Biographers have called Walt Whitman “America’s most influential and innovative poet” and some have even called him “the greatest of all American poets.” But in the winter of 1862-63, even as he was gaining a reputation as a talented poet, Whitman was forty-three years old, volunteering as a nurse in Union hospitals, and looking for a steady job in the nation’s capital.

Whitman’s desire to work for the government in Washington, D.C., had much to do with the Civil War. In December 1862, a few days after the Battle of Fredericksburg, Whitman checked the casualty roster in his New York newspaper and saw a name that resembled that of his younger brother. His brother was George Washington Whitman, and the roster read “G.W. Whitmore.” So, the elder Whitman immediately went to Virginia in search of his brother.

In Fredericksburg, Whitman did find his brother, who was alive, having sustained only a superficial facial wound. But rather than returning home immediately, Whitman sent a telegram telling their family that George was safe and that he, Walt, had decided to stay for a few days, as his help was needed.

The battle had resulted in nearly 18,000 casualties on both sides. The bodies of the dead needed to be buried and the wounded needed attention. Whitman assisted with both tasks. He spent time attending wounded soldiers, often writing down their messages to their families. He also wrote a letter to his own mother, telling her that he might look for work in Washington, D.C.

The federal bureaucracy during these years was growing. In the 1830s, there were 20,000 federal employees; by the end of the Civil War, there were 53,000; and by the mid-1880s, there were 131,000. Whitman knew that while government jobs were available, the so-called “spoils system” still dictated who was hired (and would for another twenty years until the passage of the Pendleton Act). Under this system, many officials obtained their positions, not because of special skills, but because of whom they knew. So, Whitman wrote to his friend, the American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, and asked him to write letters of recommendation on his behalf to the secretary of state and the secretary of treasury, who were both acquaintances of Emerson.

Emerson’s handwritten letter to Salmon P. Chase, secretary of the treasury, dated January 10, 1863, is featured in this article. In it, Emerson described Whitman as a man “of strong original genius” who was “self-relying” and “large-hearted.” He described Whitman’s writings as “more deeply American, democratic, and in the interest of political liberty than those of any other poet.” He stated that if the government had work that Whitman could do, “it may find that it has called to its side more valuable aid than it bargained for.”

The government indeed had work that Whitman could do, and for the next eleven years, Whitman was a...
Concord, Massachusetts
10 January, 1863

Dear Sir,

Mr. Walt Whitman, of New York, writes me that he is seeking employment in the public service in Washington. Perhaps some application on his part has already been made to you.

Will you permit me to say...
writings are in certain points open to criticism, they show extraordinary power, I am more deeply American, democratic, in the interest of political liberty, than those of any other poet.

A man of his talents dispositions will quickly make himself useful, and, if the government has work that he can
I think it may safely be said that it has called for more valuable aid than it bargained for. With entire respect,
Your obedient servant,
R.W. Emerson.
Hon. Salmon P. Chase,
Secretary of the Treasury.
public servant in three different cabinet departments—but never in the Treasury Department. Initially, he worked part-time as a copyist in the army’s paymaster office. Then, in early 1865, he went to work as a clerk in the Indian Bureau of the Interior Department. However, his time with the Interior Department was short-lived. In the spring of that year, the new secretary of the interior, James Harlan, sought to abolish all non-essential positions, and to dismiss any employee whose moral character was considered questionable. Learning that Whitman was the author of the controversial volume of poetry, *Leaves of Grass*, Harlan dismissed him in late June.

Through personal connections in other agencies, Whitman immediately secured a position as a clerk in the busy and evolving attorney general’s office. The Judiciary Act of 1789 had established the office of the attorney general, but it was not until 1870 that Congress passed the Act to Establish the Department of Justice and made the attorney general the head of the department. The brand new Justice Department was involved in issues such as patent infringement cases, disputes over Reconstruction, and challenges to legislation—such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Civil Rights Act of 1875, and the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871.

As a clerk in the attorney general’s office for nearly nine years, Whitman’s tasks varied. Initially, he assisted in the preparation of pardon requests from Confederates, and later he copied documents for delivery to the president and cabinet members.

During the war years, while employed by the federal government, Whitman continued his volunteer work in the Union hospitals—there were more than thirty of them in the district, some in government office buildings, including the U.S. Patent Office. He would often run errands for the soldiers and help them write letters home. Whitman estimated that he visited between eighty thousand and one hundred thousand sick and wounded soldiers.

