

# City Safari: The confectionary kisses of Walt Whitman

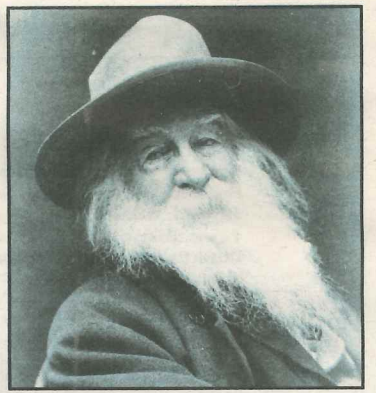
Thom Nickels  
Contributing Editor

The name Walt Whitman will be on everyone's lips this coming spring. May 2019 marks the poet's 200th birthday and the celebrations will run the gamut from an historic birthday cake bake-off to a wide-ranging number of cultural events throughout

the city. A number of city bakeries will throw their best cake into the ring for the chance to be the winning bakery that will design a four foot-plus high cake to feed 500 people. Imagine that! Whitman had a sweet tooth, so a mammoth cake is appropriate (he also liked champagne, but that's another story). Whitman at 200 is sponsored by the

University of Pennsylvania with support from the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage and includes everything from multimedia installations to interactive works on the RiverLink ferry operating between Philadelphia and Camden. There will also be lectures, poetry readings, a presentation by the Bearded Ladies Cabaret, traveling gospel ensembles and much

more. Like the poet himself, the months-long event will "contain multitudes." Walt Whitman means different things to different people. For unworldly Middle School students he is the saccharine, Santa Claus-like author of "O Captain My Captain." For others, like The Bearded Ladies Cabaret, he is the complicated, often controversial poet with many "shifting" layers. Let me say upfront that I've never been an avid fan of the



Walt Whitman

Bearded Ladies Cabaret. You might call me a potential fan still waiting to be "won over." BLC, to my mind, tries so hard to be avant-garde that they wind up in some ethereal "spin off" space that might be called Planet Ridiculous. That may change with their presentation at Whitman at 200. At Whitman at 200 BLC will explore and highlight "the dangers of blind hero worship and the challenges of holding up our ancestors to contemporary ideals." All of this sounds very substantive. It also makes me think of the controversy surrounding the destruction and dismantling of statues of Confederate war heroes throughout the South and elsewhere by contemporary rigid-thinking political ideologues.

The Whitman at 200 press release states that the BLC presentation is inspired by "an actual spontaneous trial of Whitman held in a Radical Faerie camp in Vermont last summer that questioned his role as a queer hero."

Of course, Whitman denied being homosexual although there are few scholars today who believe he was telling the truth about himself when he replied to John Addington Symonds' inquiry as to whether the "conception of Comradship" included any "semi-sexual emotions and actions," to which Whitman answered, "The possibility of such construction is terrible; any such inferences are disavow'd as damnable."

When Oscar Wilde visited the poet in Camden and when afterwards he stated that "The kiss of Walt Whitman is still on my lips," does not mean, as certain writers like to imply, that the two men "did it." Wilde's comment is ambiguous at best,

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Center City Philadelphia's Community Newspaper

## PHILADELPHIA

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Event listings for **MLK Day 2019** in our Almanac Section (Pg 8)

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

By Marc Holmes III  
Contributing 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 started a search to learn more. The entry made on September 8, 1774 in Adams' diary kept during the period of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Continental Congress reads as follows: "Dined at Mr. Powells—A most sinful Feast again! Every Thing which could delight the Eye, or allure the Taste." Note that this apparently was not the first time Adams dined

with the Powells, who were known for their lavish lifestyle and extravagant social events for the elite of the new 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. 3<sup>rd</sup> 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, Benja-



Feast

min Franklin, John and Abigail Adams, the Marquis de Lafayette, and others. Although Samuel Powel held office as Mayor of Philadelphia during British rule and immediately after at 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

