



## A Newly Discovered Walter Whitman, Sr., Document

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## A NEWLY DISCOVERED WALTER WHITMAN, SR., DOCUMENT

Long Island, Whitman's birthplace, has once again yielded a small piece of the Whitman family history. On May 5, 2001, the Community United Methodist Church of East Norwich held a centennial celebration that included the opening of a cornerstone laid May 18, 1901. Among the cornerstone contents was a receipted bill dated August 16, 1834, for carpentry work by Walter Whitman. This would have been for the construction of the original church, or meeting house, known as the Wesley Methodist Church and dedicated in 1834.

The history of the Methodist community in Norwich (now East Norwich) begins in 1784 with a circuit rider minister, Rev. Phillip Cox, who was responsible for the Long Island Circuit, which took in all of Long Island.<sup>1</sup> From his preaching ministry arose the first organized Methodist society in the area, which met in the homes or barns of its members. In 1810 the Long Island Circuit was divided into two units, with Norwich part of the Jamaica Circuit. One circuit minister, Elijah Hibard, serving in the year 1822-1823, is known to have had a theological dispute with the controversial Quaker Elias Hicks in the latter's native Jericho, just south of Norwich. Hicks, who caused a schism within Long Island's Quaker community, was greatly admired by Walter Whitman, Sr., and later by his son Walt. (We know that in 1829 Louisa and Walter Whitman heard Hicks preach in a Brooklyn meeting.) By 1826 the Norwich Methodist Society was sufficiently established to have its members enumerated for the Methodist Quarterly Conference. Included in the list of members is one Jane Van Nostrand, and among the 1833 subscribers to a pledge to contribute toward the Society's first church building was a John [Van?] Nostrand. It is possible that one or both of these may have been related to Ansel Van Nostrand, the mechanic who in January 1840 married Walt's sister Mary Elizabeth when she was eighteen. Mary and her husband lived in Greenport, which is north of East Norwich and further east, but some part of his family may have resided in the Norwich area.

The original Norwich Methodist church was built on a site donated by James Vernon (some of whose descendants remain active in the church today) and the wood for its construction came from trees felled on his land in the winter of 1833. The following spring construction began of the small 31' x 34' structure, and in June of that year the building was dedicated. A new and larger church was built in 1901 and the cornerstone laying for it, on May 18, 1901, was attended by Vice-President Theodore Roosevelt, whose home was in nearby Oyster Bay. In June 1987 the Wesley Methodist Church merged with St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Oyster Bay to form the Community United Methodist Church, at Vernon Avenue and Route 106, East Norwich, New York.

The 1834 document recovered from the cornerstone appears to be a payment draft and reads:

