

Series: Local Laws

Box# 050009

Folder# 3

W. 135TH STREET /  
WESLLY WILLIAM  
PLACE, MANHATTAN

1985

Witness 6-18-85

Cm Williams

James Hardy      ass. To Major Koch

INTRO. NO. 819

West 135 St/Kearney William H., Ward

PARKS, RECREATION AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS

LD 6/21/85

LL 39/85



**LOCAL LAWS  
OF  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
FOR THE YEAR 1985**

**No. 39**

Introduced by Council Members Samuel and Foster, also Council Member Spigner—

**A LOCAL LAW**

**To amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to a street name, West 135th Street/Wesley Williams Place, Borough of Manhattan.**

*Be it enacted by the Council as follows:*

Section one. Section B4-5.0 of title B of chapter four of the administrative code of the city of New York is hereby amended by adding thereto a new designation to read as follows:

Section B4-5.0 **Manhattan, change certain street names.**—The following street name is hereby designated as hereafter indicated.

New Name	Present Name	Limits
West 135th Street/Wesley Williams Place	West 135th St.	From Lenox Avenue to Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard.

§2. This local law shall take effect immediately.

THE CITY OF NEW YORK, OFFICE OF THE CITY CLERK, S.S.:

I hereby certify that the foregoing is a true copy of a local law of The City of New York, passed by the Council on June 21, 1985, and approved by the Mayor on July 8, 1985.

DAVID N. DINKINS, City Clerk, Clerk of the Council.

CERTIFICATION PURSUANT TO MUNICIPAL HOME RULE LAW § 27

Pursuant to the provisions of Municipal Home Rule Law § 27, I hereby certify that the enclosed local law (Local Law 39 of 1985, Council Int. No. 819) contains the correct text and, received the following vote at the meeting of the New York City Council on June 21, 1985: 34 for, 0 against.

Was approved by the Mayor on July 8, 1985.

Was returned to the City Clerk on July 9, 1985.

HADLEY W. GOLD, Acting Corporation Counsel.

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PUBLIC HEARING ON LOCAL LAWS

MONDAY, JULY 8, 1985

4:30 A.M. -- CITY HALL

The next bill on today's public hearing calendar is Introductory Number 819, introduced by Fred Samuel and Wendell Foster, and co-sponsored by Archie Spigner.

This bill would add the designation "WESLEY WILLIAMS PLACE" to the block of West 135th Street limited by Lenox Avenue and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Boulevard, in Harlem, in memory of the late, trailblazing firefighter known as "the Chief". Williams died in 1984 at the age of eighty, thirty-three years after retiring from a long and distinguished career with the New York City Fire Department.

Wesley Williams joined the Fire Department in 1919. That year, out of 27,000 men who took the Civil Service exam for firefighter, Williams placed thirteenth. On the physical test he achieved a perfect score, only the second man in the Department's history to attain a flawless mark. Yet, what most distinguished Wesley Williams from the other candidates appointed to the Fire Department in 1919 was neither his intelligence nor his strength. Rather, he was one of only a few black men in a still segregated, biased Fire Department.

Williams was assigned to Engine Company 55 on Broome Street in Lower Manhattan. Later in life Williams recalled that the

first day he reported to work the Captain of the Company retired, and walked out of the firehouse in order to avoid the so-called stigma attached to the assignment of a black firefighter to his station. At once, every firefighter in Engine Company 55 submitted a request for transfer.

Williams endured this hostile reception. And he endured the reprehensible treatment he received simply because he was a black man--practical jokes, alienation, assignment of the worst jobs, exclusion from social activity both in and out of the firehouse. But Wesley Williams triumphed in the face of adversity. Uninvited to share in firehouse meals and with no one to talk to, he built a small gym in the firehouse hose tower and spent his spare time exercising and studying.

During the 1920's, the traditional method of settling arguments between firefighters was an invitation into the firehouse cellar. Williams' athletic prowess won him respect during these unsavory bouts; it also won him the 1924 Fire Department Heavyweight Boxing Championship. Slowly but surely, Wesley Williams was bringing about a change in Fire Department procedures and attitudes.

Wesley Williams was appointed the Department's first black officer in 1927, when he made Lieutenant. He was soon promoted to Captain, and then, fifteen years after he had first entered the Engine Company 55 firehouse, he was appointed its Company



Commander. In 1938 he became the Department's first black Battalion Chief.

There had been less than a handful of black firefighters when Wesley Williams joined the Department in 1919; by 1937 there were twenty, and by 1940, at the peak of Williams' career, there were fifty. Wesley Williams was their advocate and confidant, because, while the grosser examples of racial brutality had abated, prejudice and injustice had not yet vanished from the Fire Department. In 1940, Williams organized his fellow black firefighters into a fraternal organization--the Vulcan Society--, because, as he once put it, ". . . it was a fight for survival in those early days, survival with dignity."

Wesley Williams retired in 1951, but even today, a year after his death, he remains alive in the minds of Vulcan Society members, the Fire Department, the Harlem community in which he lived, and the City at-large, which he ably protected for many years. This street name change memorializes one of the bravest of New York's Bravest, and I am pleased it is before me for signature.

