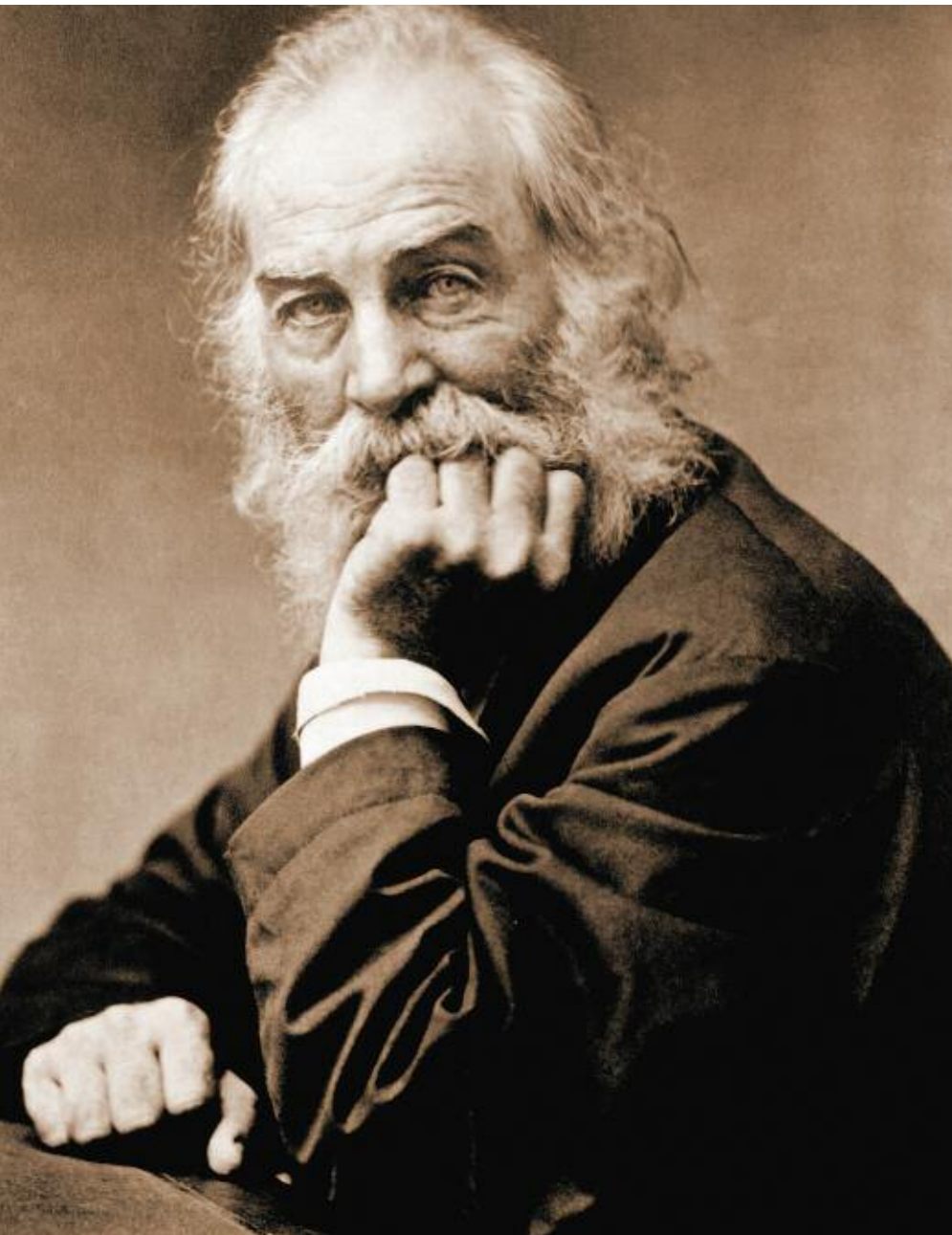


# The story behind the Walt Whitman interview



**Editor's note:** Acting on a hunch that students attending The New Jersey State Normal School in Trenton might have been interested in Walt Whitman, the famous poet who had published *Leaves of Grass* in the same year the school was founded, then-junior English major Nicole Kukawski searched archived issues of *The Signal*, the student paper. In an 1888 issue, she came across a brief article that had escaped the notice of prior researchers. In May, *The Associated Press*, *Newsweek* magazine, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* and many international papers reported the finding, which has brought Nicole and the College considerable attention. Here Nicole explains another part of the story.

"Remember this above all. There is no royal road to learning," I said, excitedly quoting Walt Whitman to my professor, David Blake, during our class' train ride from Trenton to the historic Whitman house in Camden. The April 6th trip was the perfect occasion for sharing the news that I had discovered an interview with Whitman in *The Signal* just two days prior, for we were traveling on the same track that carried the two young interviewers from the NJ State Model School to Whitman's home over a hundred years earlier. In the back of the train, I feverishly recited as much as I could remember from the February 1888 article, "Walt Whitman's Advice to the State Scholars" and incessantly repeated the most alarming three pieces of his advice: "First, don't write poetry. Second ditto. Third ditto."

