

## "Williams' Early Years: Coming of Age in Rutherford and its Environs"

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In the summer of 1955, William Carlos Williams, then 72, agreed to participate in a Voice of America series called, "This is America." He described how his life as poet and doctor had been spent "pretty close to one spot - Rutherford."

"Rutherford is a river town," he began, "lying six miles north of Newark on the Jersey marches, the 'meadows' of my boyhood, where we used to hunt ducks and muskrats. It is built on high ground, as the names of the streets indicate: Ridge Road, Summit and Highland Cross. From the eastern edge of town you can plainly see - and this was important to me - the skyline of New York City."<sup>1</sup>

The population of the newly formed Borough of Rutherford in 1883, the year of his birth, was about 1,000. That year, the first oil burning street lamps were installed. Although the term was not in vogue, Rutherford was as much a suburb of Newark as it was New York City. It was rustic in nature and quaintly equipped, with dirt or cobblestone roads and wooden sidewalks. There was one school house and a handful of merchants at Depot Square, where the Erie R.R. trains ran from New York to Boonton. It was surrounded by the Meadows to the east and the Passaic River to the west, with some of the richest farmland still occupying its central section. Already newcomers were pushing against the agrarian culture. One of the first laws on the Borough's books forbade a person from using sidewalks to drive "any horse, vehicles, cow, goats, sheep or other animals."<sup>2</sup>

Despite its quaintness and minor nuisances, newly established residents, like the Williams family, who settled in Rutherford in the early 1880's, were captivated by the bucolic nature of its landscape. Many others responded to the promotional literature commissioned by the Erie Railway Company, which had opened its Rutherford Park depot there in 1866. Williams, who adored the outdoors and cultivated a

group of likeminded friends, was also impressed with the history of the place and with those, like Washington Irving and George Inness, who had captured its essence.

In his correspondence with John Rutherford, the former United States Senator and for whom Williams' native town was named, Washington Irving (1783-1859) thanked his host following Irving's visit to Rutherford's Edgerton Manor in 1830. The Rutherford estate, in the area now known as Lyndhurst and Rutherford, was on the banks of what Irving described as the most picturesque river in North America.<sup>3</sup> Irving's enthusiasm for the "pastoral innocence" of the Passaic was cited by Williams biographer Mike Weaver as among the poet's early literary influences.<sup>4</sup>

While a resident of Montclair, about eight miles southwest of Rutherford, George Inness (1825-1894) visited the meadows near what was then Union Township in the mid-1850's. "Autumn Meadows," one of Inness's oil paintings from that time, depicts the rich fall colors and tree-filled landscape on swampy meadowland that still retain those famous cedar trees. Whether or not Inness's technique from the Hudson School of realism had influence on the poet, Williams, nevertheless, had admiration for Inness's subject matter. Williams cherished his time in the meadows, where he "enjoyed blueberries, cedar swamp, egrets by the flocks, wild azeleas, black ducks and teal."<sup>5</sup>

Any boy growing up in Rutherford in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century had to have imagined life on a houseboat on the Passaic River, as lived and described in "Rudder Grange," by Frank Richard Stockton (1834-1902). First published in 1879, the book's chapter on "Pomona's Bridal Trip," provides Williams with an earthy description of Passaic Falls with its "rocks and precipices and direful depths."<sup>6</sup> And if there was any doubt, Williams would later learn how Stockton chose some of his main characters, like Pomona. "As you remark, that village (Rutherford) was the scene of some of the incidents in "Rudder Grange," and a few of the characters of the book made themselves known to me there," Stockton told Rutherford author Margaret G. Riggs in 1898.<sup>7</sup>

Other known artists, like George Bernard Mitchell (1872-1966), the water colorist of Mystic Seaport fame, described the Rutherford of the very early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when he decided to move there, settling in a hillside house on The Terrace, just a short distance from 9 Ridge Road. "I looked across (Ridge Road) at the impressive outline of the Presbyterian Church – stopping to take in more fully its Gothic beauty and the feel of the old European cathedrals I had formerly known."<sup>8</sup>

Harry Mills Walcott (1870-1944), the son of a Presbyterian minister, was known for his natural settings in oil paintings that depicted scenes from Rutherford. Williams impression of Walcott's work was described to his mother among the letters he wrote while a student at the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>9</sup> One of Walcott's paintings, entitled "The Challenge," captures the fascination and joy on the faces of school children gathered around a fallen sparrow's nest in Rutherford's Lincoln Park, as a mother sparrow protects its young. Williams may have been more inspired by H.M. Walcott, than he was the painter's sister, Helen, who was Williams' fourth grade teacher (and disciplinarian) at Sylvan School. Walcott, who studied in Paris on scholarship from the National Academy of Design, returned to paint in America's mid-west, after teaching in New York and at the Art Institute of Chicago.

