walt_whitman@pfaffs.bar: Bohemia on the World Wide Web

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The vault at Pfaffs where the drinkers and laughers meet to eat and drink and carouse

While on the walk immediately overhead pass the myriad feet of Broadway

As the dead in their graves are underfoot hidden

And the living pass over them, recking not of them,

Laugh on laughers!

Drink on drinkers!

Bandy the jest!

Toss the theme from one to another!

Beam up—Brighten up, bright eyes of beautiful young men!

> —Walt Whitman, "The Two Vaults" c. 1861

I am the co-editor of *The Vault at Pfaff's*, an Internet-based digital archive about the New York City bohemians that Walt Whitman fraternized with at Charles Pfaff's beer cellar during the late 1850s and early 1860s. Except, I'm not really an editor, and *The Vault at Pfaff's* isn't really an archive. Don't get me wrong. I do a lot of the things that editors do, like correct spelling mistakes and verify the provenance of texts, and *The Vault at Pfaff's* has a lot of the things that digital archives have, like rare documents and scholarly indexes. It's just that *The Vault at Pfaff's* isn't an archive in the same way *The Walt Whitman Archive* is an archive. Granted, *The Whitman Archive* itself is not an archive in the traditional sense of a brick-and-mortar building that houses historical artifacts, but it is a textbook example of a *digital* archive in that it is an electronic repository of texts and images that have been gathered from physical archives around the world and reproduced in a self-contained and scholarly-moderated digital space. It's true that much of the server space that *The Vault at Pfaff's* occupies at its home institution, Lehigh University, is dedicated to electronically reproducing texts and images of historical value, but the real scholarly

contribution of the site—at least as I understand it to be—lies elsewhere than its bits and bytes of digitally reproduced nineteenth-century documents.

Let me backtrack for a minute and review who the Pfaff's bohemians were and explain why I think that they deserve to be enshrined in a digital archive that isn't *really* a digital archive, before I go on to argue that what I do as the co-editor of this not-an-archive isn't *really* editing. Along the way of explaining what *The Vault at Pfaff's* is (and isn't), and what it is that I do (and don't do) as its editor, I'm going to make the case for how digital scholarship has made it possible to conceive of fascinating new kinds of scholarly projects, projects that include both digital archives and not-quite-archives alike. The project I've had the privilege to work on since 2004, I believe, not only is poised to provide insight about a period of Whitman's life that still, even after years of dedicated scholarship, is largely shrouded in mystery, but also has the potential to help us rethink some ingrained notions about authorship and American literary history.

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From about the mid-1850s to just after the end of the Civil War (give or take a few years), Charles Pfaff's beer cellar in midtown Manhattan was a gathering place for a group of New York City writers and artists who attempted to recreate the bohemian lifestyle of Paris's Latin Quarter that Henri Murger had chronicled in his 1851 book *Scènes de la Vie de Bohême*. The leader of this group, often referred to as "the King of Bohemia," was [Henry Clapp, Jr.](), a former antislavery and temperance activist from New England who, upon returning to the United States from a trip to France in 1850, renounced his allegiance to social reform movements of any kind and set up a Parisian-style salon that included intellectuals, [utopianists](), [artists](), [poets](), [playwrights](), [novelists](), and [actors](), along with the occasional [banker](), [politician](), and even [police]()

officer. In addition to reigning over the kingdom of Bohemia, Clapp was also the founder and editor of *The New York Saturday Press*, a literary weekly that served as the organ of the Pfaff's crowd. One of many articles celebrating the bohemian lifestyle that Clapp ran in *The Saturday Press* described Pfaff's as "the trysting-place of the most careless, witty, and jovial spirits of New York,—journalists, artists, and poets."[1]

