

NOTES



A NEWLY DISCOVERED 1849 WHITMAN LETTER TO THE “MESSRS. MERRIAM”

AN IMPORTANT 1849 LETTER written by Whitman to “Messrs. Merriam” has recently been found. “Messrs. Merriam” are George and Charles Merriam, the brothers who formed G. & C. Merriam Company, which in 1843 gained the rights to publish Noah Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. The letter turned up several years ago in the collection of Merriam Company papers owned by Madeline Kripke. Ms. Kripke, well-known as the “dame of dictionaries” (and founding member and Fellow of the Dictionary Society of North America), amassed one of the world’s largest collections of historical dictionaries and dictionary-related materials, all housed in her Greenwich Village walkup, which contained over 20,000 books and countless boxes of documents. She worked with me on this note for several years before her death from COVID-19 in April of this year.¹ She originally contacted me in 2013 about the existence of this letter, and, with her typical caution, moved slowly and carefully toward its publication.

Madeline Kripke received a cold call fifteen years or so ago offering her a large archive of old Merriam papers, which she agreed to purchase over a period of several years. Correspondence from well-known nineteenth-century celebrities associated with the dictionary had been weeded out of the archive decades before by the heirs. The reason this letter from Whitman slipped through, Kripke believed, was his lack of fame in 1849. This appeared to the heirs to be just another letter from another newspaper man. When Kripke was combing through the massive archive, she suddenly saw on one docket page the notation “Brooklyn Freeman April 17 / ’49.” She knew that Whitman had edited that paper around that time, and she recalled her fear and excitement as she began to open the stampless cover. “My wonder was profound,” she told me, “even *before* I saw that it really *was* from Walter Whitman. I was in fact trembling as I opened the letter slowly and carefully.”

This letter joins the very few extant Whitman letters from before 1855. Until this Merriam letter was found, there had been only twenty-one known

letters from Whitman prior to the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*: nine letters written to Whitman's friend Abraham Paul Leech in 1840 and 1841; one letter to an unidentified correspondent in 1841; two letters from 1842 (both to editor Nathan Hale, Jr.); four letters in 1848 written by Whitman and his brother Jeff to their mother (when Walt and Jeff were in New Orleans); one in 1849 (to politician Tunis G. Bergen); and four letters in the early 1850s before *Leaves of Grass* was published.

The letter to the Merriam brothers is particularly significant because it records the inception of Whitman's lifelong relationship with G. & C. Merriam Company, during which he sent them new editions of *Leaves of Grass* and asked for the latest edition of Webster's Dictionary in return. And it documents just how early Whitman's lifelong love of and fascination with dictionaries began. The letter records Whitman's complaint to the Webster brothers that, although he had already published in the *Freeman* a long notice he had written himself about a new revised edition of Webster's published in 1847, he had not yet received his complimentary specially bound copy of the *Dictionary* in return. This tit-for-tat advertising strategy was a staple of the Merriam Company's promotions. Whitman lets the Merriams know he had inquired at the publisher and book agent Mark H. Newman's shop on Broadway in New York, which he had designated as the place for the Merriams to send the copy of their new Webster's.

Here is a transcription of the letter:

"Freeman" office
Brooklyn, L.I., April 17

Messrs. Merriam,

I have published one long notice, (written by myself,) and the two short notices sent me from you—as you have doubtless seen by the papers I send you.—All have been printed in the editorial columns.—

But I have not yet received my copy of the Dictionary.—I have called several times at Mr. Newman's, but they have either not had any copy in Russia binding, or were averse to giving me one.—If convenient, upon the receipt of this, I wish you would envelope a Dictionary and put on it my address (as below) and send it to Newman's—labelled "to be called for."—Let it be Russia bound—black, or some other dark color.—I shall publish the notices received the other day—and from time to time, what others you send.—

I still have the note you wrote me, embodying an order on Mr. Newman for a Dictionary—which order I will give him, when my copy arrives.—

Walter Whitman
Publisher "Freeman"
106 Myrtle avenue, Brooklyn L.I.

The smudged, hard-to-read Merriam disposition note in the upper left-hand corner of the first page of the letter reads:

sent an
order
Newman &
asked him to
return order
on Newman[?]

The letter was accompanied in the archive by a docket page on which there is light pencil writing in the hand of Douglas Rowley, the grandson of Homer Merriam, who joined the Merriam brothers as a partner of the company in 1856. The first word in that note is “news.” Then “Brooklyn” and “Freeman news.” Above that is “Brooklyn Freeman April 17 / ’49.”

