



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.

Fitzgerald's 'first certain memory' was of Syracuse

By Sean Kirst
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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.

Frank's death apparently caused harder times for Elizabeth, who split her house into apartments and began accepting tenants. None of that would be especially remarkable, except that Elizabeth — in 1901 — rented one unit to a Procter & Gamble salesman out of Buffalo. The guy 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 ledger. Writing of himself in the third person, he described how his father took him to "Sarycuse" 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 on the Internet.

The ledger was obtained by the late Matthew Bruccoli, a prominent USC professor, who was close to Fitzgerald's daughter, Frances "Scottie" Fitzgerald. Bruccoli wanted the document to be easily accessible for research; Park Buckner, a Fitzgerald scholar who studied with Bruccoli, said Fitzgerald made handwritten 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 Buckner, who pointed specifically to this reference made by

Fitzgerald, writing in the third-person:

"His sister Annabel was born (in Syracuse). His first certain memory is the sight of her howling on a bed."

If Fitzgerald's work makes anything clear, it is the manner in which he was haunted by a sense of loss so powerful it transcends nostalgia. Buckner said a memorable line from Fitzgerald's most famous novel captures that quality. Warned that no one can repeat the past, Gatsby replies:

"Why, of course you can."

For Fitzgerald, his ledger 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 Minnesota, 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 Conifer Realty of Rochester.

While he was there, Fitzgerald began attending the nearby Goodyear-Burlingame 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-T."

In 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 hair-raising buck-board (wagon), the little girl whose father was in prison for telling lies, 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) boxed with Edgar Miller the grocery man's son. His nurse pierced her ear for rings and he howled."

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, before their marriage descended into a torment of alcohol and mental illness. Fitzgerald died in 1940; his 1934 novel, "Tender is the Night," is a fictional chronicle of his searing 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 Buckner, 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.

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