But not all of the denizens of Pfaff's were "careless, witty, and jovial." Scholars and biographers have noted for many years that Whitman came to Pfaff's at a low point in his life. After both the 1855 and 1856 editions of *Leaves of Grass* failed to catapult its author to literary stardom, Pfaff's was a place where Whitman could retreat from the public eye and lick his wounds. Clapp's relationship with Whitman has long been regarded as an important chapter in the publishing history of *Leaves of Grass*, with Clapp's advocacy for Whitman in the pages of *The Saturday Press* contributing significantly to the success of the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1860. Scholars have recognized for years that Clapp and *The Saturday Press* (if not the Pfaff's scene in general) got Whitman back on his feet and put *Leaves of Grass* on the map.[2] Much of what else happened at Pfaff's, however, has remained largely unchronicled. Malcolm Cowley wrote in 1959, "There is a curious period in Whitman's life that I think has never been properly interpreted. It is the period of the six years beginning with the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* published in 1855."[3] Almost 50 years later, Cowley's assessment of Whitman's bohemian period remains true. This is not to say that important scholarly work has not been done about the Pfaff's scene, but rather that scholars have only begun to scratch the surface.[4]

Scholars still need to account for the Pfaffians' impact on a number of cultural changes that took place during the nineteenth century. For one, the Pfaff's bohemians played an integral role in redefining New York City as the cultural capital of the United States. Before the heyday of Pfaff's in the 1850s, the heart of American literature was in Boston; after the 1850s it moved

to New York. The role of Pfaff's in effecting this transition is a story that has yet to be told. *The Saturday Press* in particular played an essential role in redefining the importance of New York City to the cultural life of the mid-century United States. William Dean Howells, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* during the late nineteenth-century, said that *The Saturday Press* "embodied the new literary life of the city" for him as a young man living in Ohio, and that one of the first things he did upon arriving in New York City from the Midwest in the early 1860s was to visit Pfaff's and meet the bohemian writers who had captured his imagination.[5]

In addition, *The Saturday Press* pioneered a model for counter-culture publications in the United States, a model that predates the "little magazines" of literary modernism and the "zines" of contemporary culture. The Pfaff's bohemians were also involved in transforming Broadway from a provincial showcase of small-scale burlesques and vaudeville-style routines, and creating the system of long-running productions with high-profile stars that has become the norm. This defining feature of New York culture—the theater—owes much to the Pfaffans, who counted among their number playwrights, actors, actresses, and the first woman to independently manage a successful theater company in Manhattan.

Despite the important role that the Pfaff's bohemians played in presiding over a number of innovations in nineteenth-century cultural life, most of these writers and artists have slipped into obscurity and their works have all but disappeared from public view. As such, one of the primary goals of *The Vault at Pfaff's* has been to familiarize scholars and interested readers alike with both the people and texts that were a part of the Pfaff's experience. At present, *The Vault at Pfaff's* profiles approximately 150 people who were connected in some way or other to Pfaff's. We have also been working to provide access to texts and images by and about the Pfaffians. The centerpiece of our collection is a complete run of *The New York Saturday Press*. Given that *The Saturday Press* is available on microfilm at only about thirty institutions (and actual print copies

are even more difficult to come by), ensuring that this groundbreaking periodical is freely available to anyone with Internet access has been the most significant scholarly contribution that *The Vault at Pfaff's* has made as a digital archive.

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By and large, however, hosting *The Saturday Press* is where the archival work of *The Vault at Pfaff's* comes to an end. (This is not to suggest that *The Saturday Press* is a minor part of the archive, though. Of the over 4,500 entries on the site, about 3,000 come from *The Saturday Press*.) But having *The Saturday Press* be the only nineteenth-century document housed in our digital archive—give or take the occasional electronic text—was not the model that we had originally envisioned. On the contrary, our initial goal was to personally digitize every scrap of paper that the Pfaffians ever published (or left unpublished in manuscript form). But something happened early on in the process of creating *The Vault at Pfaff's* that sharpened our focus on how, precisely, we could best exploit the digital medium to tell the story of the antebellum New York bohemians.

When we did a preliminary search of the Web to see what, if any, texts by the Pfaffians had already been digitized we were amazed to see how many of the texts that we were convinced had been "neglected" and "forgotten" were alive and well on sites such as *Making of America*, *Wright's American Fiction*, *Literature Online (LION)*, and *Project Gutenberg*, not to mention the monster that is Google Books, which is as we speak digitally consuming the research libraries of the world's great universities. After recovering from the initial feeling of shock that someone else had already done our project for us, we began to reconceptualize *The Vault at Pfaff's* as more of a sorting-house for existing texts on the Web and less as an archive of wholly original material. We realized that the task of making the Pfaffians' texts available online—which sites

like *Making of America* had not only done but had done with much more funding than we could ever hope for—was meaningless if we didn't also recreate the context within which these texts had their origins. The Pfaffians' texts already might have found a home online, but they were still scattered and decontextualized, unmoored from the community that gave them birth.

