F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'first certain memory' was of Syracuse

By Sean Kirst

Sarah Kozma, a researcher at the Onondaga Historical Association, did some digging Wednesday afternoon. She learned that Elizabeth Peck, who lived on West Genesee Street in Syracuse in the late 19th and early 20th century, was the widow of Frank Peck, a successful merchant. Peck's death apparently caused harder times for Elizabeth, who split her home into apartments and began accepting tenants. None of that would be especially remarkable, except that Elizabeth — in 1901 — rented one unit to a Proctor & Gamble salesman out of Buffalo. The boy brought along his young family, including his 4-year-old son.

This child, it turns out, had quite a memory. Years later, as an adult, he scribbled out his early recollections in a notebook. Writing of himself in the third person, he described how his father took him to “Syracuse” and “Mrs. Peck’s apartment.” He recalled how his family moved twice in this city, going from West Genesee to an apartment building on James Street and then to another home on East Willow Street.

Those memories remained vivid for F. Scott Fitzgerald, a monumental American writer whose work is again in the national spotlight. A new film version of his novel, “The Great Gatsby,” will be released May 10, with Leonardo DiCaprio starring. Last month, to anticipate that opening, the University of South Carolina — a longtime capital of Fitzgerald scholarship — decided to make the ledger available online.

The ledger was obtained by the late Mathews Bruccoli, a prominent USC professor, who was close to Fitzgerald's daughter, Frances “Scottie” Bruccoli. Fitzgerald wanted the document to be easily accessible for researchers. Park Buck, a Fitzgerald scholar who studied with Bruccoli, said Fitzgerald made hand-written notes in the ledger throughout his adult life. While the casual observer might see a few childhood years in Syracuse as unimportant, it is evident — through the ledger — how much they mattered to Fitzgerald.

The first memories of life, the first memories he had, were in Syracuse, and we’re talking about a writer who was fixated on the importance of the past and the importance of memory,” said Buck, who pointed specifically to this reference made by Fitzgerald, writing in the third person: “His sister Annabel was born (in Syracuse). His first memory is of his mother and of her bowing on a bed.”

If Fitzgerald’s work makes anything clear, it’s that marriage is one of life’s great tragedies. Gatsby said a memorable line from Fitzgerald’s most famous novel, “Great Gatsby.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald, left, kept a ledger, above, in which he mentioned his earliest memories, including the years he spent in Syracuse. Part of that time he lived in the Kasson Apartment building, below, at 622 James St.

“Why, of course you can,” said Gatsby, his legs braced.

F. Scott Fitzgerald reflects the Syracuse years as a time of relative happiness. He stayed here until he was 7, when his father was transferred back to Buffalo. Fitzgerald's life changed again when he was 12, his father lost his job and returned to Middletown, with his wife and children.

Despite all those moves, Fitzgerald retained sharp memories of Syracuse. In the ledger, he even refers to one apartment building by name: He recalls family life in The Kasson, at 622 James St., a landmark that was recently restored by Confer Realty of Rochester.

While he was there, Fitzgerald began attending the nearby Claywood-Collingwood School. He wrote about how he became friends with a little girl, “name unknown,” and how they were “stars of the primary class” because they worked out “the phonetic spelling of C-A-I.”

January 1904.

Fitzgerald’s family moved again — this time to East Willow Street, where his memory seemed to fully kick in.

On Willow Street, Fitzgerald grew familiar with “a filthy vacant lot, the haunt of dead cats, a half-naked back-board (wagon), the little girl whose father was in prison for drunkenness, a Rabelaisian incident with Jack Butler, a blow with a baseball bat from the same boy the son of an officer — that left a scar that will shine always in the middle of his forehead. . . .” Also, he Fitzgerald boated with Edgar Miller the grocery man’s son. His nurse carried her ear or rings and he hated it.

Fitzgerald went on to become an American legend. He was a friend and peer of Ernest Hemingway’s. His romance with Zelda Sayre transformed the couple into symbols of the Jazz Age. After their marriage descended into a torrent of alcohol and mental illness, Fitzgerald died in 1940. His 1934 novel, “ Tender is the Night,” is a fictional chronicle of his enduring relationship with Zelda.

At book’s end, the main character, Dick Diver, vanishes into Upstate New York.

Fitzgerald was in Syracuse for a brief time in early childhood, a connection that might seem to be of minimal importance. Yet Buck, the South Carolina scholar, said the ledger points to the extraordinary nature of a great writer who was shaped and driven by memory.

And Scott Fitzgerald's first memory was here. Sean Kirst is a columnist with The Post-Standard. Email him at skirst@syracuse.com, visit his blog at www.syracuse.com/kirst, write to him in care of The Post-Standard, Canton square, Syracuse 13222 or send him a message on Facebook or Twitter.