In later life, Williams found himself acquainted with modernist painters, so-called Constructivist and the Expressionists, like John Marin. With Marin, however, Williams shared a special affinity with the early rusticity of Rutherford. In the foreword of a 1948 biography, Marin describes his birthplace: "Approached by a tree-bordered avenue which began at a gatehouse, the house was surrounded by lawns and gardens whose shrubs and flowers were known to John Cheri Marin by their botanical names." John Marin was born Dec. 23, 1870, 13 years before Williams, in a "pleasant house in Rutherford, on the west side of the Hackensack Meadows."<sup>10</sup>

Growing up in a small town, Williams enjoyed the camaraderie of a close-knit group of friends. His autobiography speaks of this handful of friends - including Edward Brown, Lester Maxwell and James A.

Hyslop - "We loved and hated each other with fiercest intensity, though Jim, the naturalist, may not have hated as much as we others."<sup>11</sup> This was the poet's early years, the period of innocence. Like a typical boy, Williams dabbled in sinful behavior, at least according to Helen Walcott, the school teacher who disciplined him for his display of the "bloomer girls" postcards in the Sylvan School playground.<sup>12</sup> But his healthy distractions led him outdoors. He camped at a rustic setting in Oradell with his brother, Edgar, along with Jim Hyslop, Garry Alyea, and Ed brown, the outdoorsman of the group. He especially enjoyed long walks along the Passaic River, roamed Kip's woods and explored the meadows with Jim Hyslop.<sup>13</sup>

Williams' true healing nature may have blocked him from becoming as skilled with a gun as his friend Ed Brown.<sup>14</sup> An early indication of this nature was revealed one time in front of the Rice house on Home Avenue when he nearly cried over his shooting a robin.<sup>15</sup> He admired Jim Hyslop and tried to encourage him to publish his studies of entomology.<sup>16</sup> It is likely that his relationship with Hyslop, which lasted well into the 1940's, was what influenced Williams to want to study forestry or conservation, rather than his ultimate choice of medicine.<sup>17</sup> His tendency toward being an observer of wildlife is also brought out in his choice of "bird-hunting" activity with his theologian friend, Estelle Elizabeth Padgham, the Unitarian minister at Rutherford's Church of Our Father. Williams befriended Miss Padgham after her arrival in Rutherford in 1905. "She is one of the few real people I have ever met," Williams told his brother, Edgar.<sup>18</sup> He is apparently comfortable with their bird-watching, likely being her guide through the meadows. He was impressed her skillful footing on the trails. "The way she can get through brambles, climb banks, and jump over streams is a caution," the poet writes. No doubt, Miss Padgham impressed Williams in other ways besides her hiking skills. She was a pioneer among women as president of the Rutherford Equal Suffrage League.<sup>19</sup> As a female pastor, she saw her feminine qualities as an advantage and considered herself as a "confidant-at-large," able to gain the trust of both women and men.<sup>20</sup> So it may have been that Williams relied on his Unitarian pastor for guidance during an important period of

his professional growth and personal challenges. He did, after all, chose to have Miss Padgham assist at his and Florence Herman's wedding ceremony at Rutherford's Presbyterian Church in 1912.<sup>21</sup>

Williams and his brother Edgar were among the early advocates of what America has come to know as urban parks and recreation. "The very concept of a playground, a specialized space for children's fun, is completely urban, a world away from Kipps's (sic) woods and the meadowlands Williams roamed as a boy," states Williams biographer David Frail.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the two boys, who knew the freedom to be able to walk in any direction from 131 West Passaic and find woods and water, could now see that bridges and highways and population growth would change all that. Children of future generations would need outdoor space safeguarded in order to be guaranteed a safe and healthful playgrounds, the kind of environment Williams' generation took for granted. The "Local Beauty Spot" Edgar Williams identified in a 1910 letter became a symbol for Rutherford's so-called "playground appeal."<sup>23</sup> Ironically, the "spot" that Williams and his brother insisted should be set aside as a park in 1910 ultimately became the site of Rutherford post office, which sits as one corner of the community's civic center, known as the Monument Circle or "Isle of Safety." At the center rests the World War I monument, designed by Edgar Williams in 1919.

