

## W. C. Williams Building

### I. CONTEXT

Palacios is situated on State Highway 35 halfway between Houston and Corpus Christi in the southwestern corner of Matagorda County. The town is also on Tres Palacios Bay (after which it is named), an inlet of Matagorda Bay off the Gulf of Mexico. The name of the bay is Spanish for "Three Palaces." An apocryphal story has it that sailors from a Spanish ship that wrecked in Matagorda Bay thought they saw palaces on the shoreline. As they neared the shore, however, the palaces disappeared. It is thought that the bay and the Tres Palacios River were actually named for José Félix Trespalacios (1781 – 1835).<sup>1</sup>

In 1901 the future site of Palacios was part of the bull pasture offered for sale by the estate of Abel Head "Shanghai" Pierce (1834 – 1900). The Texas Rice Development Company purchased the land and subdivided it into 160-acre tracts. The mile-square tract on Tres Palacios Bay at Hamilton Point was sold by the Palacios City Townsite Company, a subsidiary of the development company. The town of Trespalacios was surveyed into lots in 1902. Since there was already a nearby post office named Tres Palacios the new town changed its name to Palacios. The development company paid a bonus to the Southern Pacific to extend its line to Palacios.<sup>1</sup>

In 1903 a post office was opened, the first church was organized, the train began excursions for settlers, and the town site company built Hotel Palacios. In 1904 a pavilion was constructed on a T-head pier over the water at the south end of town, next to the hotel. The town site company gave thirteen acres on Hamilton Point to the Baptists on the condition that the Baptist Young People's Union Encampment would be held at Palacios. The first encampment was held there in 1906.<sup>1</sup> Duncan Ruthven (1869 – 1945), who along with A. R. Hillyer (1871 – 1937), opened a packing company in Palacios in 1903 and was elected the first mayor in 1909 when the city was incorporated.<sup>2</sup> In 1907 the Palacios public library was organized by five women; it was officially established in 1910 and in 1967 moved to the site it still occupies today. By 1915 the town had a population of 2,000, more than 100 businesses, a weekly newspaper (the *Palacios Beacon*), and Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran churches.<sup>1</sup>

## II. OVERVIEW

William Conrad “Billy” (W. C.) Williams (1854 – 1946) was born in Matagorda County on February 20, 1854 to John Aaron Williams (1816 - 1865) and his wife Catharine Elizabeth Franz Williams (1827- 1914).<sup>3/4</sup> John A. Williams was a ship's carpenter from Denmark. His wife was from Germany. By 1860, seven children were living in the household.<sup>5/6</sup> W. C. Williams and Martha Alice Franz Williams (1860 – 1952) were married on July 14, 1876, a union which produced seven children; Mabel Claire Williams Walker (1882 – 1968), Lula Theresa Williams Newton (1892 - 1969), Lyda Gay Williams Huddleston (1890 – 1976), John Alvin Williams (1885 – 1956), George Edward Williams (1879 – 1964), Walter Henry Williams (1877 – 1969) and Myrtle Pearl Williams Hoot (1897 – 1939).<sup>3</sup>

Before coming to Palacios, Williams grew up with and was a childhood friend of well known western author Charles Angelo Siringo (1855-1928).<sup>3a</sup> Siringo mentions several references to W. C. Williams whose nick name was Billy, and his father, John Williams, in his book *A Texas Cowboy*, first published in 1886.<sup>3b</sup> The families lived near each other on Matagorda Island, in a small colony called the "Dutch Settlement."<sup>3c</sup> It should also be noted that Siringo was, by his own admission, in love with Williams' later to be wife, Martha. Siringo recounts how after years of exploits away from Matagorda Island, he received a letter informing him that Martha had married his best childhood friend, Billy (Williams).<sup>3d</sup> In 1903, Williams was involved in oil ventures in the lucrative Big Hill<sup>3e</sup> oil discovery area in Jefferson County, TX,<sup>3f</sup> as was his brother, James Francis Williams (1849 – 1938) and Son, Walter Henry "Pete" Williams (1877 – 1969).<sup>3g/3h</sup> From the time Mr. Williams purchased land in Palacios, he was one of its leading citizens, being appointed to supervise elections and other activities.<sup>7</sup>

Williams came to Palacios in 1904 at the age of fifty.<sup>4</sup> In 1908, Williams purchased the property at the corner of 5th and Commerce Streets from Mrs. M. L. Gillett (1859 – 1951) (Block 51, Lot 15 of the original Palacios town site).<sup>8</sup> Williams made plans to erect a two story brick Romanesque structure on the site. The structure would be 30 feet wide and 70 feet deep accommodating a total of 2,400 square feet. Commerce Street, also known as "Haber" Street, was considered the "main street" of the city and the street upon which the most prominent buildings would soon follow in the form of the R. J. Hill and Ruthven Buildings.<sup>9/10</sup> The W. C.

