

## History Made Personal

*Courtesy of Steve Hess & Hope Rollins, Historic Oakwood Neighborhood Newsletter, July 2008*

Last fall my wife and I bought the house at 326 Oakwood Avenue. It would require significant renovation and repair before anyone could live in it, but the price was right, the location was excellent, and my wife, at least, saw potential in the place. We believed the house to have been built around 1919. An Oakwood Walking Tour map named it as the "R.C. Rivers" house.

Mr. Rivers, we learned, had been born in England and had an active resume in Raleigh: he was manager of the Metropolitan Opera House, worked at the Raleigh Academy of Music, and was a clerk at the Raleigh sheriff's office. My wife and I soon realized we had bought not just a home but a place with a history.

The real research into the house's past didn't begin, however, until we learned from our neighbor Ian Shields that, with proper documentation, our home could qualify for a Historic Oakwood marker plate on the front porch. I Googled "R.C. Rivers" and followed a link to the Raleigh City Directory from 1899-1900. It listed a Robert C. Rivers living at 326 Oakwood Avenue and corroborated the facts in the walking tour map. It seemed our house was significantly older than we'd thought.

The next stop was the Wake County Government website. The "Wake County Real Estate Data" section showed sales for the property dating back to 1915. It was obviously missing some transactions since we knew R.C. Rivers lived there in 1900. I called the Register of Deeds' office and someone there faxed me a copy of the deed from R.C. River's purchase of the land our house sits on, dated 1895.

Hoping to piece together a complete listing of all the owners of 326 Oakwood Avenue, I made a trip downtown to look at records on microfilm. I found our property had been sold in 1888 to a Dr. James McKee. Googling Dr. McKee revealed that he was an officer in the Confederate Army who later studied medicine at Bellevue Hospital Medical College in New York. He has the distinction of being the first medical practitioner in America to systematically instruct African Americans in medical science. He also served as superintendent of what is now Dorothea Dix Hospital.

Next I made a visit to the Olivia Raney Local History Library, which is part of the Wake County Public Library system and contains a treasure trove of reference materials on Raleigh and surrounding areas. There I found further evidence that the house had built around the turn of the twentieth century. By accident, I stumbled onto a wealth of online databases via the public library's website. One of the databases was a listing of what are known as "Sanborn maps." These maps were updated every five years for the fire insurance industry to confirm the existence of property, in case a claim was submitted for loss due to fire. I found Raleigh street maps for Oakwood Avenue from 1903 and 1898. The house appeared on the 1903 map but not on the 1898 map. So R.C. Rivers likely built our home around 1900, just as the city directory had suggested.

The final leg of my journey was to ancestry.com, a website for family history research. I discovered that a descendant of R.C. Rivers had done extensive research on his family, including a detailed family tree. I was able to contact the descendant, who lives in Boone, NC, and got a wealth of information from him, including a scanned copy of a photo of Robert C. Rivers himself.

This history project has been a rewarding experience for my wife and me. We enjoy imagining the lives that have been lived inside these walls at 326 Oakwood Avenue. If any of you wonder about your own home and its unique history, I urge you to make an effort to find out about it. It really enhanced our appreciation of our home and life in Raleigh at the turn of the twentieth century.