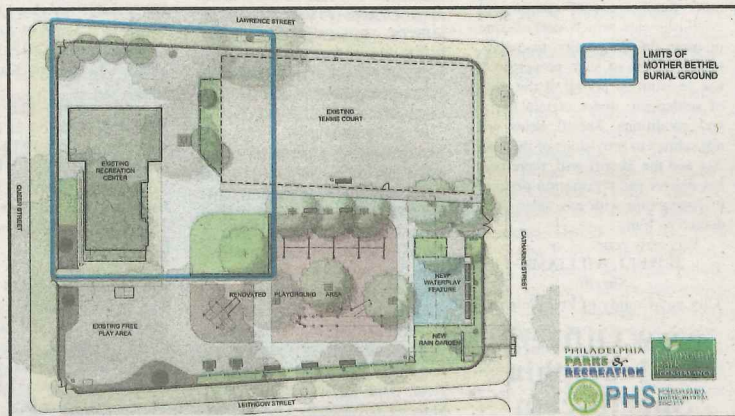
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## Public Art Memorial will tell the Important Story of Philadelphia's Bethel Burying Ground Historic Site

By Haywood Brewster  
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 Weccacoe Playground at 400 Catherine Street Philadelphia, PA 19147. Efforts to develop a Bethel Burying Ground Historic Site Memorial began in 2014 with public and stakeholder planning meetings to identify ap-

propriate ways to commemorate the history and 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 im-



Map showing Bethel Burying Ground Site.

plement 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 in 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

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suggesting an emotionally rich and effusive meeting followed by a huggable kiss as one would implant on the cheek 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 today's #MeToo world. In Jerome Loving's epic biography of the poet, he recounts 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 stripling he had never seen before that night."

All of this calls to 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 often one 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 "eyeing the grocery boys" 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, spotted 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

the famous poet down, even as other young men in the room did not.

How do you tell a famous poet no? The same way, I suppose, that you tell a famous movie producer no, or tell Matt Lauer no or Kevin Spacey no, even if maybe two percent of the time a no doesn't always mean no, it can also mean, build up your case why don't you, tell me you love me or tell me what you can do for me, etc.

My great aunt, God rest her soul, was born in 1895 and she thought Whitman immoral. So did many other people. Bayard Taylor, Whitman's chief literary competitor in the 1800's, criticized Whitman's poetry and pretty much said that he wasn't a poet at all, which goes to show how vicious writers and poets can be to one another.

Roy Morris, Jr. writes in *Walt Whitman in the Civil War*, that on April 12, 1861, Whitman had just attended the New York Academy of Music on Fourteenth Street where he saw Verdi's opera, *A Masked Ball*, when he bought a newspaper and read that Rebel forces had

that the Civil War had begun.

Whitman's first reaction to the news was anger; he slammed his fist to the pavement as he walked away. Three days later, upon reflection, he characteristically sought to personalize the crisis: "I have this hour, this day, resolved to inaugurate for myself a pure, perfect, sweet, clean blooded robust body by ignoring all drinks but water and pure milk—and all fat meats, late suppers—a great body—a purged, cleansed, spiritualized, invigorated body."

When Whitman administered 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 regardless 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 "enemy" patients to die or suffer longer than those patients deemed to have the correct political views.

Today's #MeToo movement might find fault with Whitman for a reported episode in his life, at least according to biographer David S. Reynolds, who writes that as a young Long Island schoolteacher, "Whitman was tarred, feathered and run out of town on a rail after being accused of inappropriate relations with one of his students." The accuser was a rather rabid Presbyterian minister who didn't like Whitman and who made the accusations in a Sunday sermon. The fiery sermon worked up the congregation although other biographers do not say that Whitman was actually tarred and feathered but that a female friend of his convinced the congregation to put down their tar buckets and go home.

Whitman at 200's artistic director is Judith Tannenbaum, former Curator of Contemporary Art at the Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design. From 1986 to 2000, Tannenbaum served as Curator, Associate Director and Interim Director for the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), University of Pennsylvania. As Interim Director for the Institute of Contemporary Art

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Samuel Powel

the "lady" mentioned in Secretary of War James McHenry's journal of September 18, 1787, when he wrote, "A lady asked Dr. Franklin, Well Doctor what have we got, a republic or a monarchy? A republic replied the doctor if you can keep it."