Williams Building was completed in 1909 and would remain a cornerstone of commerce and downtown activity in Palacios for almost 105 years.<sup>8</sup>

In 1910, Williams became a partner with Mr. Christian Doss (1847 – 1920) and Mr. Robert J. Hill (1864 – 1930) in the original Palacios Water Supply Company with an initial capitalization of \$20,000.00.<sup>11</sup> In 1910, Mr. Hill built the Hill Building a block down Commerce Street from the Williams Building.<sup>9</sup> In 1914, Mr. Williams built his home on South Bay Boulevard, just a block from the structure he erected five years earlier.<sup>12</sup> In the years that followed Williams raised a family of four boys and three girls in Palacios. One of his sons, W. H. "Pete" Williams (1877 – 1969), later served as Palacios' Justice of the peace.<sup>13/31</sup> On May 4, 1926, another of his sons, John Alvin Williams (1885 – 1956), was a Director of the Palacios Board of Trade and signed the document changing the name to the present day, Palacios Chamber of Commerce,<sup>14</sup> In September 1984, Mr. Williams' Grand Daughter, Jacqueline J. Holt (1923 – 2010), was serving as Assistant Cashier at City State Bank.<sup>15</sup>

The Williams building located at the corner of 5th & Commerce Streets, was a cornerstone of the business community and an anchor to Palacios' downtown. It became the home to several businesses throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The first recorded occupant of the Williams Building was Palacios Hardware. An early picture of the building shows the Palacios Hardware sign on the 5th street side.<sup>16</sup> The streets are not paved indicating the picture was taken prior to 1929, when a bond issue was passed and taxes to pave the streets were assessed.<sup>17</sup> Palacios Hardware was owned originally by O. L. Sparks (1871 – 1924) who sold to G. H. Davis (1896 – 1992) in March 1920.<sup>18</sup> Palacios Hardware moved sometime in the early to mid 1920s to another location to make way for Traylor Hardware.

The second occupant of the building was Traylor Hardware, owned by Palacios prominent businessmen and early pioneers, John Traylor (1867 – 1932) and Edmond Allen Traylor (1897 – 1966).<sup>19</sup> The Traylor's established the store on Main Street around 1917.<sup>20</sup> Dr. Joseph. Ralph Wagner (1870 – 1957), a prominent citizen and doctor had his offices on the second floor of the original location.<sup>20</sup> Sometime after 1917, Traylor Hardware moved into the Williams Building.<sup>21</sup> Dr. Wagner also moved his offices above the Traylor Williams Building

location.<sup>20</sup> Later in 1957, the city would vote to build a local hospital named in his honor.<sup>22</sup> Traylor Hardware was in the building until September 1, 1929, when they moved to the building previously occupied by the Queen Theatre located just east on Commerce Street.<sup>23</sup>

In February of 1929, W. C. Williams was among the many businessmen and citizens who signed a petition to have gas service provided to the city.<sup>24</sup> On March 14, 1929, the Williams Building experienced a small fire with minimal damage.<sup>25</sup> A few months later on August 8, 1929, W. C Williams announced he would be making planned improvements to the structure.<sup>26</sup> Later that year, the citizens of Palacios voted to pave the downtown streets, among which were Commerce and 5th Streets.<sup>17</sup>

Golden Rule Grocery was the next occupants of the building at 5th and Commerce Streets. On December 19, 1929 the company signed a lease, moving in on December 30th of that year.<sup>27</sup> Golden Rule was owned at various times by C. F. Conner (1899 – 1975), G. Bieri, Stillman R. Winfield (1897 – 1987) and Harley C. Lewis (1892 – 1977).<sup>28</sup>

