

## Charles Williams, aged 54...

by: Doris Sherrow

"Buried in Church Yard, Mr. Charles Williams, aged 54, a warden of the Church, a bosom friend of mine..." wrote Rev. Samuel Emery of the Episcopal Church in his diary on March 30, 1848. Williams had died the day before. The sentence caught my attention, because I, too, am 54. So let me distract myself from the awareness that 54 is plenty old enough to die, and yet so young, so young!---by painting for you a scene that you are not going to deduce from today's downtown streetscape.

Picture the southeast corner of Main and Marlborough streets, where today we have Forlini Automotive and the new Exxon station. This strip of land was either forest or possibly farmland until the 1820s. Then the owners, **Joel, Samuel, Jesse,** and **Joseph Hall**, quarry owner Joel Hall's four sons, decided to divide it into three house lots.

The northernmost, at the corner of Main and Marlborough, went to Jesse Hall, the second youngest of the brothers. The middle lot was sold to **Charles Williams**, who was probably a merchant, and the southernmost lot was bought by **Timothy Edwards**, who was married to **Almyra**, daughter of **Samuel Hall**, the second eldest of the brothers.

Hall, Williams, and Edwards then built three rather similar Federal style houses on these lots.

The Federal style was a charming change from the stark simplicity of colonial architecture. The earliest ones were ridge-to-street, like colonials, but looked like they had been cut nearly in half--two windows and a door on one side, but not the two windows on the other side! A "half house," it was often called.

The Federal style also employed more molding, fancier doors, cove ceiling entry porches on the front, and perhaps even a graceful fanlight over the door or up in the gable. These houses would have offered a visual treat for the community.

So Charles Williams built himself a ridge-to-street Federal style house about 1828. It had 12 over 12 pane windows, and a 6-sunken-panel door under a classic cove ceiling entry porch on the right side of the front as you faced the building, its arched roof leading back to a fanlight over the paneled door. It stood directly opposite the southwest corner of Main and Silver streets. His neighbor to the south, Timothy Edwards, had a very similar house, but with the entry porch on the left side of the front, so that Edwards' and Williams' doorways were close to each other. Edwards' house had a decorative fanlight in the gable, as did Jesse Hall's, to the north.

When Main Street was numbered, in the later 19th or early 20th century, these houses were #181, #187 and #197. Pictures of #181, Timothy Edwards' house, and #187, Charles Williams', exist at the State Library in the **WPA Census of Old Buildings** files. #197 was torn down in 1937, before it could be photographed by the WPA researchers.

By 1848, when Charles Williams stepped out into his last night, the neighborhood had changed a bit.

Jesse Hall had died in 1836. His son Joel 2nd had bought the house in 1843, and by 1848, Joel and his wife, the former Eliza Ann Stocking, were living there with their children, **Jesse**, 8, **Elizabeth**, 6, and one-year-old **Joel** 3rd.

In the house to the south of Williams, Timothy Edwards had died in 1839, and his widow, Almyra, lived on with her grown children, **Ella Mary, Richard, Samuel,** and **Fanny**. Except for 16-year-old Fanny, they were in their twenties.

By 1848, **Charles Williams'** household had an interesting family arrangement. Williams and his wife **Abigail** lived with their 26-year-old daughter, **Julia**, her 38-year-old husband **Parker Pelton Norton**, Norton's 10-year-old daughter **Mary** from his first marriage, and his two-year-old daughter **Betsey**, from his second marriage to Julia's late older sister, Betsey! And Julia was six months pregnant with hers and Parker's first child!

**Rev. Emery** went on in his diary to comment on Williams' death: "A gloom is depicted on the countenance of all at his loss and the striking Providence which brought him to his death, viz: running against a post in the dark, when in haste to procure some one to go for a doctor for his granddaughter, supposed to be dying."

Williams was apparently killed while running for help for his two-year-old granddaughter Betsey, the last touch he had of his departed oldest daughter!

Perhaps the doctor he wanted someone to bring was **Dr. George Jarvis**, who had recently moved into the house at 344 Main Street. It is unclear whether he was seeking help from his 34-year old neighbor **Joel Hall** at 197 Main, which would have been in the direction of 344 Main, or from one of the two Edwards boys at 181 Main, which would have necessitated running a bit away from Dr. Jarvis's.

And nothing remains of the dreadful post to offer us a clue.

The little granddaughter Betsey survived. She married **George McLean** in 1864, and produced, among other citizens, **Julia Norton McLean**, who wrote the extensive **History of Trinity Church** in 1938.

So the next time you're passing Forlini Automotive — no — make that the next time you're riding as a passenger in a car passing Forlini Automotive, look back in time over that lot and see Charles Williams' little household, so tragically hit by that one moment of accident in the darkness of a night in March.

And, with any luck, on the 28th of this month, unlike poor Charles Williams, I shall turn 55.