His personal time was also spent on his poetry. During his years of government service, Whitman published such famous works as “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” and “O Captain! My Captain!” that reflected his wartime experience.

His career as a federal government employee ended following a stroke in 1874 that left him partially paralyzed. That year, he moved to Camden, New Jersey, where he lived until his death on March 26, 1892.

For Additional Information
The Walt Whitman Archive is an electronic research and teaching tool that sets out to make Whitman’s vast work accessible to scholars, students, and general readers. The archive is directed by Kenneth M. Price (University of Nebraska-Lincoln) and Ed Folsom (University of Iowa). [www.whitmanarchive.org](http://www.whitmanarchive.org).

The Department of Justice website includes a bibliography listing numerous books and periodicals related to the attorney general’s office, [www.usdoj.gov/jmd/ls/agbib2000.html](http://www.usdoj.gov/jmd/ls/agbib2000.html).

The Department of State website provides information on the history of the Pendleton Act as well as the text of the act, [usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/democrac/28.html](http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/democrac/28.html).
Teaching Activities

1. Document Analysis
Explain to students that well into the second half of the nineteenth century, the “long s” was a feature of the written English language. Show students a copy of the Bill of Rights and draw their attention to the long ‘s’ in “Congress” (a high resolution image is available online at [www.archives.gov/national_archives_experience/bill_of_rights.html](http://www.archives.gov/national_archives_experience/bill_of_rights.html)). Tell them to be on the lookout for the long ‘s’ in the featured document. Remind them that it resembles a backward ‘f’.

Provide students with a copy of the featured document, and ask a volunteer to read it aloud while the others follow along. Lead a class discussion using the following questions:
▶ What kind of document is it?
▶ When was it written?
▶ Where was it written?
▶ Who wrote it and to whom?
▶ For what purpose was it written?
▶ What questions does the document raise?

2. Research and Letter Writing
Ask students to list the adjectives used by Ralph Waldo Emerson to describe Walt Whitman in the letter. Direct the class into two groups. Direct one group to conduct research on Whitman and the other to conduct research on Emerson. Ask the group that researched Whitman whether the adjectives used by Emerson to describe him were accurate and if so, to what extent. Ask the group that researched Emerson to generate a list of adjectives to describe him. Assign all students to take on the role of Whitman and write letters of recommendation for Emerson as though he were applying for a government job.

3. Reading and Expository Writing
Direct students to read Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance,” and write a one-page explanation of what Emerson meant in the letter when he described Whitman as being a “self-relying” man.

4. Research and Class Discussion
Ask students to research, locate, and read the poems that Whitman wrote and published during the period 1863 to 1874, when he lived and worked for the government in Washington, D.C. Lead a class discussion about how his poetry may have been influenced by his occupation and the events and people who surrounded him.

5. Independent Research and Writing
Encourage student volunteers to conduct research on the history of the attorney general’s office during the period when Whitman worked there (1865 to 1874) and to identify the activities, events, and issues that the office addressed. Invite students to share their findings in the form of a poem, or ask students to write a two-page essay comparing the activities, events, and issues dominating the work of the attorney general’s office in the 1870s to those of today.

6. Internet Research
Describe the “spoils system” to students. Explain to them that it no longer exists as a result of the Pendleton Act that was passed in 1883. Alert students to the website of the office of personnel management (www.usajobs.opm.gov), and ask them to:
  a. find out the procedures one must follow in order to obtain a government job today;
  b. locate jobs that someone with Walt Whitman’s writing skills would be qualified for; and
  c. find a job that they think would be interesting.

Encourage students to share their findings with the class.

7. Small Group Research
Suggest that small groups of students conduct research on other literary figures who also worked for the government at some point during their lives. Examples include Edgar Allen Poe, Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr. Seuss), Nathaniel Hawthorne, and John Burroughs. Encourage student groups to share their findings with the class.

Lee Ann Potter is the head of Education and Volunteer Programs at the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. She serves as the editor for “Teaching With Documents,” a regular department of Social Education. You may reproduce the documents shown here in any quantity. For more information, write, call, or e-mail the education staff at the National Archives, NWE, 700 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Room G-9, Washington, DC 20408; 202-208-1305; education@nara.gov.

Social Education 252