

6. Two Old Family Interiors

OF the domestic and inside life of the middle of Long Island, at and just before that time, here are two samples:

“The Whitmans, at the beginning of the present century, lived in a long story-and-a-half farm-house, hugely timber’d, which is still standing. A great smoke-canopied kitchen, with vast hearth and chimney, form’d one end of the house. The existence of slavery in New York at that time, and the possession by the family of some twelve or fifteen slaves, house and field servants, gave things quite a patriarchal look. The very young darkies could be seen, a swarm of them, toward sundown, in this kitchen, squatted in a circle on the floor, eating their supper of Indian pudding and milk. In the house, and in food and furniture, all was rude, but substantial. No carpets or stoves were known, and no coffee, and tea or sugar only for the women. Rousing wood fires gave both warmth and light on winter nights. Pork, poultry, beef, and all the ordinary vegetables and grains were plentiful. Cider was the men’s common drink, and used at meals. The clothes were mainly homespun. Journeys were made by both men and women on horseback. Both sexes labor’d with their own hands—the men on the farm—the women in the house and around it. Books were scarce. The annual copy of the almanac was a treat, and was pored over through the long winter evenings. I must not forget to mention that both these families were near enough to the sea to behold it from the high places, and to hear in still hours the roar of the surf; the latter, after a storm, giving a peculiar sound at night. Then all hands, male and female, went down frequently on beach and bathing parties, and the men on practical expeditions for cutting salt hay, and for clamming and fishing.”—John Burroughs’s NOTES.

“The ancestors of Walt Whitman, on both the paternal and maternal sides, kept a good table, sustain’d the hospitalities, decorums, and an excellent social reputation in the county, and they were often of mark’d individuality. If space permitted, I should consider some of the men worthy special description; and still more some of the women. His great-grandmother on the paternal side, for instance, was a large swarthy woman, who lived to a very old age. She smoked tobacco, rode on horseback like a man, managed the most vicious horse, and, becoming a widow in later life, went forth every day over her farm-lands, frequently in the saddle, directing the labor of her slaves, with language in which, on exciting occasions, oaths were not spared. The two immediate grandmothers were, in the best sense, superior women. The maternal one (Amy Williams before marriage) was a Friend, or Quakeress, of sweet, sensible, character, housewifely proclivities, and deeply intuitive and spiritual. The other, (Hannah Brush,) was an equally noble, perhaps stronger character, lived to be very old, had quite a family of sons, was a natural

lady, was in early life a school-mistress, and had great solidity of mind. W. W. himself makes much of the women of his ancestry.”—The same.

Out from these arrieres of persons and scenes, I was born May 31, 1819. And now to dwell awhile on the locality itself—as the successive growth stages of my infancy, childhood, youth and manhood were all pass’d on Long Island, which I sometimes feel as if I had incorporated. I roam’d, as boy and man, and have lived in nearly all parts, from Brooklyn to Montauk point.

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