Is there anyone to be heard in opposition?

Is there anyone to be heard in favor?

There being no one [else] to be heard, and for the reasons stated above,

I will now sign the bill.

# THE COUNCIL

The City of New York

Int. No. 819

September 6, 1984

Introduced by Council Members Samuel and Foster, also Council Member Spigner—read and referred to the Committee on Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs.

## A LOCAL LAW

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4 nated as hereafter indicated.

5

New name	Present name	Limits
6		
7		
8 West 135th Street/Wesley	West 135th St.	From Lenox Avenue to Adam
9 Williams Place		Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard.
10		

11 § 2. This local law shall take effect immediately.

12  
Note: Matter in *italics* is new; matter in brackets [ ] to be omitted.

THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
COMMITTEE ON PARKS, RECREATION AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS

DATE: 6-18-85

INTRO NO. \_\_\_\_\_ RES. NO. \_\_\_\_\_ M- \_\_\_\_\_

OVERSIGHT SUBJECT: 980  
946, 952, 955, 958A  
914, 919, 925, 938  
780, 819, 905, 910

COUNCIL MEMBER	PRESENT	item			item		
		aye	nay	abstain	aye	nay	abstain
WARD	(1)	(1)					
POVMAN							
ALTER	(2)	(2)					
FOSTER							
LEFFLER	(4)	(3)					
MALONEY							
WOOTEN	(2)	(4)					

TOTAL PRESENT \_\_\_\_\_ aye 4 nay \_\_\_\_\_ abstain \_\_\_\_\_ aye \_\_\_\_\_ nay \_\_\_\_\_ abstain \_\_\_\_\_

OTHER COUNCIL MEMBERS ATTENDING:

Dea Williams  
ODonovan ALBANESE  
CRISPINO

TIME OF OPENING:

TIME OF ADJOURNMENT:

SPEAKERS:



Submitted by: Edward F. O'Malley

T H E C O U N C I L  
REPORT OF LEGAL SERVICES DIVISION

COMMITTEE ON PARKS, RECREATION AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS

INT. NO. 819

By: Council Members Samuel and  
Foster; also Council Member  
Spigner

SUBJECT:

In relation to a street name, West 135th  
Street Wesley Williams Place, Borough of  
Manhattan

ADMINISTRATIVE CODE:

Amends section B4-5.0 of title B of chapter  
four by adding a new designation.

INTENT:

This legislation will add a second name,  
Wesley William Place, to the present name West 135th Street. The

limits are from Lenox Avenue to Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard.

COMMENT:

In 1919, Wesley Williams was one of New York  
City's first black fireman. As his career progressed, he would  
become the City's first black battalion chief.

Mr. Williams, while a school dropout, studied  
and read on his own. He easily passed the Fire Department's written  
test and was the only applicant out of 1,700 who passed the physical  
with a perfect score of 100.

Wesley Williams was assigned to Engine 55  
on Broome Street. The day he first reported, the captain of the  
company took off his uniform and walked out. Other firemen also walked  
out or refused to acknowledge him. He was subject to racial attacks  
throughout his early career, often having to fistfight to stay on the  
job. He spent the time studying and lifting weights.

By 1927, he made lieutenant, captain in 1934  
and battalion chief in 1938. He retired from the department in 1951.

-2-

As seen by his devotion to weight lifting, Mr. Williams believed in body-building and health foods.

He died recently, living past the age of 80.

EFO'M:arp  
INT. NO. 819  
6-18-85

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Name ~~St.~~  
change  
from next week  
cm Samuel office

