

NOTES

JESSE WHITMAN, SEAFARER

In “Some Notes on Whitman’s Family,” published in 1941, Katherine Molinoff writes about Jesse Whitman, Walt’s older brother, “Jesse seems to have left behind him fewer footprints than any member of the Whitman family except the brother who died so young that he never even had a name.”¹

Jesse, born 1818, had been a sailor. So Walt told the staff at the Kings County Lunatic Asylum, where he committed his deranged brother on December 5, 1864. The document of admittance, unearthed by Molinoff, recorded information that Walt provided:

Born in New York, aged 48 years. Single. A seafaring man. Temperate. About sixteen years ago had a fall from the mast which injured his head. He remained in the City Hosp. N.Y. about six months, and went out apparently well. He has been considered somewhat insane, by his friends, for the last four years. For the last year he has been worse, at times violent, usually in the night on awaking from sleep.²

A year before—on December 6, 1863—Jesse had exploded in rage, a rage directed mainly at Mattie Whitman, the wife of his younger brother, Jeff. The Whitman family was then living on North Portland Avenue, Brooklyn, in one of the houses that it occupied during the Civil War. Another brother, Andrew, had died the day before, and while Andrew’s body still lay in the house, Jesse erupted when Mattie’s three year-old daughter, Hattie, pushed a chair festooned with a diaper across the kitchen floor.

Jesse had been having violent episodes for some time. His mother, who presided over the packed brood, revealed in the aftermath of the diaper incident that Jesse “has these kind of things quite often with her—calls her everything—and even swears that he will keel her over,” according to a letter that Jeff, the outraged husband, wrote Walt.³ Fired from a job at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in late 1861, Jesse sheltered with his family. Up until the time of his outburst, he had pitched in as a babysitter with Mattie’s children, and George Whitman—Walt’s third youngest brother, who was fighting in the war—described Jesse as performing a peaceful domestic task in the fond reverie of home that he wrote after *Antietam*: “I guess [Hattie] is down stairs helping Mother mix the dough, Walt is up stairs writing, Jeff is down town at the Office, Jess is peeling Potatoes for dinner, and Tobias [feebleminded youngest brother Edward] has gone down cellar for a scuttle of coal. . . .”⁴

Molinoff tried to find evidence that Jesse had been a sailor. But her inquiries with the Bureau of Navigation of the Navy Department, Washington; the Library of the Chamber of Commerce, New York; the Office of the U.S. Archivist, Washington; and the Conrad Library of the Seaman’s Church

Institute, New York, produced no results.⁵ More recently, I did find a few traces. Searches among the U.S. Customs Service master's crew lists at the National Archives regional facility, on Varick Street in Manhattan, turned up an entry for a Jesse Whitman on the ship "Carroll of Carrollton," sailing in 1839.⁶ The "Carroll of Carrollton," under master Thomas Bird, returned to New York from Liverpool on November 6 that year. The crew of twenty-four was mostly American-born. The crew list describes Jesse Whitman as a native New Yorker, twenty-six years old, five feet seven inches tall, with light complexion and brown hair.

The "Carroll," built in 1829 and owned by J. Walker, carried immigrants to New York in 1834 and 1835.⁷ (The voyage in 1839 did not carry many immigrants, if it carried any.) The ship left Liverpool on or about September 27. Six men had deserted upon arrival at Liverpool; but Jesse Whitman made the voyage both out and back (in other words, was not hired in England to fill a berth).

Born March 2, 1818, according to the Whitman family Bible, Jesse would have been twenty-one in 1839, not twenty-six. A slip of Thomas Bird's pen—for it appears from a comparison of his signature with the crew list, that Bird wrote the record out himself—may account for the five-year discrepancy in age. More likely, Jesse exaggerated his age. If this was indeed his first ocean-going berth (and searches of the crew lists beginning with January 1835, when he would have been sixteen, have turned up no other Jesse Whitmans), he may have wanted to seem a little older.

