

**Starting From Paumanok:
A Tour of Old Whitmanland
Your Guide: Karen Karbiener (kk55@nyu.edu)**

*Free, fresh, savage,
Fluent, luxuriant, self-content, fond of persons and places,
Fond of fish-shape Paumanok, where I was born,
Fond of the sea—lusty-begotten and various...
(from “Proto-Leaf”, 1860)*

Walt spent few years actually living on Long Island—his first four at the Birthplace in West Hills, and about six years (1836-1842) in various towns as schoolteacher—but he declared his Paumanok as a major influence on his character in his prose memoir, *Specimen Days*:

I estimate three leading sources and formative stamps to my own character, now solidified for good or bad, and its subsequent literary and other outgrowth—the maternal nativity-stock brought hither from far-away Netherlands, for one (doubtless the best)—the subterranean tenacity and central bony structure (obstinacy, willfulness) which I get from my paternal English elements, for another—and the combination of my Long Island birth-spot, sea-shores, childhood’s scenes, absorptions, with teeming Brooklyn and New York—with, I suppose, my experiences afterward in the secession outbreak, for the third.

The Whitmans were time-honored landholders in the West Hills area of Suffolk County—so much so that early maps designate an area entitled “Whitmansdale.” Their lands, which at one point encompassed several hundred acres, were first marked on April 1, 1668 at a town meeting:

Also it was voated and agreed the same Daie that Joseph Whitman shall take up ten or twelve acres of land on the west side of the south path [now New York Avenue, south of Jericho Turnpike] on the hether side of Samuell Ketchams hollow [present day Melville], it being toward his secon division.

A likely place to start the tour is

1. **Walt Whitman Birthplace:** Walt spent the first four years of his life in this, “my sweet birthplace,” built by his father Walter in 1816. Born a farmer, Whitman Sr. served as a carpenter’s apprentice to a cousin in Manhattan for three years of his youth; the “year without a summer” of 1816, which devastated crops for several years, may have encouraged him to leave the family farmlands and go into full-time carpentry in Brooklyn in 1823. This house bears several signs of his finesse as a carpenter and house builder, including unusually large windows and

a staircase with risers that grow shorter as one ascends (possibly to help with the climb).

From the Whitman Birthplace, make a right on to Old Walt Whitman Road. Take a left on Chichester Road. On the right, you'll soon see (at 69 Chichester):

2. **Whitman Place House:** Whitman mentions this land as being owned by his great-grandfather Nehemiah; it was sold by Whitman Sr.'s brother Tredwell in 1835 and eventually acquired by Tredwell Place, hence the name of the house at the end of the long driveway. "NEW HOUSE, BUILT IN 1810, HOME OF JESSE WHITMAN, GRANDFATHER OF WALT WHITMAN" reads the historical marker ("erected 1992") near the mailbox. The barn in front of the house is believed to be the original homestead of John Whitman (Walt's great-great grandfather, and one of the sons of the original West Hills settler Joseph Whitman). Indeed, the marker reads "HOME OF JOHN WHITMAN, BUILT IN 1692, NOW A BARN."

Bear right on to West Hills Road and note the left turnoff to the continuation of Chichester Road—but for now, bear right on to West Hills Road. On your right (at number 365) is a grand old white colonial home known as the

3. **Joseph Whitman House:** allegedly the oldest house in West Hills, built sometime before 1692 (its basement contains a cistern used to transport running water throughout the house). Joseph was born in England around 1640 and became a prosperous and prominent citizen in West Hills, acquiring large tracts of land and holding responsible public offices (for example, he served as the emissary between the Towns of Huntington and Smithtown in a 1672 border dispute). His direct line of descent from Joseph is John, Nehemiah, Jesse, Walter, to Walt. The house and land were allegedly sold to Captain Timothy Carll, a Revolutionary War soldier, in 1788. The oldest part of the house was moved across the street in 1908 and used to construct another house.

Double back and make a right on to Chichester Road. On the right you will see a house with a sign for "Nathaniel Whitman" in front of it. This is the

4. **Whitman Rome House:** this white colonial home at 85 Chichester Road was (as the historical marker indicates) the "Home and Burial Site of 2nd Lt. Nathaniel Whitman (1732-1804) of the Huntington Militia during the American Revolution." Nathaniel was the grandson of original West Hills settler Joseph Whitman, Walt's great-great-great grandfather. Nathaniel's son Daniel lost the house in 1821 when he failed to pay a mortgage of \$1400, and it was sold to the Rome family. Whitman visited the house on July 29, 1881.