" CHIEF" WESLEY WILLIAMS

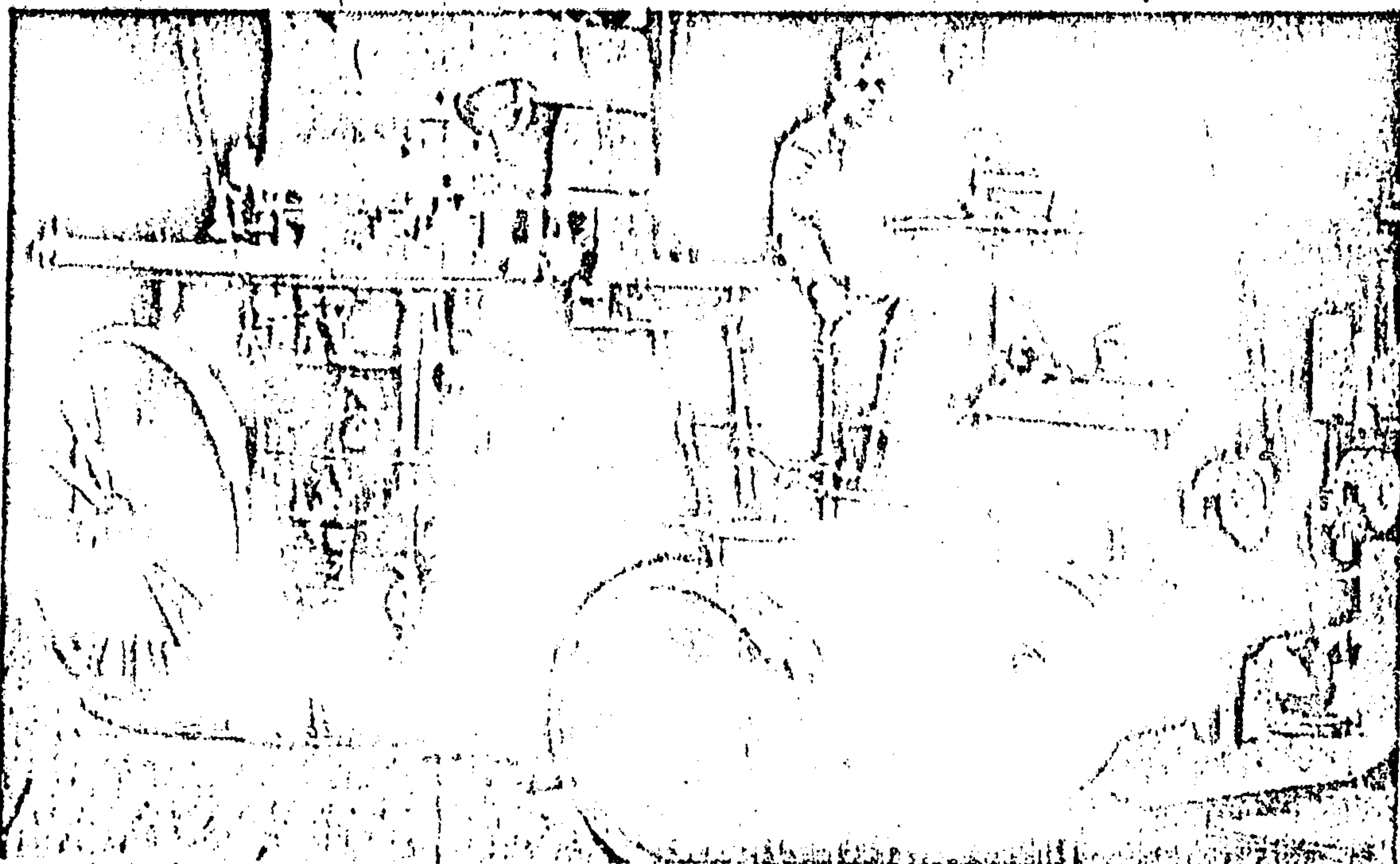
"Chief" Wesley Williams was employed by the Fire Department of the City of New York as a firefighter on January 10, 1919.

His commitment, his dedication to his job and his courageous personality all characterized him as one of the most distinguished members of the Fire Department. At the time he was appointed to the Fire Department at Engine Company #55, 363 Broome Street, the White captain retired rather than experience the "stigma" of being the captain of the company where the Black fireman was to work.

Wesley Williams later became the first Black Battalion Chief in the history of the New York City Fire Department and has been the recipient of many honors and citations because of his very distinguished professional career.

"Chief" Williams died recently and at the time of his death he was over 80 years of age.





Wesley Williams at the wheel of a Christy steam engine, outside Engine 55, 303 Broome Street, in 1919. He was given the job because of his experience as a truck driver for the U.S. Post Office.

## City Firemen Hail Once-Scorned 'Chief'

In 1919, Wesley Williams, one of New York City's first black firemen and eventually its first black battalion chief, walked into his first city firehouse. The other firemen walked out in initial protest, then ostracized him.

Last night, at the age of 80, "The Chief" was the guest of honor at a dinner in the State Office Building at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue in Harlem, and more than 350 firemen, policemen, other Civil Service employees and community workers came to pay tribute.

Borough President Percy E. Sutton of Manhattan was there, and so was Fire Commissioner Joseph T. O'Hagan.

Mr. Williams was there because as he put it, "I prefer smelling roses while my nose is in good condition."

