

The Bills Block – Gone But Not Forgotten By Dorothy French



West Walworth residents are proud of their area's history and the businesses that were located there. The Bills family contributed to this legacy in several ways, including ownership of the two-story Bills block which was located on the southwest corner of Bills and West Walworth Roads. The location is now an empty lot, but in its heyday it was a busy shopping and meeting hub for the area and an apartment complex.

Left photo taken in 1896; location unknown. Note Bills name on front left window. Photo courtesy of Bonnie Bills Bendschneider.



Left photo "The Old Bills Block, West Walworth, NY." Undated postcard photo from museum files. We have been unable to confirm when this building was erected. Based on photographs, it may be possible the Bills family operated a business at two different locations in West Walworth. Aided by conversations with area residents, old records, and a Walworth Memories program, we have been able to put together the following timeline:

Early Dates:

1857: The Historical Sketch of West Walworth 1805 – 1923 by Mrs. Charles Peters of West Walworth – "In 1857 Dr. Charles Fuller was located in the Bills block and, after remaining ten years, moved to Fairport."

1889: An advertisement, courtesy of Richard Roland, featured a Ransom's Family Receipt Book. Mentioned is Ransom's Celebrated Family Medicine that was "Sold by W. J. and G. W. Bills, West Walworth, New York." It was noted they also sold dry goods, groceries, hardware, and other items.

1892: Information from the Wayne County Historian records: "William Bills purchased a store in 1892 – a two-story building 24x30 feet where he has been in business carrying a general stock." Additional information: he was postmaster from 1875 to 1887; there were several generations of men in the Bills family named William.

1904: A 1904 map of West Walworth lists the Bills family as property owners.

1930 Census: Glenn C. Bills was a general farm store merchant and his wife, Agatha, was a general store clerk.

Unknown Date: Information from the 150th Walworth Anniversary Sesquicentennial brochure Walworth 1979 Directory – 1829 – 1979: "A primitive store was built on the crossroads and operated by the Bills family for nearly 100 years."



Left Photo Will Powell is pictured in front of the Bills block going to work in his horse-drawn buggy. The photo, courtesy of Norm Druschel, is dated July 23, 1907.

Bills Family Background:

W. J. (William Jay), G. W. (George Whitney), and Charles L were born in Walworth to William and Caroline (Miller) Bills. Charles L. married Carrie Sweet; their son, Glenn C. married Agatha Freer. Refer to our March 2017 issue and Agatha's 1975 interview with their son, Charles, for additional family information.

The Stores/Post Office:

- According to Agatha, after the passing of W. J. and G. W., Charles L. operated the grocery store which was located at the north end of the Bills block. After Charles' death in 1931, Glenn C. and Agatha managed the store and the post office which was also located there. Agatha was postmistress from July 1, 1929 – November 30, 1929, and also delivered the mail. Glenn C. had a mail route for 13 years.
- Ray Welker remembered a barber shop located on the first floor.



The Apartments:

Left photo (undated), courtesy of Larry Hill, shows his father, Forest Hill, standing next to a stairway which faces West Walworth Road. Larry Hill has provided of the following information: three apartments were located on the south side of the building; a second floor apartment was accessible via outside stairs located between the apartments and the store.

During the late 1940's Forest and Bertha Hill lived in a first-floor apartment with their children: Viola, Bernard, Maynard, Larry, Mary, Jerry, and Harry, who was the only child born there. Other renters were Glenn Bills before he moved to Bills Road, the Clacks, and John Vane. Other tenants were Bill Bartman and Inez and Roy Ikewood. George and Ida Druschel lived there in 1905, according to Norm Druschel, their grandson. Darwin Welker said brothers Norm and Art Kier were the last two people who resided there.

Swing Your Partner and Jamming Sessions:

- After serving as a store and post office, the first floor became a dance hall and was called Townsend Hall/Club or the Thompson Hall. Round and square dances were held there on Saturday nights. Forest Hill played the fiddle and was a caller; Dick Haley played guitar. Admission was free and dances were very well attended.
- At the April 2009 Walworth Memories program, Harold Granger mentioned that Mrs. Hedy Ryan of Atlantic Ave. operated the dance hall for several years.
- Larry said Vern Young, nationally known singer and musician with local roots, would stop at Larry's parents' apartment and play his guitar, as did Carl Abraham and Bob Wall.

Current Status:

- The exact date of the building's destruction is unknown. Ray Welker said it was still standing when he left for the service in 1959 but was gone when he returned in 1960. Darwin Welker said Ray Halsey knocked it down with his bulldozer. **Current photos of the Bills Block are shown below.** According to information at the Walworth Town Hall, the property is currently owned by John (deceased) and Marilyn Wilson of 684 Bills Road, whose house adjoins the vacant corner lot.