In July 1931 W. C. Williams built a smaller galvanized building on the north side of his building along 5th Street to provide space for the shoe repair business of Isaac. W. Kinard (1878 – 1970).<sup>29</sup> That same year, Mr. Williams and his wife celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary.<sup>30</sup> By 1940, Williams was 86 and living with his wife at 454 Duson Avenue. His son W. H. "Pete" Williams (1877 – 1969) 61, was living with them.<sup>31</sup>

Williams and his wife, Martha, often celebrated their birthdays together since their birthdays were one day apart, hers on February 19th, and his on February 20th. Such was the case in February 1943. Williams and his wife celebrated his 90th birthday and her 84th birthday.<sup>32</sup>

Mr. & Mrs. Williams celebrated their 70th wedding anniversary July 14, 1946.<sup>33</sup> Williams died the following November 24th at the age of ninety-two.<sup>4</sup> Ms. Williams died in San Antonio, TX on October 15, 1952 at the age of ninety-three.<sup>34</sup>

As early as November 22, 1962, Lawson Hardware was a tenant and continued to occupy the premises through the 1960s.<sup>35/36/37</sup> The building was still owned by the Williams estate through the 70s, remained empty, but not destroyed.<sup>38</sup>

On December 7, 1979, Douglas Rosenthal (1940 – 1996) purchased the structure from the Williams heirs for \$10,000.00.<sup>3/39</sup> In Rosenthal invested \$10,000.00 for the purpose of installing new plumbing and electric service as well as make structural changes.<sup>40</sup> On February 2, 1982, City State Bank took ownership of the building after Rosenthal defaulted on monies owed the bank.<sup>41</sup> On three occasions between 1983 and 1986, the bank entered into commercial construction projects on the building for rental and/or sale purposes.<sup>42</sup>

New offices were constructed in the southwest and southeast corners to house the Palacios Area Fund office and an additional tenant. The back of the building was re-done as a conference room for the bank. In addition, the bank let a contract to turn the second floor into offices to house the Vocational Training Program of the Palacios Independent School District.<sup>42</sup> A fire escape was added on the east wall to accommodate the students. On February 15, 1987 the PISD and City State Bank signed a rental agreement for use of the second floor.<sup>43</sup> The Vocational Ed program ran for several years into the 1990s. Besides the tenants who rented offices in the front of the building, City State Bank used the structure through the 1990s and into the early 2000s for storage as well as bank meetings. The bank also acquired lots 14, 13 and 12 to the east of the structure. By then these lots were vacant since the structures had been demolished a few years after Hurricane Carla.

Lorraine Faye Hudson (1948- ) purchased the building on September 5, 2003, along with lots 14, 13 and 1/2 of 12.<sup>44</sup> Ms. Hudson did extensive modifications to the second story so the area could become a two bedroom residence. Ms. Hudson also had the east wall of the structure reinforced, due to the fact the buildings immediately east on Commerce had been torn down after hurricane Carla. Ms. Hudson rented the front two offices to an attorney and to Lacey Byron Lowry (1940- ), CPA, who used the office as his Palacios location. The rest of the building downstairs was used for church meetings and storage.

On March 19, 2010, Paul Arnold Christensen (1944 - ) and his wife, Donna Jan Garrison Christensen (1947 - ) purchased the building and most of the adjacent property (Block 51, lots 15, 14, 13 and 1/2 of 12).<sup>45</sup> In 2014, the Christensens purchased the other 1/2 of lot 12 from Commercial State Bank.<sup>46</sup> The Christensens moved from Dallas and had always dreamed of purchasing an old commercial building in a small Texas coastal town near the water. The W. C.

Williams building built in 1909 and located one block and within view of Tres Palacios Bay was made to order.

Over the next two years the couple made major updates to the building. The upstairs was finished to accommodate two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen and utility area, as well as a large 29 x 24 foot area for living and dining. A Duro-Last hurricane certified roof was installed as was new flooring and paint. They also completed air conditioning and sheet rock repairs. On the first floor, the dropped ceilings and old air conditioning was removed. All the rooms were framed up as high as possible with sheet rock. New flooring was installed as was updated air conditioning. Several walls were moved to accommodate movement within the downstairs and a two room guest suite with private entrance and full bath was finished on the southwest corner. In addition, a two room office with half bath was finished in the southwest corner to accommodate the couple's business, as were additional back rooms for storage and offices. Another 1/2 bath will soon be added.