Despite Williams support for preserving parkland and his aid to Rutherford's "playground appeal" in 1914, the poet, like other Rutherford residents, was powerless over the developments in the upstream areas of the Passaic and Hackensack rivers. The warning signals began as early as 1890 that the Passaic River could not sustain the assaults on its quality. Referring to an analysis of water samples taken to a laboratory in Jersey City, a report in August 1890 advised advocates against taping the Passaic River as a source to fill north Jersey reservoirs. "Among the revelations in the crystal fluid, outside the ordinary sewage from Paterson and Passaic, were a decomposed boy, a number of chickens, two bags of drowned cats, and other animals."<sup>24</sup> Eight years later, further alarms were sound by one of early

regional environmental agencies, the River Pollution Commission, calling for separate treatment of sewage for each municipality in the Passaic River basin.

Although his first volume of "Paterson" wasn't published until 1946, Williams makes references to the impact of contamination and need for pollution controls in the Passaic in his earlier essays. "It was a good job to build the Passaic River Sewer (System) and clean up that stink hole," Williams declared in an early edition of "Make Light of It."<sup>25</sup> Of course, as he notes, the pollution problem is more diverse than human sewage. Pausing one morning on his car ride to Passaic General Hospital on the Boulevard in Passaic, the poet makes an observation near the 8th Street Bridge: "There's a sound of work going on there," referring to a power plant near Manhattan Rubber Company, "and a jet of water spouts from a pipe at the foundation level below the factory onto the river's narrow bank which has been channeled making a way for itself into the brown water of the two hundred foot wide stream."<sup>26</sup> He next observes some young boys, not much older than he was back in the Kip Woods days. "These youngsters who make boats out of barrel hoops and a piece of old duck, where ever they can find it, live by the river these hot summer days."<sup>27</sup>

In the years that ensued, progress continued to overtake the bucolic environs the poet knew as a youth. The population of Rutherford, barely more than 5,000 at the close of the 19th Century, had reached 14,768 by the end of the 1920's. Williams would agree that a positive measure of progress over that same period was the increase of volumes in Rutherford Free Public Library from 1,100 volumes in 1894 to more than 14,000 in 1928. The Holland Tunnel had opened in 1927, followed four years later by the George Washington Bridge. Rutherford had become a veritable island amidst concrete and rail. In 1928, Williams was about to witness the end coming for another significant era of a 17th Century Dutch settlement called Acquackanonk, on the west bank of the Passaic River in what is now called Delawanna. It was shortly before this land patent was executed between the Lords Proprietors of the Province of

East New Jersey and fourteen Dutch settlers, that two Labadist missionaries became the first Europeans to visit and make a written description of the Great Falls.<sup>28</sup> Willaims asked his friend Charles Sheeler to photograph the remaining Dutch-styled stone houses of the Acquackanonk settlement before the bulldozers rolled over them to build New Jersey State Highway 21 through Clifton and Passaic.<sup>29</sup>

In what appears to be his last words on the deterioration of the Hackensack meadows, Williams laments the loss of the cedar swamps and he accurately pins the blame of the "water level" in the region. He attributes this condition to the "crisscrossing of highways," which certainly contributed to the decline of the natural flow and quality of life in the meadows. But just as the reality of the upstream influx of industrial and human waste resulted in the contamination of the lower Passaic River, it was activity in the upper Hackensack River that caused the death of the massive cedar swamps in the meadowlands. The Hackensack Riverkeeper's version of events is borne out by the records of the Hackensack Meadowlands Development Commission. After World War I, demand for water supply led to New Jersey's approval to built the Oradell Reservoir by the Hackensack Water Company in 1921. The dam at the Oradell facility essentially created two rivers: one that flowed above the reservoir; and a second, the lower Hackensack River, which created a brakish water estuary. This brakish water, high in salt content, slowly choked the cedars. At low tide in the meadows, one can see the cedar tree stumps, especially in the Secaucus section. Even the cattails have disappeared, Williams remarked, replaced by reeds, or "caneys," with its plumelike inflorescences. However, the ecosystem supported by the cedar swamps is gone. Or as Williams puts it, "But the whole character of the place has been altered."<sup>30</sup>