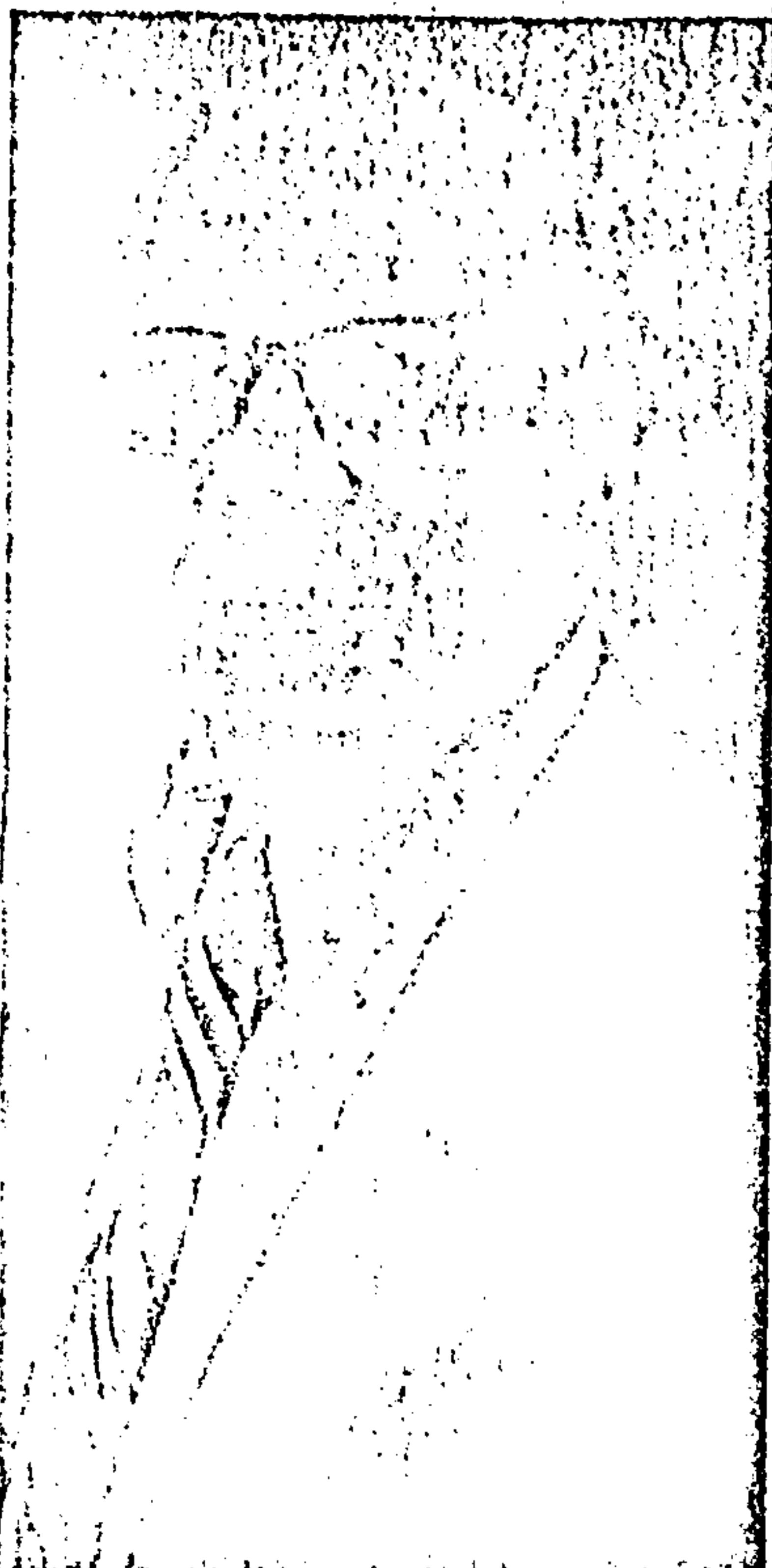
The rest of Mr. Williams isn't too bad either. He swims three times weekly at the Harlem Y.M.C.A. on 135th Street, lifts weights and is a devotee of vitamins and health foods. He looks, in fact, very much as he did when he became a fireman in 1919 and took up weight-lifting.

### Gross Rejection Recalled

A school dropout in the second decade of this century, Mr. Williams studied and read on his own, and when he entered the Fire Department, he passed the written test strongly and was "the only man out of 1,700 applicants to pass the physical with a perfect score of 100," according to a 1919 newspaper clipping.

On the day he walked into Engine 55 on Broome Street, the captain of the company took off his uniform and walked out. Other firemen walked out of the firehouse and up to its roof, and when Mr. Williams attempted to join them, they walked back downstairs.

"For months it was like that," Mr. Williams said in a recent interview.



Mr. Williams greeting guests at the dinner in his honor last night.

"My job was to clean up the building, and they would urinate in the spittoons."

"They filled my boots with excrement and damaged my uniforms. There was even one guy who went into the kitchen behind me, breaking plates and glasses I used at dinner, and nobody hardly said a word, except when they were challenging

me to a fistfight." Which he always won.

"I could not have stayed on the job if I lost," he said. "There was no Human Rights Commission, and you couldn't go complaining to a civil-rights group. They would have thought I was a weakling and trampled me. In those days you stood up alone and put knuckle to jaw."

Alone in a crowded firehouse, Mr. Williams learned on the lessons he had been taught by his father, a Grand Central terminal redcap, and on childhood lessons in body-building and yoga. He lifted weights and studied.

### Excelled as Weight-Lifter

Mr. Williams lifted 3,600 pounds at his hips and 625 pounds in a dead-lift with one arm. When the national heavyweight "clean-and-jerk" record was 250 pounds, Mr. Williams was lifting 345 pounds. This despite a height of 5 feet 8 inches and a weight that never rose above 180 pounds.

He was also a swimmer, a boxer, a ball player, and he kept to his disciplines. He was made a lieutenant in 1927, a captain in 1934 and a battalion chief in 1938. He retired in 1951.

Mr. Williams was married three times and outlived all three wives.

"You know, I'm too old for marriage now," he says, "but the truth is that at my age when you see a pretty woman whom you like a lot, you feel just as silly as you did when you were 18."

