

## **The Walt Whitman House: Mickle Street Revisited**

### **By Will Valentino**

The famed poet Walt Whitman lived the final years of his life in Burlington County finally settling down in 1884 to spend his twilight years in a humble home he purchased in Camden, New Jersey which still stands today. In recent years, the house has undergone an award winning restoration, including the duplication of original wallpapers found in the home that survived from the time Whitman lived there. The house was the first and only home Whitman would ever own.

Most of the street Whitman knew is gone now, and the small house-lined street from Whitman's time is now a raging Boulevard seething past the house in angst against its solitude. Leo Blake, the curator of the Whitman House at the time of my visit led me on a tour of the home, which is filled with much of the original furniture, mementos, and photographs that were in the house when Whitman lived there until his death in 1892.

Upstairs, the front bedroom still has Whitman's original bed where the poet died and a pair of Whitman's shoes carelessly left on the floor by a favorite chair, as if awaiting his return. Many visited Whitman here, from fans and journalists of his time to his contemporaries such as Bram Stoker and Charles Dickens. Oscar Wilde visited with Whitman a few years earlier when Whitman was living with his brother in Camden. The house is a rare surviving example of a mid-19th century working class row home, outwardly simple yet inwardly filled with wonder.

"I like the folks, the plain, ignorant, unpretentious folks, and the youngsters that come and slide on my cellar door" Whitman once said of his working class neighborhood. Mr. Blake told me Whitman would sit by an open window in the parlor just above his cellar door and talk with people as they walked by the house. Whitman's chair still looks as if it beckons to him, sitting in the corner by the same window, but only Whitman's eloquent words remain and the memory of the free spirited man who wrote them.

The House is located at 428 Mickle Blvd., a walkable three blocks west of the Walter Rand RIVERLINE rail station, literally minutes from Palmyra and Riverton.

Perhaps even Whitman ventured north along the rails to visit Palmyra or received a visit from John Dunbar Hylton, a contemporary of Whitman's who lived in a house on a bluff along Pennsauken Creek overlooking Palmyra.

You can learn more about the Whitman House on its website.

(<http://www.nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/historic/whitman/>). Visitors should first call the house @ 856 964 5383 to confirm its hours and schedule a tour.

"Camden was originally an accident, but I shall never be sorry I was left over in Camden. It has brought me blessed returns." - Walt Whitman.