

Copyright Lore

Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*

■ Judith Nierman

May 15, 2005, marks the 150th anniversary of the copyright registration for Walt Whitman's volume *Leaves of Grass*, a landmark in American poetry. The author, Walter Whitman as he called himself then, registered his copyright in the work on May 15, 1855, in the U.S. District Court in the Southern District of New York. In its first edition, *Leaves of Grass* included an introduction and twelve untitled poems written in a flowing free-verse style much praised by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Throughout his life, Whitman continued to work on *Leaves of Grass*, issuing nine editions until it grew to a lengthy volume. Even as he created derivative works, he was careful about his copyrights.

An exchange of letters between Librarian of Congress Ainsworth Rand Spofford, who was responsible for copyright registration after that function was centralized in the Library of Congress in 1870, and Whitman illustrates the author's concern for his intellectual property rights. In an undated letter written in Boston, Whitman requests a search of his copyrights.

My Dear Mr. Spofford

If convenient won't you inform me soon as possible by letter here, of the dates of my copyrights on Leaves of Grass— I think they were in 1856, 1860, 1866 (or 7) and in 1876, — but want to know exactly.

Walt Whitman

If you have a printed slip or abstract of the copyright laws, please enclose that also.

Spofford, who did not have a Reference and Bibliography Section to do copyright research, responded on July 21, 1876:

Dear Sir,

This Library has six editions of Leaves of Grass:

Brooklyn 1855 1st Ed. / [ditto] 1856 2d. Ed.? / Boston 1860–61 3d. Ed.? / New York 1867 4th Ed.? / Washington 1871 5th Ed.? / Camden 1876 6th Ed.?

Wishing to know from an authentic source what other American editions have been printed if any will you kindly inform me of the place and date of any such publications?

Very respectfully,

A.R. Spofford

Librarian of Congress

RIGHT
Photograph of Walt
Whitman, circa 1871
(courtesy Prints and
Photographs Division)

BACKGROUND
Whitman's letter of
July 22, 1876 (courtesy
Manuscript Division)



The next day, July 22, 1876, Whitman responded from Camden, N.J.:

A.R. Spofford

Dear Sir

The editions of my Leaves of Grass as within specified are the only ones I have published— & comprise all. (Two Rivulets, the further Vol. just issued by me, I believe you have.)

Walt Whitman

I write on the letter, & return it so, for greater definiteness.

Writing later that year on Sept. 26 from Brooklyn, Whitman registered an additional three claims to copyright.

Librarian of Congress.

Dear Sir:

By accident the \$3— fees for the three copyrights— solicited in my letter of yesterday— were not enclosed in that letter.

I beg pardon— & enclose the money herewith.

Walt Whitman

As a result of Whitman's copyright registrations, the Library of Congress acquired priceless volumes that form a part of America's literary and cultural heritage. See a first edition of *Leaves of Grass* and other Whitman materials, including manuscripts, letters, books, and haversack, in "Revising Himself: Celebrating 150 Years of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*" on exhibit in the Southwest Gallery of the Jefferson Building May 16 through Dec. 3. ©