Lavish dinners were routine for the Powels. According to Meagan Regina, Powel House site manager and private rentals coordinator the Powels were able to maintain their prominent lifestyle because of their wealth. "Samuel Powel inherited his grandfather's fortune very, very young. His father was already deceased when the grandfather passes away so everything goes right to Samuel Powel. He becomes what I like to think of as new money. He's like newly rich. Elizabeth Powel is of European descent, a long line of money. She's wealthy. So between Samuel Powel's new money and her old money, they can fund this social and political position of mayor because you had

to fund your own office at that point in time, no tax dollars. So that's how they were able to be in government and then socially, she had to be a prim and proper woman of the world to host these parties."

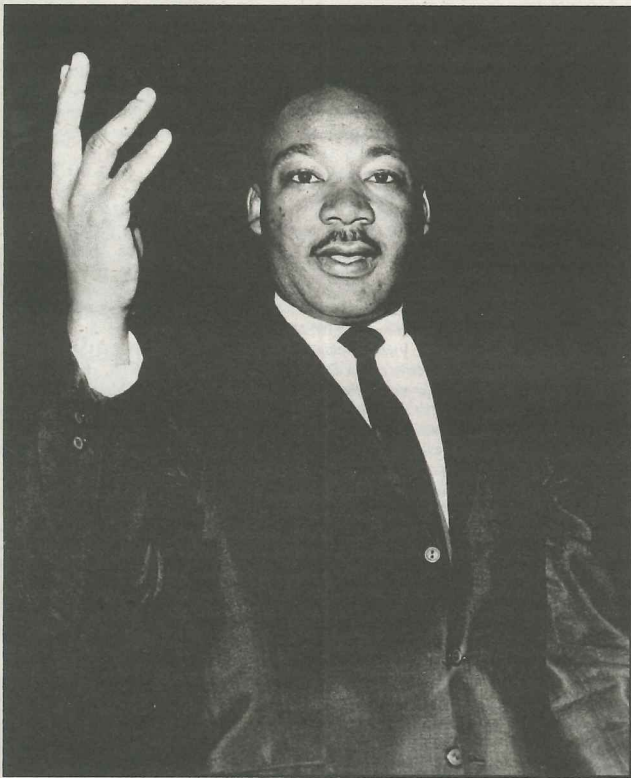
We are fortunate to have a written record of the menu of the meal John Adams referred to as a sinful feast. Walter Staib, owner and chef at Philadelphia's City Tavern replicated the meal as part of his television series "A Taste of History," which will be discussed in Part II of this report to be printed in next week's edition of this paper.

A version of the recipe of the beer served at that feast and on other occasions at the Powel House also exists. Meagan Regina, and co-site manager Matthew Iannone, recently made a batch using a recipe of George Washington who was attempting to replicate this beer that both he and John Adams developed a fondness for.

"So Elizabeth Powel, lady of the house, her brother-in-law is considered the first person to brew a porter in the colonies. His father was a famous brewer over in England, he was brewing English porters, [and] he comes here and brews the first known porter in the colonies. George Washington tries it, loves it, has it shipped to him on the front lines during the revolution, has it shipped to him at Mount Vernon, likes it so much he tries to replicate the recipe countless times at Mount

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## Rep. Jim Roebuck Salutes the Iconic



### Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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(ICA) at the University of Pennsylvania, she became the spokesperson for the defense of public funding for artistic freedom in relation to the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition originated by ICA.

One program will concentrate on Whitman in Philadelphia and Camden. This will be my own creation, the site for the lecture as yet undetermined although the hope is that the Library Company of Philadelphia will be the selected venue.

There is a lot to say about Whitman in Philadelphia. What comes to mind is the time when he bought a wheelchair at John Wanamaker's Department store.

Jerome Loving writes, "Whitman left his Mickle

Street abode for the first time since his strokes of the previous June. The excursion was made possible by a wheelchair purchased [on a friend's] credit at Wanamaker's department store and propelled by his faithful nurse, Ed Wilkins. The poet went out hesitantly at first but then regularly, for 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 bloated 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."