For that matter, Walt himself reported Jesse's age inaccurately in 1864, when he committed him to the Flatbush asylum. His brother was forty-six then, not forty-eight. A presumptive, nineteenth-century vagueness about ages and dates might be cited here, except that a case for scrupulous attention to ages and dates might as easily be made. Walt reckoned the age of his close relations with delicate care, usually; for example, two months before his mother turned sixty-nine, he wrote William O'Connor, his friend in Washington, "Mother's age I think begins to just show—in a few weeks, she will commence her 70th year. . . ."⁸

The Jesse Whitman aboard the "Carroll of Carrollton" may, of course, not be Walt's brother. But a master's crew list for December 1841 records another voyage by Jesse Whitman, a notably similar Jesse Whitman: also a native New Yorker, now standing five feet seven-and-a-half inches, and now giving his age as twenty-four.⁹ (Walt's Jesse would have been twenty-three and nine months that December.) This ship is the schooner "Eagle," master William F. Martin, bound for Veracruz, Mexico. Jesse earned wages of \$15.00 per month, and his first wages were paid him in advance.

On both voyages, in 1839 and 1841, Jesse's name on the crew list directly precedes that of a man named Pettit. On the list from 1839, it is John Pettit, age twenty-two, of New York, five feet six inches in height, and in 1841 it is Edwin Pettit, of New York, twenty-five, five feet eight inches tall. This may be coincidence or Jesse may have signed on with a comrade each time, one of a pair of brothers he knew from Brooklyn or Manhattan.

The young man who first sets sail in the 1830s—and whom we glimpse on his way to Veracruz, a voyage taking three months—becomes, a quarter-

century later, the madman no longer fit to live with a family. What happened in the interim can only be surmised. Ingenious readings of Walt's early stories, for instance, by Jerome Loving in *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*, suggest that Jesse may have been his father's favorite, and that Walt, a less-loved second son, may have resented him.¹⁰ Jesse was early on "considered to have the best mind of any of the children," according to Jessie (California) Whitman, brother Jeff's youngest daughter (the one who probably wore the diaper of the kitchen-chair episode). Seventy-six years later, Miss Whitman told Katherine Molinoff that her uncle had been "attacked by thugs and hit on the head with brass knuckles," after which he was never the same. A mechanical injury—fall from a mast, beating by thugs—was more savory as an explanation than was the notion advanced by Jeff in a letter to Walt of December 15, 1863. Still upset over the unpleasantness with his wife and child, he fumed, "To think that the wretch should go off and live with an Irish whore, get in the condition he is in by her act. . . . Jess did [this] to himself and made himself what he is—and I think is answerable for it."¹¹

Loving, in his *Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman*, infers that Jeff means that Jesse had contracted syphilis.¹² Gay Wilson Allen, in *The Solitary Singer*, also quotes Jeff's letter and seems to imply the same thing, syphilis in its final phase being associated with dementia in some cases.¹³ Jeff may have meant something else, though—maybe living with the Irishwoman had led to a beating from the sort of people to be found around prostitutes, or maybe the woman inflicted the beating herself, or arranged for it to be given. Or, Jeff may have been wrong in his amateur diagnosis—the symptoms of late-stage syphilis are varied, and many can have other causes. To name only one possible other cause: cerebral arteriosclerosis, from which Walt may have suffered (*viz.* his crippling stroke of January 1873, which was preceded by what would now be seen as many hypertensive episodes). Walt was fifty-three when he had his stroke, and Jesse was fifty-two when he died, still in the asylum, of a cerebral aneurysm.¹⁴

Their father, Walter Whitman, Sr., had also begun to decline in his fifties. In his last years he was plagued by paralysis and debility, common symptoms of cerebral artery disease (and of many other conditions, too). Some of the neurological symptoms characteristic of late-stage syphilis—blindness, hearing loss, loss of peripheral reflexes—are nowhere mentioned in the medical record kept of Jesse, and the only glimpse we have of him during the years of his asylum stay seems to suggest that he was still able to get around well, if he wanted to. This glimpse comes from a letter Mrs. Whitman wrote Walt on April 7, 1869, when Jesse had been under hospital care for four years. It reports on an unusual meeting that her youngest son, Edward, had on the streets of Brooklyn:

two or three weeks ago edd was down town and encountered henry rome he talked a great deal about Jess said it was too damed bad to keep him [in the asylum] that he henry had broke out and got away....i didnt know but what he would induce Jess to leave and come with him....i dont know what i should doo if such should happen they must have much trouble with henry¹⁵

Rome was a member of the family of Brooklyn printers (brothers Andrew and James Rome) that produced the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.¹⁶ He was quite mad, and it was Mrs. Whitman's impression that he had tried to get Jesse to break out, but that Jesse had declined to come along. Not too much can or should be made of this report from a retarded man of a madman's story, but Mrs. Whitman seems to have taken seriously the idea that Jesse might show up at her door—he was certainly able to do so, she believed.