Over a decade ago, Richard Brodhead encouraged scholars of literature to consider how "Writing always takes place within some completely concrete cultural situation."[6] As our emphasis shifted from digitally archiving texts ourselves to recreating the "completely concrete cultural situation" within which these texts emerged, we realized that the primary function of our site wasn't to provide digital copies of texts, but to draw the lines *between* these texts. Once we came to this conclusion we began to think of *The Vault at Pfaff's* less as an archive and more as the connective tissue between a variety of archival repositories on the Web. My co-editor, Robert Weidman (who is the Technology Coordinator of the [Digital Library at Lehigh University]), proposed that we catalogue the Pfaffians' texts in a relational database. He suggested we go this route—rather than create a long scrolling list of texts as a conventionally printed bibliography would—for a number of reasons: not only would a relational database help us to efficiently sort out where these texts were available on the Web and then facilitate searching for these texts when a visitor to the site needed them, but also because this technology would allow us to indicate when a text by one of the Pfaffians mentioned another Pfaffian or a Pfaff's-related text, thereby recreating the network of connections within which these texts were originally created and disseminated.

A word about database technology: databases are designed to store information in a way that facilitates the quick and efficient retrieval of data; *relational* databases are designed to store and then *sort* data in a way that foregrounds the relationships between various pieces of information. A database can stockpile millions of bytes of data for future use, but a relational

database can arrange this data in ways that allow for meaningful patterns to emerge. Stephen

Ramsay has argued that relational databases, which he says have the power "to enable the

serendipitous apprehension of relationships," can be of great use to humanities scholarship,

which he characterizes as "an activity fundamentally dependent upon the location of pattern."[7] I

started *The Vault at Pfaff's* because I wanted to determine what the patterns were that defined the

Pfaff's experience for Whitman and his fellow bohemians. By using a relational database to keep

track of a wide variety of texts—some of which I personally edit, others of which I do not—we

are able to follow the textual traces of the relationships that developed at Pfaff's.

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One of the hallmarks of databases, as Ed Folsom has recently argued, is their ability to

shuffle discrete packets of information into new shapes and formations, revealing connections

and patterns that might not be so readily visible in other media. In his discussion of how

Whitman's poetry has found a new home in the database of *The Whitman Archive*, Folsom

contends that Whitman himself—long before computer scientists at IBM developed the first

electronic databases in the 1970s—thought of his lines of poetry as discrete packets of data that

could be moved around to create a variety of different formations. "Whitman," Folsom writes,

"formed entire lines [in his manuscripts] as they would eventually appear in print, but then he

treated each line like a separate data entry, a unit available to him for endless reordering, as if his

lines of poetry were portable and interchangeable, could be shuffled and almost randomly

scattered to create different but remarkably similar poems."[8] Folsom goes on to make the case

that Whitman's poetry fits so well into the database of *The Whitman Archive* because Whitman

was, in essence, "an early practitioner . . . of the database genre" (1575).

I love how provocative Folsom's suggestion is that Whitman was, in some sense, "writing database" as much as he was writing poetry. Within the Pfaff's context, I've started to think of database less as the genre of a text or set of texts by a single author (as Folsom posits for Whitman's corpus), and more as a model for understanding the behaviors of a literary community, a model that challenges how we think about the supposedly solitary nature of authorship.[9] Situating Whitman in a database on *The Vault at Pfaff's* has revealed a network of relationships between Whitman's texts and the texts of his peers. For example, on *The Vault at Pfaff's* we can read Whitman's Pfaff's-inspired poem "The Two Vaults"—which is excerpted as an epigraph to this essay—alongside one-time bohemian Thomas Bailey Aldrich's "At the Café" and observe how both poets describe Pfaff's patrons who hide a secret sorrow amid the revels at the bar. Creating a database for Whitman and his bohemian friends has opened up a space for rethinking the notion of Whitman as the "solitary singer" of the nineteenth century and seeing him instead as part of a vibrant community of writers and artists.[10]

One of the reasons why we have persisted in seeing Whitman as a "solitary singer" is because American literary history in general has not provided us with a way of thinking about literary texts as the collective productions of a community. This lack is curious given the number of literary communities that almost any student of American literature could rattle off without really having to think about it for very long: Transcendentalist Concord, the Harlem Renaissance, the Lost Generation, the Beats, and so on. It might be more trouble than it's worth to try to put a label on a group of disparate texts written by authors who happened to live and work together, but without a way to analyze the relationships between these texts we'll probably continue to think of literary communities as the supporting cast of a single creative individual rather than as an organic network of reciprocal influences.

