

Is One of the World's "Greatest All-Around Athletes" Buried in Lebanon?

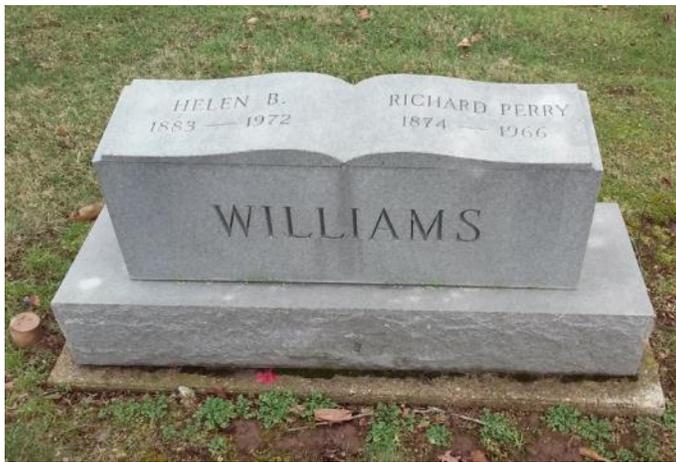
The Story of Richard Perry Williams

by John J. Zimkus, WCHS Historian & Education Director

In Section C, lot No. 152 of the Lebanon Cemetery there is an interesting, but not necessarily extraordinary, granite tombstone. On its face is simply carved the name WILLIAMS. The stone's top is made to look like an open book. On the left page is carved Helen B. 1883-1972, and on the right page is Richard Perry 1874-1966.

The book is most likely meant to represent the "book of life" mentioned in Revelation 20:15 in the Bible. It records the names of those who will live with God forever in heaven. R.P. or "Doc" Williams, as Richard Perry Williams was better known, may well have deserved to be included on this list where "only the names of the righteous are written."

There is, however, a type of secular book, or record book if you will, where some feel his name should also be listed but is usually not, at least not today. That would be the record that lists the names of the greatest sports figures in history. In 1915, the people of Lebanon, Ohio definitely thought he was "one of the greatest all-around athletes." None other than Jim Thorpe, who is often referred to as "the world's greatest athlete," once called Williams "the fastest sprinter who ever lived."



Williams' grave marker in the Lebanon Cemetery.

In the 1970 book, *Super Athletes*, author David P. Willoughby devotes only eight or so pages out of nearly 700 to Williams. He does however list the following athletic feats Williams claimed to have accomplished between 1898 and 1910: 100 meters, 9 ⁴/₅ sec.; 400 meters, 46 ³/₅ sec.; mile run, 4 min. 25 sec.; running broad jump 26 ft. ¹/₂ in.; standing broad jump with weights 15 ft. 4 in.; standing jump backwards with weights 13 ft. 3 in.; Sargent (vertical) jump 34.9 in.; running high kick 10ft. 3 in.; hitch and kick (i.e., standing jump off one foot and kick) 9 ft. 6 in.; Shot put (16 lb.), 47 ft. 9 in.; shot put (12 lb.), 57 ft. 3 in.; discuss throw, 142 ft. 9 in.; baseball throw, 415 ft. 3in.; circling bases (baseball) 12 sec. flat; chinning the bar, 48 times; dipping parallel bars, 55 times; high jump on ice skates, 4 ft. 6 in.

The most amazing athletic accomplishment attributed to R. P. Williams was in June 1906 in Winthrop, Massachusetts when he is said to have run the 100-yard dash in 9 seconds flat!

Frank G. Menke was an American sportswriter and historian who wrote for the Hearst Newspapers from 1912 to 1932 and was billed as "America's Foremost Sports Writer." His book *All Sports Record Book* was considered an authoritative sports reference work at the time. In its 1931 edition, Menke reported that R.P. Williams was asked to run an exhibition 100-yard dash "on a truly measured track and against absolutely perfect watches. He agreed and made his world's record on June 2, 1906. Five business men who were sprinting enthusiasts and expert timers, each timed him— and each watch showed 9 seconds for a full 100 yards. A while later Williams had regained his breath, he tried to shatter that mark, but the best he could do in his second try was 9 ¹/₅ —the fourth best time in his brilliant career that he was clocked at the that mark."

Willoughby in his book disputes some of Williams' marks, but suggests that the most heavily disputed mark, the 9-second 100-yard dash, is quite possibly accurate. (The official world record for the 100-yard dash is held by Frank Budd who ran it in 9.2 seconds in 1962. Ivory Crockett in 1974 and Houston McTear in 1975 were both clocked running a 9.0 second 100-yard dashes by unofficial hand-timed devices.)

The great Jim Thorpe in an article entitled "What Is the Human Limit?" in the June 1940 issue of *The Rotarian* magazine said, "Williams, in his prime, could have defeated, without trouble, any sprinter who ever lived. He could have left Paddock, Wykoff, Simpson, Tolan, Metcalfe, Owens, all of them, yards behind."

So why are Williams's records, especially those in track and field, generally ignored today? The main reason is that most of these marks were set by R. P. Williams when he was considered a "professional pedestrian."

