

# COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

## Tough to search for childhood home of William Carlos Williams

BY ROD LEITH  
Borough Historian

Promising "good sidewalks" and "lighted streets," Henry G. Bell (1833-1921) began building his wood framed houses on "large, finely situated lots" in the section of Rutherford known as Passaic Hill, about where Grace Episcopal Church was built in 1873. Several houses were built for a prominent New England

### History Chest

Rod Leith

businessman named William H. Mellen (1811-1886), Bell's friend and fellow Unitarian. Mellen, who purchased 19 lots from Bell's Rutherford Heights Association, never resided in houses he owned on Newell and Passaic avenues. Instead, he leased them to newcomers to Rutherford, including one who would become a most prominent citizen - William George Williams (1853-1918). In time, Williams and his new wife, Raquel Helene (1847-1949), became the parents of two of Rutherford's most famous sons and ultimately built their own home on another of Bell's lots on Passaic Avenue.

"According to William Eric Williams, the structure on West Passaic Avenue in which his dad (William Carlos Williams) was born is still there," stated Emily Mitchell Wallace, of Bryn Mawr College's Center for Visual Culture. William Eric Williams, who died in 1995, spoke of his father's birth place in a 1981 interview with Wallace. He described the structure as "a little skinny house" a few houses west of the corner of West Passaic Avenue and Mortimer Avenue.

Records kept by Jacob G. Van Riper, Rutherford tax assessor after the borough was formed in 1881, reveal that "W.G. Williams (was) in Mellin (sic) house on (plot) No 5 Bl. C," a one-family house that is currently listed as 87

West Passaic Avenue. Before houses and structures were numbered, houses often took the names of their owners. Williams paid a poll tax of \$1 during the period of Van Riper's record keeping, from February to September 1884. The poll tax, a resident voting tax, was required by state law for adult male residents. Williams also paid tax on an estimated \$100 of personal property, bringing his total local tax for the year of 1884 to a whopping \$3.49.

Discovery that it was the "Mellin house" that was the residence of the Williams family after they settled in Rutherford serves as a breakthrough in the search of the actual birthplace of Williams Carlos Williams. In his exhaustively researched 1981 biography, "Williams Carlos Williams A New World Naked," Paul Mariani did not address the place of the poet's birth. Other Williams biographers just speculate the birthplace was demolished. "In November of 1882," Mariani states, "William George and Elena were finally married in Brooklyn, and Elena found herself living in a suburban sprawl called Rutherford." William George, who had just turned 29, was apparently attracted to Bell's image of a "healthy village" nine miles from New York City. Here he could raise a family and provide a home for his mother, Emily Dickenson Wellcome, and his two half-brothers and half-sister - Irving, Godwin and Mary Wellcome, all of whom are buried at Hillside Cemetery.

Research to find the poet's early childhood home in Rutherford has brought only disappointment. Searches conducted by the Rutherford Health Department in 2006 in conjunction with Rutherford's 125th anniversary found birth records dating to 1875. The borough historian examined those records, focusing on 1883 and 1884. There was no entry for the birth of William Carlos Williams on September 17, 1883, nor was there a registration of the

birth of his brother, Edgar Irving Williams, born October 5, 1884. However, on his death record, information on the birth of Dr. Williams is provided by his widow, Florence "Flossy" Williams (1890-1976), who stated that her husband's birthplace was Rutherford, no other details. His brother Edgar signed a passport affidavit in 1923 certifying Dr. Williams' birth in Rutherford, although he states, "while I have not seen the birth certificate, my parents were living in Rutherford at the time."

In 1956, Edgar Williams, who became a prominent architect and designed Rutherford's World War I Monument, was invited by The South Bergen News to participate in a contest called "Quarter Century Club," as part of the borough's Diamond Jubilee celebration. The architect stated the following: "Edgar I. Williams Born Oct. 5, 1884 131 West Passaic Avenue. Rutherford, N.J." Edgar Williams claimed to be the oldest Rutherfordian "living in the house in which he was born." Unfortunately, his brother's response to the same newspaper contest provided only that he was born in 1883. Dr. Williams gave an address for his office and residence as 9 Ridge Road, a house he purchased in 1913 and where he died March 4, 1963.

There is proof that a house at 87 West Passaic Ave., built for William Mellen after he acquired the property in 1871, was the home of William George and Raquel Helene Williams in early 1884, before the birth of Edgar Williams. William George did not acquire the land and premises at 131 West Passaic Ave. until October 1884. An 1872 map of the lots sold by Henry Bell pinpoints Lot 5 in Block C, which was formerly the Barclay Farm, on the footprint of what is currently Block 34, Lot 33, or 87 West Passaic, just west of Mortimer Avenue. Finally, the obituaries of both Raquel Helene and William George Williams, who died on Christmas Day 1918, do state that



PHOTO COURTESY/JONATHAN COHEN

William George Williams in an undated photo taken in the Dominican Republic in the early 1880s, just when he first met Raquel Rosa Elena Hoheb. William George, whose pose strikes an amazing resemblance to a young William Carlos Williams, became enamored with the "birdlike woman" who spoke fluent French and knew music and art, according to biographer Paul Mariani. They were married in Brooklyn in the fall of 1882 and soon settled in Rutherford.

they came to Rutherford in 1882, a year before the poet's birth.

As his autobiography recalls, the sidewalks of early Rutherford were of wood, and streets were not paved in most places. But in his birth year the evenings



PHOTO COURTESY/MEADOWLANDS MUSEUM

became safer and brighter after "oil burning street lights were installed." And because they came here 132 years ago, the Williams family gave Rutherford two of its brightest stars of the arts and architecture.

became safer and brighter after "oil burning street lights were installed." And because they came here 132 years ago, the Williams family gave Rutherford two of its brightest stars of the arts and architecture.

Rod Leith is Rutherford's borough historian, sits on the Rutherford Historical Committee and is Acting President of the Meadowlands Museum. He is also a former reporter for *The Record*.