A Most Sinful Feast: A Story About Food, Beer, And An 18th Century Power Couple - Part I

By Marc Holmes III
Contribution Writer

When I first read the account of a "most sinful feast," written in a journal of John Adams, the first vice president and the second president of the United States, I immediately set out to learn more. This entry made on September 8, 1774 in Adams' diary kept during the period of the 2nd Continental Congress reads as follows: "Dined at Mr. Powel's—A most sinful Feast against Every Thing which could delight the Eye, or allure the Taste."

Note that this apparently was not the first time Adams dined with the Powels, who were known for their lavish lifestyle and extravagant social events for the elite of the nation. As was described in a previous article published in this newspaper in October 2018, Elizabeth and Samuel Powel presided as a Philadelphia power couple from their stately home built in the Georgian style in 1765, at 244 S. 3rd Street, just blocks away from Independence Hall, which at the time was the scene of vigorous debate regarding separation of the colonies from the British Crown.

Among their frequent guests were notables such as George and Martha Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John and Abigail Adams, the Marquis de Lafayette, and others.

Samuel Powel held office as Mayor of Philadelphia during British rule and immediately after the birth of the United States, his wife Elizabeth was a power in her own right. Indeed, Elizabeth was said to be the persuasive force that convinced George Washington to run for a second term. It is also said that Elizabeth is...

Public Art Memorial will tell the Important Story of Philadelphia’s Bethel Burying Ground Historic Site

By Howard Bremer
Staff Reporter

The City of Philadelphia’s Office of Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy (OACCE) is working with the Bethel Burying Ground Historic Site Memorial Committee to commission a special public artwork that will become a memorial of the Bethel Burying Ground, a historic site located beneath Wecacoe Playgound at 400 Catherine Street Philadelphia, PA 19147.

The efforts to develop a Bethel Burying Ground Historic Site Memorial began in 2014 with public and stakeholder planning meetings to identify appropriate ways to commemorate the site and to preserve the significance of Bethel Burying Ground. The information from these meetings was documented and carried over to the Bethel Burying Ground Historic Site Memorial Committee, established by the Kenney Administration and Managing Director’s Office in 2017. In June 2018, the City of Philadelphia officially announced plans to develop a meaningful memorialization of the Bethel Burying Ground Historic Site after identifying preliminary funding for the memorial design.

A priority for the Bethel Burying Ground Historic Site Memorial Committee is to implement an inclusive and city-wide public engagement process to develop an appropriate memorial for this historic site, educate the public about the history of the site and the African Americans laid to rest there, and give the public a way to engage with the City’s public art process. As part of this process, OACCE and the Bethel Burying Ground Historic Site Memorial Committee held a series of public engagement meetings...
Rep. Jim Roebuck Salutes the Iconic

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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suggested an emotionally rich and effective meeting following by a huggable kiss as one would implant on the cheeks, or lips of a dear friend about to go away forever. But Wilde in his clever way knew how to work that statement so that it would leave a smoke trail of mystery. A young gay man, as Wilde was at the time of the meeting, would not normally be sexually attracted to an older daddy type like Whitman (for proof of this go to any gay bar and see how the young "avoid" older gay men) although it is very possibly true that Whitman’s fame may have acted as a potent pollen and brought the two into some kind of physical intimacy. Whitman was fond of kissing strangers, something that would get him into trouble in this #MeToo world. In Jerome Loving’s epic biography of the poet, he reprints an episode in Philadelphia in 1880 in which Whitman, who had just finished his second Lincoln lecture, was approached by a young male reporter in the street “when the venerable, patriarchal-looking poet put his arms around his neck and kissed him—a stripping he had never seen before that night.” All of this to call mind the time I interviewed the poet Allen Ginsberg, who thought of himself as Whitman’s rightful 20th Century heir (Ginsberg died in 1997). Ginsberg’s identification with Whitman was so intense that one often lost track of who was who. By that I mean it was easy to imagine Whitman “speaking” through Ginsberg. The proudly promiscuous Ginsberg often compared his sexual exploits to Whitman “eating up the grocactions while walking through the streets of Manhattan and Philadelphia. Ginsberg’s sex life was made real for me when, more than two decades ago, I met a young New Yorker who told me that when he attended a Ginsberg poetry reading in Manhattan, the poet, in between playing the harmonica, liped his good looks and offered to take him into an intimate space for something much more than an Oscar Wilde kiss. The young New Yorker, however, turned

that the Civil War had begun. Whitman’s first reaction to the news was anger; he slammed his fist on the pavement as he walked away. Three days later, upon reflection, he characteristically sought to personalize the crisis: “I have this hour, this day, to bring to the2n, for myself a pure, perfect, sweet, clean, blooded, robust body—by ignoring all drinks but water and pure milk—and all fat meats, later suppers—a purged, cleansed, spiritualized, purged body.” When Whitman ad- ministered to dying and seriously ill Civil War soldiers in Washington hospitals, he performed his duties with equal mercy and compassion to Yankee and Confederate men alike. He regarded all patients as equal regard of their views on slavery. An ideological purist hell bent on continuing the war into the realm of the hospital bed might be tempted to allow “enemies” patients to die or suffer longer than those patients deemed to hold the correct political views.

Today’s #MeToo move- ment might find fault with Whitman for a reported episode in his life, at least according to biographer David S. Reynolds, who wrote that as a young Long Island schoolteacher, “Whitman was tawdry, feebled and run down on a town after being accused of inapposite relations with one of his students.” The accuser was a rather nationalistic minis- ter who didn’t like Whitman and who made the accusations in a Sunday sermon. The fiery sermon worked up the congrega- tion although other biogra- phers do not say that Whitman was actually tawdry and feathered but that a female friend of his convinced the congrega- tion to put down their tar buckets and go home. Whitman at 207’s artis- tic director is Judith Tan- nenbaum, former Curator of Contemporary Art at the Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design. From 1986 to 2000, Tan- nenbaum served as Curato- tor, Associate Director and Interim Director for the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), University of Pennsylvania. As Interim Director for the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) at the University of Pennsylvania, she became the spokesperson for the defense of public funding for artistic freedom in relation to the Robert Morris Mapplethorpe exhibition originated by ICA. One program will con- centrate on Whitman in Philadelphia and Cam- den. This will be my own creation, the site for the lecture is yet under- determined although the hope is that the Library Com- pany of Philadelphia will be the selected venue. There is a lot to say about Whitman in Phila- delphia. What comes to mind is the time when he bought a wheelchair at John Wanamaker’s De- partment store. Jerome Loving writes, “Whitman left his Mickey Street abode for the first time since his strokes of the previous June. This excursion was made possible by a wheelchair purchased (on a credit) at Wanamaker’s department store and propped by his faithful nurse, Ed Wilkins. The poet went out hesitantly at first but finally, after two hours a day on most days. Permanently weakened from the strokes and still suffering occasionally from dizziness caused by high blood pressure, he was also often blasted because of an enlarged prostate and constipation. But once outdoors again and in sight of the Delaware River, he came back almost miraculously to a sense of good health.”