

99 Ryerson Street, Brooklyn: Fact Sheet
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Walt Whitman is widely acknowledged as America's greatest poet, the "father of free verse" and the "Poet of New York." He is also Brooklyn's most famous and most beloved 19th century resident. The Committee to Save Walt Whitman's House is a group of concerned activist citizens who seek to protect the legacy of the single Whitman residence still standing in New York City's five boroughs: 99 Ryerson Street, Brooklyn.

Whitman's most complete listing of his New York residences is a manuscript entitled "Nehemiah Whitman," held by the New York Public Library's Berg Collection and available in text and image at the Whitman Archive:

<https://whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/transcriptions/nyp.00556.html>

Herein Whitman notes his Brooklyn addresses. "Moved in Ryerson St., May 1855. - Lived in Classon [91 1/2 Classon Avenue], from May 1st 1856 '7 '8 '9."

Though records indicate that the Whitmans purchased 99 Ryerson on May 24, 1855 and sold it on November 17, there is good reason to believe Whitman's claim that he lived in the house for a full year, most likely from May 1, 1855 to May 1, 1856. During Whitman's New York years, thousands of leases expired on what had become known as "Moving Day" (Riley 168). The upheaval of "Moving Day," when thousands of New Yorkers were forced to move house, had become a "troublesome, expensive, and destructive" problem by the mid-1850s ("The Moving Season," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 March 1854). Whitman's numerous citations of "May 1" on his list of residences demonstrates that his family, too, conformed to the common move-in date.

This list is supplemented by his note on "Autobiographical Data" in one of his earliest notebooks, which was lost during World War II. The most complete transcription of this data is also available at the Whitman Archive:

<https://whitmanarchive.org/manuscripts/notebooks/transcriptions/loc.05935.html>

The total number of New York City residences detailed in these two sources is 22 to 24 addresses: 15 to 17 in Brooklyn (from 1823-38 and 1844-62) and 7 Manhattan boarding houses (between 1842-44).

The only New York City Whitman residence recorded by Whitman that is still standing is 99 Ryerson Street, Brooklyn. Indeed, the house is the only extant building in the five boroughs that has a Whitman connection besides 647 Broadway, the site of Pfaff's Cellar. This underground 'beer cellar'—allegedly America's first bohemian bar—was Whitman's favored social scene from 1858 to 1862.

1855

Spring: Whitman's younger brother George (1829-1901) recounted Whitman at work on the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* at this time. "He would lie abed late, and after getting up would write a few hours if he took the notion—perhaps would go off the rest of the day. We were all at work—all except Walt. But we knew he was printing the book. I was about twenty five then" (Traubel 35). After unsuccessfully trying to find a commercial publisher for his radical poems, Whitman began printing the *Leaves* with his friends Tom and Andrew Rome at their print shop in Brooklyn Heights. Years later, Andrew recalled Whitman's daily routine during the printing of *Leaves of Grass*: he would "sit reading the *New York Tribune* each morning" and then later would stand to set the type (Johnston and Wallace 116-117).

May 24: Whitman's mother Louisa purchases 99 Ryerson Street for \$1840 (Allen 148); it was mortgaged for the full price. The family was the first to live in the newly built construction. With the head of the household unable to work, and Walt—typically generous with family expenditures—now working on his literary project full time, the Whitmans faced more financial hardship than usual.

Walt had worked as a real estate speculator and housebuilder since 1848, when he began construction on a house at 106 Myrtle Avenue. The family moved into this building in the "latter part of April '49"; over the next five years, they would live in four more houses built by Whitman. The decision to purchase a ready-made house at 99 Ryerson was influenced both by his father's grave illness and Whitman's decision to quit the housebuilding business and concentrate on producing his first book of poetry. "I was working at carpentering and making money when this *Leaves of Grass* bee came to me," he recalled in old age, with a touch of humor. "I stopped working and from that time my ruin commenced" (Allen 147).

Late June: The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* is completed. Advertisements for "LEAVES OF GRASS, one vol, small quarto, price: \$2" begin to appear in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on June 29.

June- January 1856: Because of his limited financial resources, Whitman had copies of *Leaves of Grass* bound on at least five different occasions during this time. He came out with a new printing when his funding permitted; the book over time thus changed appearance, often incorporating cheaper finishes and printing methods (Folsom).

July 11: Walter Whitman Sr. dies in 99 Ryerson Street; he is buried in the Cemetery of the Evergreens in Brooklyn (Allen 151).

July 21: After receiving a complimentary copy of *Leaves of Grass* from Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson sends Whitman "probably the most important letter in literary history" (Birney). Citing the book as "the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed," the eminent literary figure further emboldened the budding poet by writing, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career." Whitman would grant permission to the *New York Daily Tribune* to publish

the text of Emerson's letter on October 10; he himself printed the entire text of the letter in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1856), gold-stamping "I Greet You at the Beginning of a Great Career R.W. Emerson" on the spine of the book.

July 23: The first review of *Leaves of Grass* is printed in the *New York Tribune*. It was a sympathetic review by Charles Dana.

September-October: In an effort to drum up sales, Whitman famously composes and published three self-reviews: "Walt Whitman and His Poems" (*United States Review*), "Walt Whitman, A Brooklyn Boy" (*Brooklyn Daily Times*) and "An English and American Poet" (*American Phrenological Journal*).

September 17: The first literary pilgrimage is made to 99 Ryerson Street. The young Transcendentalist Moncure Conway seeks out Whitman, and describes his visit to Emerson in a letter:

I found by the directory that one Walter Whitman lived fearfully far (out of Brooklyn, nearly) on Ryerton [sic] Street a short way from Myrtle Avenue. The way to reach the house is to go down to Fulton Street Ferry [in Manhattan], after crossing take the Fulton and Myrtle Avenue car, and get out at Ryerton Street. It is one of a row of small wooden houses with porches, which all seem occupied by mechanics. (Conway 215-16)

Conway records that he observed Whitman reading proofs during this visit. Whitman thus began writing and editing the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* while living in the Ryerson Street house (Allen 177).

Late 1855: A "second issue" of the first edition of the *Leaves* appears, which includes Whitman's three anonymous self-reviews. He calls this book the "fullest version of the original edition" (Loving 183).

November 17: Louisa Whitman sells the house for \$2600. According to Walt, the family stays in the house until "Moving Day" (May 1) next year (see Berg manuscript link at head of sheet).

December 11: Emerson first visits Whitman at 99 Ryerson Street (Rusk 374). Late in life Whitman tells his friend and literary executor Horace Traubel that he still remembers Emerson's "gentle knock" at the door of the house, his "slow sweet voice" and the words "I came to see Mr. Whitman" (Loving 210). According to this account, Whitman takes Emerson to a social function at Fireman's Hall, which the more serious Emerson does not enjoy as much as his boisterous host (Rusk 374).

1856

End of April: The Whitmans move to 91 1/2 Classon Avenue (see Berg manuscript link at head of sheet. Up to and through this time, Whitman was getting ready to put the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* to press (Loving 209).

September 11: the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* is registered for copyright (Aspiz).

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