## Bibliography

- <sup>1</sup> Voice of America, Central Program Services Division, "This is America," series of 1955 #13; William Carlos Williams, guest; Announcer, John Pauker; transcript courtesy Rutherford Public Library, William Carlos Williams archive
- <sup>2</sup> First Rutherford Borough Ordinance; enacted December 1881; Fred Bunker, former Rutherford Borough Historian, letter to William E. Williams, July 7, 1988; "That no person shall drive over or upon the sidewalks of any street or highway in said Borough, any horse, vehicles, cow, goats, sheep or other animals." In Rutherford 125th Anniversary Commemorative Journal, "The History of Rutherford, a Version for Young People;" Edited by Jackie Bunker-Lohrenz, included the following anecdote, "Farmers saw no need for sidewalks, but new people who had moved from the city wanted sidewalks and many other improvements."
- <sup>3</sup> A Brief History of Rutherford, New Jersey, James A. Hands, Rutherford Diamond Jubilee, 1956. J.A. Hands, interviewed June 4, 2011, stated that he had obtained and reviewed a copy of correspondence of Washington Irving, including a letter written by Irving to John Rutherford in the year 1830.  
  
In his review of Irving's poem, "On Passaic Falls," written in 1806 and published in 1827 in The Atlantic Souvenir, Mike Weaver stated, "Here man's experience of the landscape is presented in terms of pastoral innocence and the corrupt taste of the picturesque."
- <sup>4</sup> William Carlos Williams The American Background, Mike Weaver, Cambridge University Press, London, 1971. Referring to Williams 1912 painting of the Passaic River, Weaver suggests that Williams "would surely have known the work of George Inness, the New Jersey landscape painter who painted nearby Hackensack Meadowlands more than fifty years before in a personal but realistic vein."
- <sup>5</sup> The Autobiography of Williams Carlos Williams, New Directions, New York, 1948 Chapters on "My early teens," pp. 18-21; and "A look back," pp. 279-285, Williams reminisces of his boyhood days spent roaming through Kip's farm, which laid between Union Avenue and Fairveiw Avenue, and the meadows, east of Meadow Road and State Highway 17. Today much of the land in Kip's woods is taken up by Rutherford High School and the Kip Farm Historic District. Williams and his friends would



hardly recognize the meadows, which has been divided by major roadways, including the New Jersey Turnpike, first built in 1951.

- <sup>6</sup> Rudder Grange, by Frank R. Stockton, Scribner & Sons, New York, 1879 On page 224, Stockton's character from "Pomona's bridal trip," has this description of Passaic Falls: "There was rocks and precipicers, an' direful depths, and everything for a good falls, except water, and that ws all bein' used at the mills." Norman F. Brydon, in his chapter on The Great Falls in "The Passaic River: Past, Present, Future, states : "Stockton thus described a condition still all too often encountered during periods of low water."
- <sup>7</sup> Things Old and New from Rutherford, Edited by Margaret G. Riggs, Bowne & Co., New York, 1898 In correspondence of August 22, 1898, Frank R. Stockton replies to Mrs. Riggs: "As you remark, that village (Rutherford) was the scene of some of the incidents in 'Rudder Grange,' and a few of the characters of the book made themselves known to me there." Stockton disclosed to Mrs. Riggs that the unnamed person he called Pomona "lived with us there."
- <sup>8</sup> Rutherford History, Rutherford 125th Anniversary Commemorative Journal, Rod Leith, Rutherford Borough Historian, Published by the Borough of Rutherford, 2006
- <sup>9</sup> William Carlos Williams The American Background, Mike Weaver. Cambridge University Press, London, 1971 Footnote, page 3, Letters to his mother 1902-1904, mentions H.M. Walcott's painting exhibited at the Academy of Fine Arts, presumably in Phildelphia.
- <sup>10</sup> John Marin, MacKinley Helm, Pellegrini & Cudahy, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 1948. Marin and Williams first corresponded when Marin was living in Manhattan in 1922 and Marin is believed to have visited Williams at 9 Ridge Road. In her essay, "William Carlos Williams and the Art World," The Rutherford Red Wheelbarrow, No 2, 2009, Carol Kolstein makes mention of the fact that a Marin watercolor, a seascape, was among the artwork in the Williams house in Rutherford. One note of clarification on the Marin biography; Marin would not have been born in Rutherford in 1870, since the community was not formed until 1881. The Marin birthplace was more likely in Boiling Spring, which was then a section of Union Township, west of the Hackensack meadows. Marin father likely ran for election on the Union Township Council in 1872.
- <sup>11</sup> William Carlos Williams Autobiography, Chapter 42, pg. 282, "A look back."

