenship!" the piece was about a rally held at City Hall Park by the Public-School Society which, according to Whitman, was mobbed and taken over by Irish opponents. Whitman called the Irish protestors "foreigners," "filthy wretches from the stews, blind alleys and rear lanes." He called the Irish priests present "False, deceitful villains."

Over time his perceptions about the Irish changed. His prejudice seemed to evaporate and he became quite enamored of *Irish Americans*. In 1847, as editor of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, he adopted

the Free-Soil position supported by Irish workers and recommended books to Eagle readers on the plight of Irish workers. In 1860, he befriended Irish short story writer Fitz-James O'Brien, and in 1861 he wrote his short epic poem, "Old Ireland," which became a part of "*Leaves of Grass*." Then, on a stormy night in Washington D.C. in 1865, Whitman would meet Irish streetcar conductor Peter Doyle, whom he would later call "a master character," and who would be his loyal friend for life.

Whitman at 200 will also include the documentary film by Jennifer Crandall, *Whitman, Alabama*, at Gallery 119 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Viewers will be able to see a series of short films of Alabama residents reading selections from the poet's greatest work, *Song Myself*.

Musical composer Tom Wilson Weinberg's new work, *Oscar Visits Walt*, will premier at Philly AIDS Thrift @ Giovanni's Room on June 14, 15, 16 with Andrew Boyask as Whitman and Caleb J. Tracy as Wilde. The meeting between Whit-

man and Wilde on at least two occasions in Camden, New Jersey, has always been the subject of speculation but Weinberg will give us his version of what possibly transpired.

On May 30, **Patti Smith and her daughter Jesse Paris Smith** will explore Whitman's legacy through word and song at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

On May 31, the date of Whitman's birthday, Mayor Jim Kenney will lead the chorus of readers and singers belting out Whitman's words in City Hall Courtyard.

Whitman at 200 is a celebration that takes in all of the poet's contradictions. After all, it was Whitman who said, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes."

"It is complicated," Tannenbaum said, "We don't want to whitewash Whitman. He was interested in the breadth of America and what made this country different."

The full schedule of Whitman at 200 events can be found at WHITMANat200.org.

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