The exterior of the building remains the same as it did in 1909, with the addition of some judicious use of hardy board in place of wood and the addition of stucco on the east wall. The stucco was added in 2006 by Ms. Hudson after the reinforcement of the east wall was completed. In mid 1985, a fire escape was added on the east wall to bring the building in compliance with local fire codes. The Christensens added aluminum louvers to the 18 windows on the second floor, in order to provide protection during the hurricane season. During the construction, the Christensens were careful to preserve the exterior of the building. Although they have not finished all the exterior brick and mortar work, they have taken care with regard to the tuck-point work so as to use special mortar mixes and the matching of colors. On the inside they attempted to retain the vintage look of an older building as much as possible.

## **SIGNIFICANCE:**

The W. C. Williams Building, built in 1909, has been a cornerstone and anchor to the commercial and cultural life of Palacios for almost 105 years. The fact the structure has endured all these years in an area prone to hurricanes such as Carla in 1961, is itself a miracle.

Many businesses have graced her brick walls for the better part of the 20th Century and into the 21st Century. Countless thousands of Palacios citizens as well as visitors have walked

and shopped within the structure. Hundreds of students studied and learned an occupation on her second floor in the 1980s and 1990s. The venerable structure has served the community well and will continue to do so well beyond the tenure of its current owners.

W. C. Williams' foresight to construct what became the W. C. Williams Building and the contribution the structure has made to Palacios business and history, will live on for years to come. Those of us who will have the opportunity to live and work in the structure will be forever indebted to Williams' vision and the investment he made in the future of Palacios.

#### **IV. DOCUMENTATION:**

<sup>1</sup> Griffin, Mary B., "Palacios, TX," The Handbook of Texas online, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hfp01>

<sup>2</sup> Claybourn, Colleen, "Palacios, City-by-the-Sea," In *Historic Matagorda County*, Volume I, Matagorda County Historical Commission, MCHS, PAHA, MCGS. (Houston: D. Armstrong Co., Inc., 1986), p. 367.

<sup>3</sup> [Marital and Heirship Affidavit, State of Texas, County of Matagorda, Volume 638, Page 38-40, dated December 7, 1979.](#)

<sup>3a</sup> [A Texas Cowboy, Charles A. Siringo, 1886, reprinted 2011, Mockingbird Books, Chapter - My Boyhood Days.](#)

<sup>3b</sup> [A Texas Cowboy, Charles A. Siringo, 1886, reprinted 2011, Mockingbird Books, Chapter - My introduction to the late war.](#)

<sup>3c</sup> [A Texas Cowboy, Charles A. Siringo, 1886, reprinted 2011, Mockingbird Books, Chapter - My Boyhood Days.](#)

<sup>3d</sup> [A Texas Cowboy, Charles A. Siringo, 1886, reprinted 2011, Mockingbird Books, Chapter - Back at Last to the Lone Star State.](#)

<sup>3e</sup> Wooster, Robert, "Big Hill, TX (Jefferson County)," The Handbook of Texas online, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hvbbg>

<sup>3f</sup> [Matagorda County Tribune, August 7, 1903.](#)

<sup>3g</sup> [Matagorda County Tribune, August 7, 1903.](#)

<sup>5h</sup> [Matagorda County Tribune, August 7, 1903.](#)

<sup>4</sup> [William Conrad Williams, Standard Certificate of Death, Texas Department of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, 51428, Received December 9, 1946.](#)

<sup>5</sup> [United States Census, Matagorda County, June 13, 1860, Page 3.](#)

<sup>6</sup> [United States Census, Matagorda County, September 11, 1850, Page 1-2.](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 14 No, 32, August 12, 1921, Page 2.](#)

<sup>8</sup> [MATAGORDA COUNTY TAX RECORDS, Volume 3 – 1904-1913, MATAGORDA COUNTY MUSEUM, ANNEX \(ARCHIVES & COLLECTIONS DEPT.\).](#)

<sup>9</sup> “Organizations and Businesses,” In *Historic Matagorda County*, Volume I, Matagorda County Historical Commission, MCHS, PAHA, MCGS. (Houston: D. Armstrong Co., Inc., 1986), p. 442.