Jesse's symptoms of mental decline—paranoia, confusion, outbursts—are consistent with vascular dementia, as it is now often called. In that condition, most commonly seen among the old, many small strokes produce damages in the brain that can lead to personality changes—sometimes profound changes. Granting that medical diagnoses a century and a half after the event are speculative, to say the least, it seems as likely that Jesse's descent into madness had to do with cerebral arteriosclerosis, amplifying the effects of mechanical injury, as with syphilis, and that a diagnosis of tertiary syphilis is not necessary to account for his suffering.



Walt, the man who nursed thousands, whose discerning sensitivity made his work in the Civil War hospitals legendary, seems an unlikely candidate for hauling a brother off to a madhouse. The patience of his ministrations to the wounded men of the war—his willingness to sit with them for days when necessary, for years in some cases (he was still visiting Washington hospitals years after the war was over)—somehow argues against an abrupt move to lock away the family lunatic. But it was probably not an abrupt or whimsical move. In the crowded conditions of the Whitman ménage in Brooklyn, an incident such as the one of December 6, 1863, went a long way toward destroying the understandings by which a group of people were able to live together; the young parents, Jeff and Mattie, could not afterward feel the same about the safety of their children in the house, and for them that was probably determinative.

It took Mrs. Whitman a year to accede to the plan to put Jesse away. There may have been other incidents during that year, although none are mentioned in the family correspondence, or maybe the hopelessness of Jesse's case at last became clear. The idea that he had “the best mind of any of the children” needs to be reconsidered in light of Mrs. Whitman's comment, at the time of the chair episode, that Jesse “is very passionate almost to frenzy and always was but of course his brain is very weak”—the weakness may be something recently acquired, or it may be a quality implied in being “very passionate almost to frenzy.”¹⁷

Walt was the right brother to do the work of finding a suitable place for Jesse, if such a place were needed. He knew New York's hospitals and doctors well; he had been visiting local hospitals, and attending medical procedures, for years before his move to Washington, and his considerable experience of different facilities and styles of treatment made him, it could be argued, exactly the sort of helper one would want. Jeff was eager to have Jesse gone from

the house, but he was less knowledgeable and possibly disinclined to trouble himself any more than he had to; two months after Jesse's confinement, he wrote Walt, "Jess I have not heard from since you went away I suppose I ought to go see him but they are taking such quantities of small pox patients out to that hospital . . . that I am almost afraid to[.]"¹⁸

Walt was at the end of a medical crisis of his own when he committed Jesse. He had been at home in Brooklyn, recuperating from exhaustion and illness, since June of 1864; the doctors attributed his condition to the infectious atmosphere of the war-hospitals ("I have spells of faintness & very bad feeling in my head, fullness & pain," he wrote his mother, again suggesting hypertension).¹⁹ But by December he was feeling pretty well again. The page in the case book of the Kings County Asylum that records Jesse's case includes a penciled notation beneath the heading "Walter Whitman (brother)" that reads, "Jan 22nd '65."²⁰ Walt likely visited Jesse on that day—it was his last full day in Brooklyn before he took a morning train back to Washington.²¹

There is another penciled notation, for "October 10, 1865," under the same heading. Walt was back in New York in the autumn of 1865, seeing to the binding of a sheaf of new poems into his already-printed, not-yet-distributed book of poetry about the war, *Drum-Taps*. The new pages included, most notably, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." If Walt in fact visited Jesse that October 10, and if he found his brother's situation acceptable, he would not have been surprised. The year before he had published a long article, an omnibus account in the *New York Times* of his experiences as an "Independent Missionary" to the sick and wounded soldiers. In the course of describing what he had seen and learned since the Battle of First Fredericksburg, when he sought his brother George among the casualties of that ferocious slaughter, he reviewed a number of New York medical institutions, finding, for example, the Brooklyn City Hospital, on Raymond Street, to be "a bad place for soldiers, or anybody else." The doctors were kind and patient there, but for "Cleanliness, proper nursing, watching &c." the place was deficient. "For dinner on Sundays, I invariably found nothing but rice and molasses." In sum it was "the poorest hospital I have yet been in, out of many hundreds."²²

In contrast to the facility on Raymond Street, the "great Brooklyn General Hospital . . . at Flatbush, including the extensive Lunatic Asylum," won his strong approval. About the asylum he declared, "I have deliberately to put on record about the profoundest satisfaction with professional capacity, completeness of house arrangements to ends required, and the right vital spirit animating all, that I have yet found in any public curative institution among civilians."²³

