Celebrate himself

Activities and events in Philadelphia and Camden mark the 200th anniversary of Walt Whitman’s birth.

By Shawn Brady

Long before the bridge that bears his name made it an easy commute, Walt Whitman crossed the Delaware River between Camden and Philadelphia countless times during the last two decades of his life. Whitman, the “Poet of Democracy,” was born in 1819 and died in 1892. To celebrate his 200th birthday, cake will be served on both sides of the river this week.

The parties, at Rutgers University’s Stockman Gallery on Wednesday evening and Philadelphia City Hall from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Friday, are timed to commemorate the bicentennial on May 31 and will host invited guests including Mayor Jim Kenney and punk legend Patti Smith (in Philly) and the late poet himself as portrayed by historian Darrel Ford (in Camden).

The festivities arrive in the midst of a year-long commemoration of Whitman’s bicentennial in both cities that includes exhibitions, performances, newly commissioned artworks, poetry readings, and discussions. (The full schedule is online at whitman200.org.) Smith will perform a Whitman tribute Thursday at the Museum of Art with her daughter Jesse Paris Smith, but that event is sold out.

“People cross the Walt Whitman Bridge every day without thinking about why it’s named the Walt Whitman Bridge,” says Lynne Farrington, project director of “Whitman at 200” and senior curator at the University of Pennsylvania’s Kislak Center for Special Collections.

Separate printings of the sixth edition of “Leaves of Grass” published between 1882 and 1900.

The bathroom in the concourse level of the Comcast Center.

Restrooms you can use without having to buy anything.

Water can be treacherous for pugs and other short-snout dogs, so take precautions.

Advice for the dog days.
Bicentennial events will include exhibitions, poetry readings, and discussions.

In between thunderclaps, Hely said, "sitting out in the open seemed important because Whitman wrote such beautiful words about nature. The poem is a challenge to throw off your everyday life, so we thought we could possibly capture some of that under the night sky." The same spirit inspired Philadelphia Jazz Project director Homer Jackson to seek audiences for a walkthrough the elements and his Whitman at 200 commission, New Songs of the Open Road consists of walks through various Philadelphia neighborhoods led by singers and accompanied by a gospel choir with sisters encouraged to sing along with raw compositions that echo Whitman’s sentiment through the lens of the civil rights movement. The performance comes to Germantown on June 8, South Philadelphia on June 22, and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway on July 6.

"I'm not a Whitman expert," Jackson says. "But one thing that I do know that makes him interesting is that he liked to hike and walk. So I thought about what it meant for folks during the '60s and the '70s to get out there and protest and express this idea of what freedom could be."