<sup>10</sup> [Industrial Development and Manufacturers' Record, Volume 55, January 14, 1909., Page 67, June 10, 1909.](#)

<sup>11</sup> [The National Corporation Reporter Devoted to the Interests of Business and Municipal Corporations, Law, Finance, and Commerce, 1910, Volume 39, Page 143.](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 32, No, 21, May 25, 1929, Page 4.](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 22, No, 21, August 1, 1929, Page 4.](#)

<sup>14</sup> Eggemeyer, Mary, “Palacios Chamber of Commerce,” In *Historic Matagorda County*, Volume I, Matagorda County Historical Commission, MCHS, PAHA, MCGS. (Houston: D. Armstrong Co., Inc., 1986), p. 520.

<sup>15</sup> Goodner, Jack A., “City State Bank of Palacios,” In *Historic Matagorda County*, Volume I, Matagorda County Historical Commission, MCHS, PAHA, MCGS. (Houston: D. Armstrong Co., Inc., 1986), p. 560.

<sup>16</sup> [Picture, Palacios Street Scene, ca. early 1900s.](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 22, No, 36, September 5, 1929, Page 3-4.](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 12, No, 8, March 12, 1920, Page 5.](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 24, No, 23, June 4, 1931, Page 1.](#)



<sup>20</sup> Fiorini, Cathy, "Traylor Hardware Company," In *Historic Matagorda County*, Volume I, Matagorda County Historical Commission, MCHS, PAHA, MCGS. (Houston: D. Armstrong Co., Inc., 1986), p. 552.

<sup>21</sup> [Picture, Fiorini, P. 552.](#)

<sup>22</sup> Claybourn, Colleen, "Palacios, City-by-the-Sea," In *Historic Matagorda County*, Volume I, Matagorda County Historical Commission, MCHS, PAHA, MCGS. (Houston: D. Armstrong Co., Inc., 1986), p. 378.

<sup>23</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 22, No. 34, August 22, 1929, Page 1.](#)

<sup>24</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 22, No. 9, February 28, 1929, Page 1.](#)

<sup>25</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 22, No. 11, March 14, 1929, Page 1.](#)

<sup>26</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 22, No. 32, August 8, 1929, Page 1.](#)

<sup>27</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 22, No. 51, December 19, 1928, Page 1.](#)

<sup>28</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 22, No. 5, January 31, 1929, Page 1.](#)

<sup>29</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 23, No. 29, July 17, 1930, Page 1.](#)

<sup>30</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 59, No. 30, July 26, 1956, Page 2.](#)

<sup>31</sup> [United States Census, Palacios, Matagorda County, Page 22A, 1940.](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 51, No. 8, February 21, 1963, Page 2.](#)

<sup>33</sup> [The Bay City News, Vol. 11, No. 4, July 12, 1956, Page 6.](#)

<sup>34</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 50, No. 42, October 18, 1962, Page 2.](#)

<sup>35</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 50, No. 47, November 22, 1962, Page 7.](#)

<sup>36</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 51, No. 28, July 11, 1953, Page 9.](#)

<sup>37</sup> [Palacios Beacon, Vol. 52, No. 48, November 26, 1964, Page 8.](#)

<sup>38</sup> [Picture, Williams Building ca. 1970s.](#)

<sup>39</sup> [Warranty Deed, State of Texas, County of Matagorda, Sale, Block 51, Lot 15, Palacios original townsite, Book 638, Page 47.](#)

<sup>40</sup> [Mechanics Lien, State of Texas, County of Matagorda, Block 51, Lot 15, Palacios original townsite, Book 58, Page 662.](#)

<sup>41</sup> [Trustee's Deed, State of Texas, County of Matagorda, Sale, Block 51, Lot 15, Palacios original townsite, Book 699, Page 614.](#)

<sup>42</sup> [Written statement, Ronnie Callahan, witness to and participation in construction activities, Williams Building, 1983 - 1986.](#)

<sup>43</sup> [Lease Agreement, State of Texas, County of Matagorda, City State Bank and Palacios Independent School District, February 15, 1987, Vol. 143, Page 166.](#)

<sup>44</sup> [Matagorda County Appraisal District, Tax and Deed Records, Lorraine Hudson, 2004.](#)

<sup>45</sup> [Matagorda County Appraisal District, Tax and Deed Records, Paul and Donna Christensen, 2010.](#)

<sup>46</sup> [Matagorda County Appraisal District, Tax and Deed Records, Paul and Donna Christensen, 2014.](#)