While Whitman's controversial words caused international interest, and while I spent my summer speaking and writing on the meaning of his advice, I can never forget the excitement I felt when I

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stood with my class in Whitman's home that day. There we were, in the very same room, with the same great oak chair by the fire, where one of the greatest American poets and two alumni of my school discussed the purpose of learning, reading, and writing so many years ago.

As the tour guide led us through the little house, I could not help but wonder about the interviewers. Who were these two insightful young men whose understanding of Whitman far exceeded that of others in their own time? In the subsequent months, I answered many questions about Whitman's advice, but I simultaneously and zealously uncovered the lives of the men who solicited it. George W. Worman and Francis B. Lee have proved themselves to be among the most fascinating and successful graduates of the Model School, the laboratory school associated with The New Jersey State Normal School from 1856 to 1917.

Worman, Model class of 1886, who is first mentioned in *The Signal* article, was a member of the first editorial board of *The Signal*, which he and other Thencanic Club (literary society) members began in September 1885. The Model School shared space with the NJ State Normal School, and likewise shared *The Signal*. After graduating, Worman worked for several Camden-area newspapers that later merged with papers for which Whitman occasionally wrote, indicating that Worman was most likely the cause of the interview.

In 1886, Worman also entered the University of Pennsylvania's School of Law, where he was elected president of the legal fraternity and became the Philadelphia correspondent of *Columbia Law School Times*. Worman interviewed Whitman only months before



graduating from Penn in 1888. A year later, he worked as a correspondent of the *Philadelphia Press* from Frenchtown, covering the presidential campaign of President Benjamin Harrison. In 1890, he returned to Camden to work in the office of Whitman's friend and eventual literary executor, Thomas Harned, who was also a top lawyer in New Jersey at the time. It is plausible, then, that Worman knew Harned, Whitman, or both at the time of the interview.

The interview is signed "Cessator," the pseudonym of the only *Signal* editor who used a Latin penname, Francis B. Lee. Lee, himself a member of *The Signal's* first editorial board and friend of Worman, is often referred to throughout *The Signal* as the "Old Roman" of the paper. After his Model graduation, Lee joined Worman at Penn in the fall of 1888, studying finance and journalism. While continuing to contribute poetry and articles back to *The Signal*, Lee wrote

for Penn's student newspaper, *The Pennsylvanian*. After 1890, Lee apparently heeded Whitman's advice not to write poetry because he abandoned doing so and devoted his life to journalistic and historical writing. He wrote extensively for Trenton newspapers and published two massive histories of the city (held in TCNJ's library today), which earned him "repute as a state historian of note, an important functionary of patriotic celebrations, a fluent speaker, and an all-around popular citizen."

Lee's life was altered when Worman died in February 1890. *The Signal* printed an obituary, which Lee most likely wrote for his fellow interviewer, editor, and classmate. It said, "the black-winged Angel of Death [came] after a brief illness from typhoid fever and resultant heart failure," and called Worman, "one of the most brilliant men who ever graduated from the Model School." In addition to Lee's memoriam,

we find a sorrowful tone in the final lines of his poem, "Stanzas," published soon after Worman's death: "Sweet love will die—he cannot live in that heart which knows only sorrow." After his friend's death, Lee contributed only one more poem to *The Signal* before graduating from Penn and establishing himself as a Trenton lawyer and writer. Although Lee also died fairly young, in 1914, his repute was enough to have a street in downtown Trenton—Lee Avenue—named for him.

It is no surprise that Whitman consented to an interview conducted by two such student journalists from the New Jersey State Normal/Model Schools. Founded in 1855, the school was created in part to break from the very "royal road to learning" that Whitman discounts. Its leaders, like Whitman, held fast to the educational reformist ideas of the mid 19th century that favored experience over memorization and conventionality. Lee and Worman's interest in Whitman profoundly demonstrates this ideal, for their enthusiasm over his poetry far exceeded daily classroom activities. Their explorative curiosity led them down their own road, to encounter—not just the poetry—but the poet himself. Even my own curiosity, which was inspired by the latest curriculum changes at TCNJ, feeds into the very same ideal—education through deeper investigation and personal experience.

While the latest changes at TCNJ are indeed just a few in the long history of the reshaping, renaming, and redefining that has occurred since 1855, oftentimes the experience of our past has been lost amid the urge to move forward. For this, TCNJ also has had a history of needing a clearer sense of school pride and tradition. Even a March 1887 *Signal*

article, under Lee's editorial board, described the lack of school feeling: "We should have a fondness for our Alma Mater.... There must be an awakening to the fact that a school feeling is an absolute necessity. When that feeling comes then will the road to a proper unification of thought, sympathy, and action among our students be a firm reality and not a myth."

Such school feelings often are based on tradition or ritual, which Whitman said can "put us in the mire." However, the 1887 article advocates not ritual, but an appreciation of people, of the individuals within the community who can think, create, and explore.

"I celebrate myself and sing myself" are Whitman's famous words from the beginning of "Song of Myself" from *Leaves of Grass*. In this sesquicentennial year, as we, like Whitman, have celebrated the importance of the individual, from both our past and future, can we finally say this feeling has arrived?



Nicole Kukawski '06