Whitman began editing the Brooklyn *Freeman* after he returned from New Orleans in June of 1848, following his three-month stint on the *Crescent*. He attended the Free Soil convention in Buffalo in August, then continued his political activities as a member of the Free Soil General Committee for Brooklyn and became editor of *Freeman*, the new Free Soil newspaper, which published its first issue on September 9, 1848. That issue, the only one that survives, reveals Whitman passionately stating the paper’s reason for existing: affirming that “our doctrine is the doctrine laid down in the Buffalo Convention,” he goes on to vow that “we shall oppose, under all circumstances, the addition to the Union, in the future, of a single inch of *slave land*, whether in the form of state or territory.” The next day, a fire destroyed twenty acres of Brooklyn, including the newspaper’s office. (A couple of days later, another fire threatened the Whitman family residence on Myrtle Street but was put under control just in time.) The *Freeman* office was uninsured, but Whitman nonetheless managed to get the paper back into print on November 1, just in time to get in a word before the election, positioning the Free Soilers against the larger conservative faction of Democrats as the conscience of the party. Free Soilers lost the 1848 presidential election and lost again in spring elections of 1849, but Whitman continued to publish the *Freeman* and turned it into a daily in May 1849. He supported the election of Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, but, eventually losing his optimism, he resigned the editorship on September 11, 1849.²

Since there are no extant copies of the *Freeman* after the first issue, it is not possible to find the puffs that Whitman published in the paper endorsing the Merriams’ Webster’s Dictionary. We can see a good example, however, in *The*

Brooklyn Daily Eagle, and *Kings County Democrat* of October 18, 1845, just a few months before Whitman became editor of that paper:

WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY.—George and Charles Merriam, of Springfield, Mass., have published an edition of Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language, in two volumes octavo—being the first in that shape. It contains the whole vocabulary of the quarto, with corrections, improvements, and several thousand additional words, and an explanation of the principles on which language is founded. The claims of this book are so well known and so generally acknowledged, not only in this country but in England, that it would be a work of supererogation to speak of them at length. It engrossed the author's time and talents during the best part of his life, and is not only an authoritative standard, but likewise a monument of patience and perseverance. In it the words are traced to their *sources*, and numerous quotations made from the best writers to assist in determining their meaning. Mark H. Newman, Broadway, N.Y. is the agent.³

These kinds of endorsements were important to G. & C. Merriam, since they were in the midst of the “dictionary war” with Joseph Emerson Worcester's dictionary for most of the nineteenth century; both companies worked vigorously to position their dictionaries as the “standard” for use in schools, homes, and businesses. This particular puff identifies Mark H. Newman as the Merriams' New York agent, making it clear why Newman appears so prominently in Whitman's letter. In addition to selling books, Newman was also a publisher of school textbooks, with offices at 199 Broadway.³

The 1847 revised edition of Webster's that Whitman presumably did eventually procure from the Merriam brothers (with its fine, dark Russia leather binding) became his preferred dictionary when he was writing the poems for the first three editions of *Leaves of Grass*. He kept tabs on the dictionary war, owning at various times both Webster's and Worcester's dictionaries and marveling at how quickly the American English language was growing as each new edition contained thousands of new words.⁴ Right to the end of his life, Whitman was thinking about the growing proliferation of American dictionaries (the six-volume *Century Dictionary* was being published in New York from 1889 to 1891), their growing lists of words, and what they signaled for the English language as it developed, altered, and expanded in America; he told his disciple Horace Traubel in 1889:

English anyhow is a composite tongue—is made up of world-contributions—the *Century dictionary* having 200,000 words. In this last hour or so in which we three have been talking together, I suppose 9 out of every 10 of the words we used are derived—and this applies especially with respect to America, for America may well be—must be—in her language what she is in her physiological composition—a complex of agencies from all quarters of the globe—a mosaic—the most remarkable natural combination of time.⁵

The beginnings of Whitman's lifelong journey with dictionaries, then, can now be further documented with this 1849 letter to the brothers Merriam.

New York City
The University of Iowa

MADELINE KRIPKE
ED FOLSOM

NOTES

1 See Sam Roberts, "Madeline Kripke, Doyenne of Dictionaries, Is Dead at 76," *New York Times* (April 30, 2020).

2 See Jon Panish, "Brooklyn *Freeman*," in J. R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1998), 82-83; and Joseph Jay Rubin, *The Historic Whitman* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), Chapter 14: "Abdiel."

3 For a selection of Newman's school texts, see openlibrary.org/publishers/Mark_H._Newman_&_Co.

4 For a full discussion of Whitman's take on the dictionary war, on dictionaries in general, on his attempts to write his own dictionary, and on the significance of dictionaries in his work, see Ed Folsom, *Walt Whitman's Native Representations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Chapter 1: "Whitman and Dictionaries."

5 See Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols. (various dates), 6:165. Available on the *Walt Whitman Archive*.

*Put on
the
note
to
Newman*

"Freeman" office

Brooklyn, L. I., April 17

Messrs. Merriam,

I have published
one long notice, (written by
myself,) and the two short
notices sent me from you -
as you have doubtless seen
by the papers I sent you -
All have been printed in
the editorial columns. -

But I have not yet
received my copy of the Dic:
tionary. - I have called several
times at Mr. Newman's, but
they have either not had
any copy in Russia binding,
or were averse to giving me

one - If convenient, upon the receipt of this, I wish you would envelope a Dictionary, and put on it my address (as below), and send it to Newman's - labelled "to be called for." - Let it be Russia bound - black, or some other dark color - I shall publish the notices received the other day - and from time to time, what others you send -

I still have the note you wrote me, embodying an order on Mr. Newman for a Dictionary - which order I will give him, when my copy arrives -

Walter Whitman
 Publisher "Freeman"
 106 Myrtle Avenue, Brooklyn L. I.

Whitman Freeman
1/17/49
news
Brooklyn
Freeman news

G. & C. Merriam docket page for the Whitman letter.