- <sup>12</sup> William Carlos Williams *A New World Naked*, Paul Mariani, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1981 Pg. 24, Chapter One, *The Beast in the Enchanted Forest*. Helen Walcott came to Rutherford in 1878 when her father, Rev. Dana Walcott, a New England-styled Congregational minister, was appointed as a temporary pastor of the Presbyterian Church. She was a Columbia College graduate, rose to become a Rutherford school principal, and retired to live on The Terrace, next door to George B. Mitchell.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Letters of William Carlos Williams to Edgar Irving Williams Williams, 1902-1912*, Edited by Andrew J. Krivak, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison-Teaneck, N.J. 2009 Pg. 141, regarding Jim Hyslop and the meadows; pp 185-186, walks along the Passaic River by Union Avenue Bridge
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, pp 65-66, Dec. 10, 1904, Ed Brown, hunting and the meadows: "Brown has shot 35 ducks this autumn. I never knew there were that many to be found in the meadows."
- <sup>15</sup> William Carlos Williams *Autobiography*, Chapter 42, "A look back," pg. 282; "One day I killed a robin (with a gun) in the apple tree at Rice's (119 Home Avenue). I almost cried at the sight of it lying out of shape and bloodied on the ground."
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 282-282; Williams is referring to James Augustus Hyslop, whom he may have assist in 1909, about the time the poet had his first poetry published by Reid Howell, his father friend. Hyslop graduated from Amherst in 1908 and was immediately hired by the national laboratory at the Department of Agriculture in Washington DC. His first research was published in 1912; "The False Fireworms (*Eleodes*) of the Pacific Northwest" by the U.S. Government Printing Office in Washington. His so-called Magnum Opus, entitled, "Encyclopedia of Economic Insects" was later published as a entomology reference book. His published works are held by the American Museum of National History.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, pg 282 "Kipp's (sic) woods was my magic forest. I wanted to be a forester, but the only schools with courses on the subject were Cornell and Yale. They were post-graduate courses."
- <sup>18</sup> *The Letters of William Carlos Williams*, pp 21 and 151; June 1, 1908 letter to EIW.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Rutherford Republican and Rutherford American*, Saturday, Sept. 14, 1918, Pg. 1; "Equal Suffrage," an item reports of an upcoming meeting to the Rutherford Equal Suffrage League at the

home of the president, 65 Ames Avenue, the residence of Rev. Elizabeth Padgham and her life-long friend, Esther Hawes.

- <sup>20</sup> Past and Promise, Lives of New Jersey Women, The Women's Project of New Jersey, Inc., Jean N. Burstyn, Editor, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, N.J., 1990 PP 372-373 Estella Elizabeth Padgham (1874-1952) Biography by Marta Morris Flanagan
- <sup>21</sup> The Rutherford Republican, Saturday, December 14, 1912, Pg. 1, "Williams-Herman" wedding announcement; "The Rev. Richard Earl Locke, the Presbyterian pastor, officiated assisted by the Rev. Elizabeth Padgham of the Church of Our Father."
- <sup>22</sup> The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams, David frail, UMI Press, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1987 Pg. 111, "The Town and the 'Townspeople' Poems" "in July 1914, Dr. William C. Williams, school medical inspector, was present at the opening ceremonies of the two improvised playgrounds, and as a member of the association's (Town Improvement Association) executive committee he signed "A Playground Appeal" for contributions."
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid Edgar's letter, written from Rome where he was completing his graduate architectural studies, makes clear that this fascination with the "beauty spot" was shared with his brother. "For several years the importance of that plot of ground as a beauty spot in our Borough has grown upon me, and only because of their prematureness have I not said anything before about the many plans evoked by my brother and me for that corner."
- <sup>24</sup> Rutherford News, August 9, 1890 "Passaic River"
- <sup>25</sup> Make Light of It, William Carlos Williams, Random House, New York, 1932 Note: Rutherford Borough joined with the Passaic Valley Sewage Systems in 1908
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, pg. 109
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid, Pg. 109
- <sup>28</sup> The Passaic River: Past, Present, Future, Norman F. Bryson, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1974 Brydon's history notes that since the turn of the century there have been "fewer songs to the Passaic and its falls." Williams is an important exception, he states. "Throughout

"Paterson" the river and the falls are always there, determining or influencing the course of the city history and the destiny of its people."

<sup>29</sup> West Bank, Passaic River, Delawanna section, three Dutch-Colonial style stone houses, part of the 1684 settlement, photographs taken by Charles Sheeler at William Carlos Williams request, Circa 1928, courtesy The Meadowlands Museum, photo archive

<sup>30</sup> William Carlos Williams Autobiography, pg. 283