These days the Chief lives on his \$250 a-week pension, which is usually spent pretty quickly on food, athletic equipment, books on natural history, memory improvement and ways to "do it yourself." He doesn't mind not having savings, he said, because you never saw a Brink's truck taking money to the cemetery.



Fireman Woodson, the second Black Fireman, had been a member of the New York City Fire Department approximately four and a half years when he read an article in the "Chicago Defender", a Black weekly newspaper, of the impending appointment of one more Black fireman to the New York City Fire Department. Woodson had established himself as a man of courage having received two citations for bravery by the Department but from his letter to Wesley Williams dated January 6, 1919 it was evident that he was unable to enter that inner circle of companionship enjoyed by his brother white firemen. In his letter he wrote that as a "race" man he felt it was his duty to enlighten the new comer to the conditions which existed in the Department at that time. He went on to explain that the new fireman would find "quite a lot of jealous and narrow minded men" in the Department and that when he (Wesley Williams) was assigned to a Company, to "do your work and do it as near perfect as you can" and to "do everything the commanding officers tell you to do, no matter what it might be, do it". In the area of race relations he admonished, "Don't force your friendship on anybody and if there is an argument don't join them; just say I'm neutral." "If they speak of our race before you, in your presence, as niggers, pay no attention - go and do something or take a newspaper and read". However, he concludes his letter on an upbeat, punctuated with hope and a lack of malice.

"With best wishes for success and a pleasant career in the Fire Department, I remain".

Yours truly,

John H. Woodson  
P.O. Box 145  
Jamaica, N.Y.C.

The envelope is postmarked Jamaica, N.Y., January 6, 7 PM, 1919 and addressed

Mr. Wesley Williams  
818 East 223rd Street  
New York, New York  
Bronx

Mr. Wesley Williams was no ordinary colored man, or Negro man, or Black man or white man -- Wesley Williams was an exceptional man.

At eighteen, as an amateur weight lifter, he had shattered most of the weight lifting records that had existed up to that time. Among his records was a 3,600 pound hip lift, a one arm dead lift of 625 pounds and a 698 pound lift one inch from the ground. When the national heavy weight record in the clean and jerk was 250 pounds, Wesley Williams was lifting 345 pounds. He also accomplished a 75 pound one arm curl, a 245 pound military press, correct style, and a 222 pound one arm "clean and jerk". Williams was not big physically; he was only 5'8" and, at that time less than 180 pounds.

Despite his acknowledged weight lifting feats, these feats may not be recorded in record books because they failed to gain official recognition. Five years after entering the Department in 1924, Williams won the heavy weight boxing championship at a weight of 185. It was not surprising that Wesley Williams achieved a perfect score of 100% in the physical examination to enter the Department. He was the one candidate of the 2,700 competing to score a 100% on the entrance physical examination and only the second man in the history of the Department to gain a perfect score.

The streets of Harlem were still wet from a heavy May shower the afternoon I interviewed Retired Battalion Chief Wesley Williams. The Chief, as he is affectionately and respectfully called by his acquaintances is a Black man of honey-brown complexion. At eighty, his weight remains approximately 180 pounds, his weight at eighteen; a well tailored red suit covers a still powerful frame.



Wesley Williams is a well educated grammar school graduate whose book library boasts the works of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, William James, Jack London, Carl Van Vechten, J.J. Robertson are examples of his wide and varied tastes in reading.

Since his retirement from the Department, April 1, 1952, the Chief has remained as active in the business affairs of "his" Harlem as he has in its social life. Still a strikingly handsome man, with just beginning-to-thin curly grey hair, it is evident that his many years of strict physical and mental discipline have served him well. The Chief has held a continuous membership in the Harlem YMCA for 55 years, still works out in the gym and pool and is an ardent devotee of ice cold showers; however, he warns that to reduce the shock you must wet your head with cold water first. While talking to the Chief in the private office of his long time friend and Harlem political leader, Lloyd Dickens, I could not help being reimpresed by his expansive wit and humor which he constantly inserted into the conversation, but most of all I marveled at the ease with which he drew on his crystal clear memory to recall the first and last names of men he had worked with in the early 1920's as he easily recounted detailed events and experiences.

To Black firemen, The Chief is certainly a minor diety, not only in the New York City Fire Department but to Black firemen throughout the nation. So much of the tone and the will to succeed and excel by black firemen in white departments was imbued by this one black man. The interview was tape recorded, not only so it might flow without interruption but that the Chief's experiences, in his own words including his humor and wit, will be recorded for posterity.



I asked him to recall his experiences from the beginning of his career. It is of utmost importance to understand the relationship of black and white fireman through the 1920's, 30's, and 40's. These were crucial years; they were the building blocks on which the present relationships and attitudes rest. The first thing we discussed was the letter he had received from Fireman John Woodson a few days before he was appointed in 1919. The Chief recalled how appreciative he was to receive the letter and how accurately Woodson had stated the facts and the problems he was to face.