This resounding endorsement, published just six days after Jesse's committal, would have been read with great interest by Mrs. Whitman, and possibly by other tenants of the house on North Portland. To know that her unfortunate eldest son, though confined to a madhouse, was in the hands of humane professionals possessed of the right spirit, would have gone some way toward consoling her; she was a habitual reader of the local papers (also of papers, reviews, and books that Walt reliably sent her), and print evidence had

great weight with her. On the occasion of Jesse's death (on or about March 21, 1870), she wrote, "My dear walt i received your letter and paper with jesse death in it poor soul i hope hes better off but it makes me feel very sad didnt the doctor say any thing[.]"²⁴ A few days later she added in another letter, "i doo wish the doctor would write something about the poor unfortunates death it would be some consolation to hear[.]"²⁵

They had done what they could—what they had to. "O walt aint it sad," she wrote when she first heard of his death, "to think the poor soul hadent a friend near him in his last moments and to think he had a pauper's grave . . . hes done poor fellow i was thinking of him more lately than common i wish walter you would write to Jeff and hanna [one of her daughters] that he is dead I will write to george i feel very sad of course walt if he has done ever so wrong he was my first born[.]"²⁶

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- 1 Katherine Molinoff, "Some Notes on Whitman's Family," in *Monographs on Unpublished Whitman Material*, No. 1-3, (Brooklyn: The Comet Press, 1941), 23.
- 2 Case Book D, Brooklyn State Hospital, 284, in Molinoff, 21.
- 3 Dennis Berthold and Kenneth Price, eds., *Dear Brother Walt: The Letters of Thomas Jefferson Whitman* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1984), 85-86.
- 4 Jerome M. Loving, ed., *Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), 71.
- 5 Molinoff, 23.
- 6 National Archives and Records Administration, Northeast Region, Record Group 36 (Hereafter NARA). I would like to thank my research assistants, Petrina Crockford and Caitlin Roper, for their help.
- 7 <http://www.immigrantships.net/v4/1800v4/carrollofcarrollton18350623.html>.
- 8 Whitman, *The Correspondence*, ed. Edwin Haviland Miller (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 1:239.
- 9 NARA.
- 10 Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 53-54.
- 11 *Dear Brother Walt*, 85-86.
- 12 *Civil War Letters of George Washington Whitman*, 9.
- 13 Gay Wilson Allen, *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 307.
- 14 Molinoff, 19.

- 15 Trent Collection, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.
- 16 Allen, 407.
- 17 Trent Collection, "Christmas Letter, 1863."
- 18 *Dear Brother Walt*, 104.
- 19 *Corr.*, 233.
- 20 Molinoff, 21.
- 21 *Corr.*, 248.
- 22 Walt Whitman, "Our Wounded and Sick Soldiers. Visits Among Army Hospitals, At Washington, on the Field, and here in New-York," *New York Times* (December 11, 1864).
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Trent Collection, "28 March 1870."
- 25 Trent Collection, "April 5 (1870)."
- 26 Trent Collection, "24 (March 1870)."

TWO UNPUBLISHED WHITMAN FAMILY LETTERS

A fragment of a letter signed by Walt Whitman lies nestled in the Special Collections department of Hunter Library at Western Carolina University, along with two unpublished letters written by his two brothers, Thomas Jefferson (Jeff) Whitman and George Washington Whitman. All of the letters reflect a familial concern of three brothers, for each other and for their mother and sisters. The collection reinforces the importance of Walt Whitman's family in the poet's life.

In the first letter of this collection (MS. 1.1 and MS 1.2), dated March 19, 1862, George Whitman describes the battles of Roanoke, Virginia, and New Berne, North Carolina, to his sister, Mary Elizabeth Whitman Nostrand. The letter's tone is matter-of-fact, even though George documents the loss of many "intimate friends." George indicates that he has not received news from home for a month, and he urgently requests that Mary "write immediately."

Near Newbern N.C. March 19th 1862

Dear Sister

Hearing that a mail leaves here today I have only time to write a few lines to let you know that I am well and hearty. Tell Han we have given the rebels another licking and won a splendid victory. I went through the fight and did not get a scratch although the balls rained around me for over two hours, and several of our boys were struck down close to my side. We left Roanoke Island March 11th and landed about sixteen