In the 1981 book *The Rise and Fall of American Sport: Mudville's Revenge*, Ted Vincent writes, "In the history of track and field sports in the United States, sprinting and distance running and walking contests were the first activities to take an organized form, under the name of 'Pedestrianism.'" After the Civil War, runners and jumpers came into their own. It was a "period of expansion and discovery in the sports world." The problem, however, was that the athletes were paid, or at least received prize money, which made them "professionals." Vincent goes on to say, "The most remarkable of all the professional pedestrians [was] Richard Perry Williams."

The racing back then was often done at amusement parks and was sometimes funded by wagering with the stakes

“usually held by the sports editor of some newspaper.” Vincent states the “amusement park track was decidedly working-class sport.”

In 1888, the Amateur Athletic Association (AAU) was formed. The amateur track programs and the soon to come modern Olympics began to take the spotlight away from the unorganized and unregulated professional pedestrians. None of Williams’s accomplishments were recorded by the AAU, “which was the only widely recognized authority in such matters.”

Edward S. Sears, in his 2001 book *Running Through the Ages*, points out the Williams “claimed to have set many amateur and professional sprint records, including 100-yard in 9.0 seconds on June 2, 1906, at Winthrop, Massachusetts. Unfortunately, none of Williams’ claimed records were reported in the newspapers and sporting journals of his day.”

Charley Paddock was a two-time Olympic champion and the first person to ever be called “The fastest man alive” by the press. He was also one of the famed sprinters Jim Thorpe said in his 1940 article that R.P.

Williams “could have left . . . yards behind” in a race. In his 1933 book *Track and Field*, Paddock wrote, “R. P. Williams . . . claimed a number of astonishing sprint records, . . . but his competitive record does not compare well against the times with which he is credited. I mention this merely because many sports authorities of today, judging solely from Williams’ marks, place him among the great sprinters of history. His professional contemporaries did not so rank him.”

Was Richard Perry Williams simply a braggart who bluffed his way into having people believe he was a track record holder? If he was a charlatan, how could he get away with claiming so many “records” in so many different sporting events, in so many different locations over so many years? One thing is clear, as Ted Vincent pointed out in *The Rise and Fall of American Sport: Mudville’s Revenge*, “The stereotype of professional peds as poorly educated and easily bribed showman didn’t fit Williams.”

Richard Perry Williams was born on April 21, 1874, in Cornwall, England. He came to America with his family in 1880 when he was 5 years old. He graduated from the prestigious Dean Academy in Franklin, Massachusetts and studied at Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania. Two years of his college work was said to have been spent studying medicine. Once source states that while at Harvard “he got sidetracked by athletics and wound up with a bachelor degree in physical education.”

Williams was not a big man. In 1900, he was recorded as being 5 ft. 9 in. tall and weighing 141 lb. The story is told that in 1902, he went to Boston to see the famous vaudeville

strongman Eugen Sandow (1867-1925). Sandow is often referred to as the “father of modern bodybuilding.” Williams wanted to meet him to learn how he could make himself stronger. “Through several years of systematic weight training,” Williams gained 20 pounds of mostly muscle and “was able to improve on most of his records, especially those requiring strength.”

In 1899, Williams coached at Tufts College in Massachusetts. He lost his amateur standing, per one source, when he took the coaching job. An April 19, 1959 article on R. P. Williams in a *Dayton Daily News* Sunday supplement magazine tells a different story. “He [Williams] started as an amateur competing in invitational track meets along the east coast, and everything was going well until he was tricked into a match with a professional—a husky German whom he raced in Nova Scotia. Although Williams got no more than expense money for winning the race, amateur athletic officials cast the same jaundice eye they exercise today on such competitions.”

On the day after Christmas in 1901, Richard Perry

Williams married Helen J. Barclay in the Orient Heights Methodist Episcopal Church in East Boston, Massachusetts. He was 28 years old and she was 19. They would eventually have four children. Together they soon began a 30-plus-year journey traveling across the United States as “Doc” Williams trained and coached thousands of adults and children to be physically fit and how to be successful on the playing field.

After Tufts College, the Williams family moved to New London, Connecticut where R.P.



R.P. Williams held 10 World Professional Records.

became the athletic director of the local YMCA and the physical education instructor in the public schools of New London. After there he spent time at the Berkeley private school in New York; Haverhill High School in Massachusetts; Greensboro North Carolina High School and then to Paducah, Kentucky where he was the athletic coach of Paducah High School and the city’s playground instructor.

In late December 1915, *The Evening Sun* newspaper in Paducah lamented Doc Williams’s leaving. “In Mr. Williams departure, the city will lose a valuable all-around man. Few athletic directors in the country are as well versed in practically every sport as is Mr. Williams and few have such splendid athletic records themselves. Mr. Williams came to Paducah with a reputation as being a physical director and coach second to none, and he certainly lived up to it.”

The place that lured R. P. Williams away from Paducah, Kentucky, where his skill as a trainer and coach was praised, and where he was so highly valued as a man, was Lebanon, Ohio.

END OF PART ONE....TO BE CONTINUED IN THE SPRING 2017 HISTORICALOG