Perhaps, extending Folsom's provocative suggestion that database is as much a genre of literature as it is a medium for the electronic storage of information, we can begin to think about the texts by a literary community as itself a genre of sorts. I hesitate to say that "literary communities write databases," but the database does provide both a metaphor and a mechanism for understanding what it is that creative communities create. For the Pfaffians in particular the database provides an apt metaphor for the environment of a nineteenth-century beer hall where people and ideas found a place to sort themselves out. Pfaff's was a place where creative people passed in and out of conversations, carrying with them the ideas bandied about at one table as they moved on to another. ("Bandy the jest! / Toss the theme from one to another!" Whitman writes in "The Two Vaults.") On any given night, Pfaff's was a place where you could talk to Whitman about poetry, Fitz James O'Brien about the politics of Irish immigration, Ada Clare about women's rights, John Brougham about the American theater, and Henry Clapp about literary publishing. Pfaff's bar—like a database—was a place for sorting through information and ideas in ways that resulted in the creation of meaningful patterns of knowledge.

Folsom has noted that, now that *The Whitman Archive* has gathered the physical artifacts of Whitman's poetry manuscripts from archives around the world into the virtual space of the database, these "manuscripts are fitting together like the rejoined pieces of a long-scattered jigsaw puzzle" (1576). My hope is that the same process has begun for the Pfaff's bohemians as well. I hope that on *The Vault at Pfaff's* their texts will become pieced together in ways that will not only open up new insights into a neglected period of Whitman's life, but that will also reveal the dynamic workings of a community of people who lived, loved, drank, talked, and wrote together.

Notes:

[1] "Pfaff's." New York *Saturday Press*. 3 Dec. 1859: 2. http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/pfaffs/w3523

[2] An annotated bibliography of references to Whitman's involvement with the Pfaff's bohemians is available here: http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/pfaffs/p47/.

[3] Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction," *Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass": The First (1855) Edition.* Ed. Cowley (New York: Viking, 1959), vii-xxvii.

[4] The published scholarship on the Pfaff's community, outside of occasional references in Whitman biographies, includes Albert Parry, *Garrets and Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America* (1933. New York: Dover, 1960); Emily Hahn, *Romantic Rebels: An Informal History of Bohemianism in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); Eugene Lalor, "Whitman among the New York Literary Bohemians: 1859–1862." *Walt Whitman Review* 25 (1979): 131–145; and Christine Stansell, "Whitman at Pfaff's: Commercial Culture, Literary Life and New York Bohemia at Mid-Century." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 10 (1993): 107–126. Amanda Gailey has an essay titled "Walt Whitman and the King of Bohemia" forthcoming in the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, and Mark Lause, a historian, will be publishing *Free Lovers & Red Republicans: Cultural Politics in Antebellum New York & the Origins of the Bohemian Experience* with Kent State University Press some time in the near future. Lause's book promises to be a major contribution to this heretofore neglected period of American literary history.

[5] William Dean Howells, "First Impressions of Literary New York," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. Jun. 1895: 62-74. http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/pfaffs/w1231

[6] Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 8.

[7] Stephen Ramsay, "Databases," *A Companion to Digital Humanities.* Ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (Malden, MA : Blackwell, 2004).
http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companion/

[8] Ed Folsom, "Database as Genre: The Epic Transformation of Archives" *PMLA* 122.5 (October 2007): 1571-1579. 1574-75.

[9] My conversations on this topic with Andrew Jewell, the editor of *The Willa Cather Archive* and a scholar of the Greenwich Village bohemians of the early twentieth century, have profoundly

influenced how I think about the relationship between database and authorship in literary communities.

[10] Gay Wilson Allen used the phrase "solitary singer" for the title of his influential Whitman biography, *The Solitary Singer: A Critical Biography of Walt Whitman* (New York: Macmillan, 1955).

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