Wesley Williams, with a grammar school education, a perpetual desire for knowledge and a near perfect physique competed with 2,700 other candidates and placed number 13 on the Civil Service list for appointment as Fireman, New York City Fire Department. On the physical examination, which is designed to test a candidates strength and agility, William's score was perfect. Even with his exceptionally high standing on the Civil Service list it was necessary to present letters of character references. Chief Williams' father was the head Red Cap at Grand Central Station and as such had developed an ongoing relationship with the Vanderbilts, the Coulds and the Morgans who were the owners of the railroads and passed through the terminal frequently, along with the many other prominent people of the era. Many of these famous people signed character references for young Wesley. One of those who vouched for him was former President Theodore Roosevelt.

The Chief went on to say that as previous Employer of his father, Mr. Thawley, a millionaire and heavy contributor to Tammany Hall was instrumental in letting the "power that be" including the Fire Commissioner and the Chief of the Department know that Wesley Williams was in the Fire Department to stay.



The next problem to be faced was, where was this black fireman to be assigned? The decision was Engine Company 55, located at 363 Broome Street, Manhattan, in a predominately Italian section. When the newly appointed Fireman Wesley Williams reported for duty, January 10, 1919, at Engine Company 55, the Captain retired as of that date to avoid the stigma of being the Captain of the Company where the black fireman was to perform duty. In addition, each man in the Company forthwith submitted a request for transfer stating they did not wish to work and sleep in the same firehouse with a black man. As a result no man was permitted it would have been impossible to keep any fireman in the Company. Fireman Williams was both ignored and ostracised and was given no direct instructions as to his duties or responsibilities. It must be noted that the Company was now without a Captain, and there were five or six months before a new Captain was assigned.

At the first real fire after his appointment, Fireman Williams was ordered to take the nozzle of the hose line down into the cellar. The rest of the Company was behind him to assist in moving the hose and to back him up. The purpose he was told, was to show his courage and his staying ability. After the Company had moved into place in the smoky cellar a series of explosions occurred and flames rolled over the probationary fireman's head in waves as he operated the nozzle and directed the stream. The Company, including the officer, retreated to the street leaving the probationary fireman in the cellar to extinguish the fire alone. Battalion Chief Ben Parker who was in charge of the fire sharply questioned the officer as to whether all of his men were present. The Lieutenant reported the probationary man was still in the cellar. The Chief chastized the company and the officer for their action. But by staying in the cellar and extinguishing the fire alone, Fireman Williams had thus established a reputation of being a courageous fireman who would not back out in the face of adverse conditions.

In our conversation I raised the question of the "Black Bed". The Black Bed was the one assigned to Wesley Williams. It was later to become the bed assigned to any black fireman in any firehouse where he was assigned to perform duty. In Engine Company 55 it was the bed next to the toilet. No other fireman used that bed even though the bed linen was changed after each man finished a night tour. This black bed was to be the source of bitter contention for many years in many firehouses.

Wesley Williams, like his father, had been a Red Cap except that Wesley worked at Penn Station. He left that job to become a letter carrier but more specifically, a parcel post truck driver and worked at it from the age of 18 to 21. It was through this job experience that he became very familiar with and proficient in the operation of motor vehicles. It was at this point in the history of the Department (early 1920's) that the horses were being replaced by the famous two wheel Christie tractors thus motorizing both steamers and aerial trucks. There was also a significant change in working tours in 1919. The 84 hour work week came into being a system that was to remain practically unchanged until 1939 when the three platoon eight hour plan was adopted.

In the attempt to motorize, the Department found there were very few fireman who possessed the mechanical ability to operate the new gasoline driven tractors. Fireman Williams had been driving gasoline vehicles for four years in the postal service and was therefore very qualified. A fate would have it, a quirk of the quarters of Engine 55 was that to back the apparatus into quarters it had to be backed up and angled just right through the apparatus doors. During one tour Fireman Williams was asked to take the apparatus out of quarters and then back it in. He executed the maneuver so expertly he was assigned as the apparatus driver. This assignment caused much resentment against Williams among the members of



Engine 55. It even prompted Assistant Chief of Department Patty Walsh to remark at a second alarm fire on Canal Street, "Of all the men in this Department, he (the Captain) had to pick "that" man to drive the apparatus". It should be explained that the resentment engendered by the assignment of Fireman Williams to drive and operate the apparatus was that tradition dictated that the Motor Pump Operators are to be the senior most experienced members of Fire Company. The fact that Wesley Williams had little or no seniority coupled with the fact that he was black was not offset by the fact that he was the most qualified to operate the apparatus by his previous experience and ability.

As I sat across from the Chief holding the microphone of the tape recorder we shared chuckles as he recalled some of the solutions had he employed to help him exist in a hostile atmosphere. His superb physical fitness was a tremendous asset. Practical jokes, in his early career, often took on the color of viciousness. There were times when Wesley Williams would report for duty and find that his equipment had been thrown into the cellar at the foot of the stairs in a pile. At another time he found his helmet crushed under the rear tires of the apparatus. Once he found his boots filled with the entrails of chickens and his rubber coat carefully slashed with razor blades so that it would come apart in strips when it was put on as the Company responded to a fire.