The old Whitman Family Cemetery is behind the house, and probably holds the remains of the early distinguished Whitmans, as well as the Chichester and Rome

families. One identified headstone is that of Experience Rogers, who married Nathaniel Whitman in 1793. Another is that of Walt's cousin Mahata, daughter of Tredwell Whitman, who was born in the same year as Walt and died December 9, 1842. Past visitors have speculated that the rows of unmarked fieldstones may designate the graves of slaves owned by the Whitmans through the generations. Many of the headstones have now either fallen or are covered with luxuriously leafy vines, giving the place a peaceful aura. When Whitman visited the cemetery on July 29, 1881, the "crumbled and broken stones" put him in a somber mood (as recorded in *Specimen Days* and as noted by the poet in a letter published in the *New York Herald Tribune* on August 4, 1881).

Across the street from the Whitman Rome house is

5. **The Spout:** a famous spring (now surrounded by bamboo and no longer visible from the street) and a public watering-place during Whitman's time. During droughts, this spring supplied clear flowing water to farmers for miles around.

Continue up Chichester Road and you will soon see on your right:

6. **Chichester Inn or Peace and Plenty Inn** (107 Chichester Road): this is a seventeenth century inn and tavern, and served as a designated place for West Hills town meetings. It was a prominent social center before and after the Revolutionary War thanks to the Chichester family, who through Walt's day served libations and hosted events such as "hog-guessings" here (Walt and his brother Jesse evidently took part in the merriment). The current owner has preserved the tap room, which is in the oldest part of the low red structure, dating to the early 1700s.

At the juncture of Chichester and Sweet Hollow Road, turn right and view (on your right) the

7. **Old West Hills Schoolhouse** (79 Sweet Hollow Road), "established in the 18th century" and attended by Walt's older brother Jesse (a school record indicates he was a student of John Woodhull Ketcham). The original schoolhouse building was destroyed by fire; this building was built in 1850 and was used as a school until 1912.

Double back up Sweet Hollow Road and make a right on Chichester Road, then a left on Mount Misery Road. Just north of Wesley Court at 26 Mount Misery Road stands the

8. **Colyer House:** built in 1819 by Walt's father Walter Whitman Sr., the house was built on the lands of Jesse Whitman, Walt's grandfather. After some trouble with the deeds in the family, Walt's father Walter sold this land to Richard Colyer in March 1836. When Whitman went to visit the house with his father in 1850, Walt's aunt Sarah and her widowed daughter (who had married Richard Colyer)

were in the house. Whitman recorded their visit: “These three days, we have been on a visit (father and myself) to West Hills, the old native place. We went up in the L.I.R.R., and so in the stage to Woodbury, then on foot along the turnpike and ‘across lots’ to Colyer’s.... it seemed familiar enough to me, for I remembered every part, just as well as though only a day had passed since the times when I used to scott around there as a youngster.”

Return the way you came on Mt. Misery Road, make a right on Chichester Road, continue on past Nathaniel Whitman’s House to make a right on West Hills Road. Bear right down West Hills Road. You’ll wind around until you can make a right on to Reservoir Road. Continue to bear right, staying on Reservoir Road until you reach the Jayne’s Hill picnic and parking area. From here, it’s a short hike up the Jayne’s Hill Trail to

9. **Jayne’s Hill:** at 401 feet above sea level, this spot is the highest point on Long Island and was one of Walt’s favorite spots both as a child and as an adult returning to his ancestral lands—“a view of 30 or 40 or even 50 or more miles, especially to the east and southwest” he wrote in *Specimen Days*. Underneath the large boulder at the top lies Benchmark KU2642 of the U.S. Geodetic Survey, a bronze disk demarcating this important triangulation station of the first coast survey of the United States. The vistas from this point were noted by many, beginning with Nathaniel Prime in his *History of Long Island* (1845): “Jayne’s Hill is one of the highest elevations of Long Island and has been supposed by some to exceed that at Hempstead Harbor. Its naked top affords a most excellent view of the main, the sound, and the island itself, and the ocean.”

Although tall trees and development now block Whitman’s broad vistas of Long Island, the Long Island Sound, and the Atlantic Ocean from Jayne’s Hill, we can enjoy one of his several poems honoring his “Paumanok” on an on-site plaque:

*Sea-beauty! stretch'd and basking!
One side thy inland ocean laving, broad, with copious commerce, steamers,
sails,
And one the Atlantic's wind caressing, fierce or gentle-mighty hulls dark-
gliding in the distance.
Isle of sweet brooks of drinking-water - healthy air and soil!
Isle of the salty shore and breeze and brine!*

Follow Whitman’s footsteps along the mile-long path back to his birthplace, descending back down Reservoir Road, making on West Hills Road, and a left at its end.