The drift of the interview turned to the Chief's physical abilities and the accepted traditional method of argument settling between individuals that existed in the Department at that period. The Chief explained that he had been invited into the cellar a few times. The winner was determined by who left the cellar first, while the other contestant remained in the cellar door to the accompaniment of splashing water in the cellar sink. The lesson was easily and quickly learned by

the rest of the Company and young Williams received no more cellar invitations. He went on to explain that this method may have been somewhat unfair because as a member of the Harlem "Y" he worked out regularly in the gym and was an acquaintance of the old time prize fighters like Sam Langford, Joe Janett and Panama "Al" Brown and they would tell him, "Look, you better stay in shape, Sonny, 'cause when you get downtown with them Irishmen - you are going to have to defend yourself".

The Chief stated, with a touch of nostalgia that they trained him and could have killed him because they were pro's; but he worked out with them on the sand bag and the punching bag and he became very proficient. With a smile the Chief said being left with no one to talk to and not being invited to take part in the commissary or meals, gave him time alone to study and develop his great respect and love for history and philosophy.

He also built a small gym at the top of the hose tower of the firehouse. The hose tower is a tower used to dry and store wet fire hose, it extends from above the firehouse roof to the cellar. The hose is suspended from the butt end by large hooks. It was in this small private gym that he continued his routine of physical fitness. In 1924 Wesley Williams became the heavy weight boxing champion of the Fire Department and at one time he held the YMCA handball championship while excelling in baseball and swimming.

On Sunday morning, October 19, 1920, a year and ten months after Wesley Williams had entered the Department, he was chatting and walking with his father on St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem on his way to work. As the two men passed 187 St. Nicholas Avenue they noticed Ladder Company 40 had responded to a fire and had already placed a portable ladder against the front of the fire building. As he and his father approached the building a body of flame could be seen angrily licking



out of the front windows and smoke was partially covering the front of the building. Ladder Company 40's wooden had operated aerial ladder was being maneuvered into position against the building so that William Thomas, age 19, trapped at a window could be rescued. In the meantime, after sizing up the situation, Fireman Williams had ascended the previously placed ladder in an effort to assist.

As the tip of the aerial ladder approached the panic stricken youth, he made a desperate lunge for it and was successful in grasping the ladder but his grip flattered. As he was beginning to fall, Fireman Williams leaped from the ladder he was standing on, caught the aerial ladder with one hand and the falling Thomas with the other thus preventing his fall to the street and certain death. After carrying the young man to the street and safety, Williams reascended the ladder and assisted in the rescue of five other children. The rescue was witnessed by two reporters. A man by the name of Livingston was one of them. This heroic deed was the subject of an article entitled, "NY's Only Colored Fireman Saves Six From Burning Building". The date and name of the publication is not recorded but it may be found in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, 135th Street near Lenox Avenue.

When Fireman Williams reported to duty he recounted the rescue to his Captain. He was told that it was just in the line of duty and that he would not write it up for submission for a Department citation.

In the continuing discussion of meritorious acts performed by the Chief as a Fireman he recounted another incident when he was on his way to work and was walking with another fireman. They discovered a fire in a loft building at Spring and Lafayette Streets. Working together they were able to rescue people from the burning building. Again the Chief recounted the rescue to the Captain of his



Company and was again told it was just in the line of duty and he would not forward the necessary recommendation. The fireman who shared in the rescue reported the particulars to the Captain of his Company, Ladder 13, and as a result, the Captain forwarded the necessary reports and the fireman received recognition of the performance of an heroic act.

The fruits of study were sweet to Fireman Williams. He was promoted to Lieutenant in 1927 but he was assigned to the same Engine 55 where he had been appointed a fireman. This was a very unusual situation because it is traditional to assign a newly appointed officer to a firehouse other than where he served as a fireman. The original plan was to assign the first Black officer to headquarters and give him a desk job but Lieutenant Williams strongly objected with the statement, "I took orders from white officers; white firemen will have to learn to take orders from a colored officer". The day Fireman Williams was promoted to Lieutenant and was assigned as an officer in Engine 55, Fireman John O'Toole walked out of the firehouse, an action that made him immediately AWOL. It was only through the political connections of his family and his brother who was a Captain in the Department that he was able to avoid serious consequences. He was subsequently transferred out of Engine 55 to a fireboat.

As a Lieutenant, Williams was especially mindful of the principals of personnel management and had no particular problem in this area. His one problem was a Fireman by the name of Abbott who was a heavy drinker and who was assigned to Engine 55 after he had previously been assigned to 30 other companies. He only retained his job because of his politically active family. Lieutenant Williams admonished him, that no matter what happened he was to respond with the Company and would not be permitted to miss a response to an alarm. Eventually charges had to be preferred against the fireman for failure to obey an order. In spite of his



political connections an exceptionally heavy fine was imposed by the Trail Commissioner (two weeks loss of pay) and the results of the trail were published in the Department Orders; this in effect was official notification that when Lieutenant Williams, as any other officer, issued an order it was to be obeyed.

There was no relaxing of the rigid routine of physical discipline and earnest study and seven years after his first promotion, Wesley Williams was promoted to Captain in 1934. Captain Williams became the Company Commander of the same firehouse he had entered 15 years ago and had been assigned all of the dirty details from cleaning urine filled spittoons to sleeping in the segregated "Black Bed". Engine 55's response area included the infamous "Hells Hundred Acres". This is an exceptionally dangerous area because it encompasses the old cast iron column construction warehouses that were built before the Civil War. Fires in these old buildings often resulted in collapses because of their construction which utilized cast iron columns imposed one on top of the other to support the interior floors. The failure of one of these columns in a fire will bring down whole sections of a building. During his tour of duty in Engine 55, Wesley Williams had many near escapes; Hells Hundred Acres has claimed the lives of many good firemen.

Four years after his promotion to Captain, Wesley Williams was again promoted. This time to Battalion Chief in 1938; but he remained in the area because he was assigned to the 3rd Battalion on Mercer Street.

By December of 1937 there were 20 Black firemen; by the Fall of 1940 there were fifty-odd black firemen. There was fierce competition for the \$3,000 per year job and all but the most qualified Black men were eliminated.



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THE COUNCIL  
OF  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
CITY HALL  
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10007  
566-2992

FRED SAMUEL  
COUNCIL MEMBER, 5TH DISTRICT, MANHATTAN  
163 WEST 125TH STREET  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10027  
663-2922

CHAIRMAN:  
PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE  
COMMITTEES:  
FINANCE  
HEALTH  
RULES, PRIVILEGES & ELECTIONS

May 22, 1985

Honorable Walter Ward  
Chairman  
Parks, Recreation and  
Cultural Affairs Committee  
City Council of New York  
City Hall  
New York, N.Y. 10007

Dear Councilman <sup>Ward</sup> Ward:

We would appreciate an early hearing on Intro. 819,  
reference to Chief Wesley Williams.

Thanks for your anticipated and kind attention.

Very truly yours,

*LS*

Fred Samuel  
City Councilman

*I am sure you will be pushing  
me. I am sure I  
was in the hospital.  
Let pray for me and  
L2*



# THE COUNCIL

The City of New York

Int. No. 819

September 6, 1984

Introduced by Council Members Samuel and Foster, also Council Member Spigner—read and referred to the Committee on Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs.

## A LOCAL LAW

To amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to a street name, West 135th Street/Wesley Williams Place, Borough of Manhattan.

*Be it enacted by the Council as follows:*

1 Section one. Section B4-5.0 of title B of chapter four of the administrative code of the city of New  
2 York is hereby amended by adding thereto a new designation to read as follows:

3 § B4-5.0 Manhattan, change certain street names.—The following street name is hereby desig-  
4 nated as hereafter indicated.

5			
6	New name	Present name	Limits
7			
8	West 135th Street/Wesley	West 135th St.	From Lenox Avenue to Adam
9	Williams Place		Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard.
10			

11 § 2. This local law shall take effect immediately.

12 Note: Matter in *italics* is new; matter in brackets [ ] to be omitted.

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Oct. 3, 1984

819

Dear Borough President Stein:

am

Borough President Andrew Stein  
2050 Municipal Bldg.  
New York, NY 10007

Oct. 3, 1984

819

Dear Mr. Sturz:

am

Mr. Herbert Sturz, Chairman  
City Planning Commission  
2 Lafayette St.  
New York, NY 10007



Oct. 3, 1984

819

Dear Mr. Jacobson:

am

Mr. Solomon Jacobson  
Municipal Reference & Research Center  
31 Chambers St., Rm. 112  
New York, NY 10007

Oct. 3, 1984

819

Dear Commissioner Ward:

am

Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward  
1 Police Plaza  
New York, NY 10038



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The City of New York

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Int. No. 819

By Council Member Samuel

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SB4- 5.0, Manhattan change certain street names. --The following street name is hereby designated as hereafter indicated.

New name	Present name	Limits
West 135th Street/ Wesley Williams Place	West 135th St.	From Lenox Avenue to Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard:

prc

S2. This local law shall take effect immediately.





THE COUNCIL  
OF  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

LEGAL SERVICES DIVISION  
250 BROADWAY, 23RD FLOOR  
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10007  
(212) 566-8433

(212) 566-8421  
(212) 566-8433

September 4, 1984

TO: Council Member Samuel

FROM: Legal Services Division

RE: Street name, West 135th Street/Wesley Williams Place, Manhattan.

The attached material was prepared at your request. If it is to be introduced, you may indicate below that you have received and approved the draft and please forward it in triplicate copies to Thomas J. Cuite, Majority Leader, City Hall. If you forward the legislation in an amended form, I would appreciate a copy for our files.

The enclosed list of interested persons, who may wish to comment on this proposal, should be submitted to the Majority Leader along with this draft local law.

A copy of the above resolution or local law has been sent to Council Member \_\_\_\_\_ for introduction.

HARVEY N. FERTIG  
Director

LS # 1394

By:  
Legislative Attorney

Thomas J. Cuite

Please introduce this legislation.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Council Member's Signature

Int. No.

By Council Member Samuel

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LS#1394  
EFOM:rk