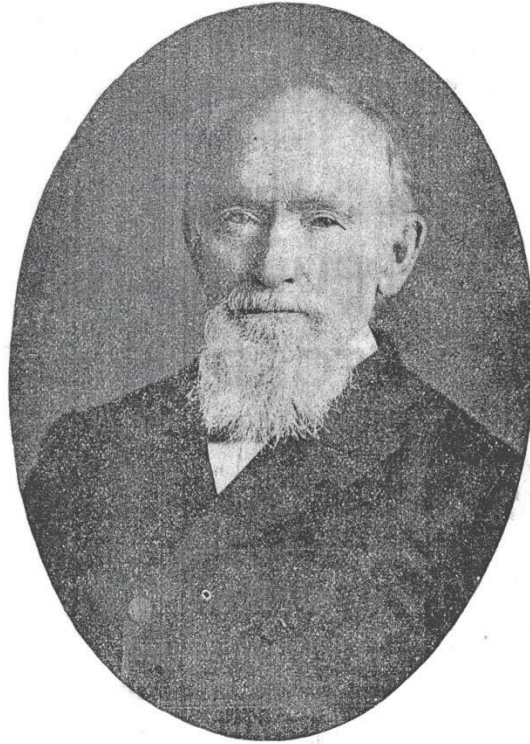


## **“Judge” William Wallace Mendell**

*By Vic Bary*



W. W. MENDELL.

In December, 2017, the Cranford Historical Society received a most unusual and meaningful gift from Karl Kaimer - a collection of Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and 30<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Volunteer New Jersey Infantry convention attendance ribbons once owned by local Civil War veteran William Mendell in the very display cases in which he displayed them. Those cases and explanatory information about Mendell, the GAR and the ribbons themselves are now on display in the Hanson House.

There appeared to have been no prior “Mill Wheel” articles about this small man who cast such a large shadow across Cranford for nearly 60 years. It seemed time to make up for that oversight.

### The Early Years

William Wallace Mendell was born July 5, 1836 on Rahway Avenue in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Within a few years his parents had moved to that part of Westfield which would become Cranford in 1871. It was here that William would grow up and receive all his education – both in Edwin Garthwaite’s home school, and in the purpose-built “Little



Red School House” at Lincoln and South Union Avenues. Upon graduation, he practiced the carpentry trade and worked at it until retiring in 1918 at age 82.

In 1858 William Mendell married Mary Elizabeth Fitz Randolph of Elizabeth. They settled in “Cranford” and would have two daughters – Lillie and Lottie - who would survive to adulthood; and George and Willanet who would die in early childhood. Mendell was very involved with the Methodist church, and in 1861 started the first Sunday school, which he would serve as superintendent until he departed for the Civil War in September, 1862.



**Cranford Methodist Church**

### Civil War Service

In August, 1862 William and his brother John joined the 30<sup>th</sup> Regiment New Jersey Volunteer Infantry, a unit comprised mostly of individuals from Somerset County. The Mendells, as

were all other Union County volunteers, were placed in Company B. The Regiment would serve a nine month muster, and then would disband a week before the Battle of Gettysburg. While the unit, through no fault of its own would never fire a shot in anger while present at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, Mendell would emphasize his Civil War service at every opportunity through the rest of his career.

While he was on active duty, Mendell's wife Mary Elizabeth received a federal subsistence for families of \$16.80 per month paid through Union County. (This was something Revolutionary War wives did NOT receive, they were left to tend the farm and run the home without any financial help from the national government.)



**A Senior Mendell in Civil War Uniform**

Long Island City Years

Upon returning from his Civil War service, Mendell relocated his family to Long Island City, New York where they would reside until their return to Cranford in 1875. A Long Island City Directory from that time records the Mendells residing at Sixth and Central Ave, where he pursued the trade of “sash and blind maker”.

While in Long Island City, Mendell would help found the Grace (Methodist) Church and was active in New York Volunteer Fire Department No. 5. This commitment to the Methodist Church and fire departments would be a life-long theme and continued in Cranford.

#### Return to Cranford 1875

In Cranford, the Mendells would take up residence at 106 Walnut Avenue where they would live for the rest of their lives. The house still exists today as the Jumble Store (as 110 Walnut Avenue)..

William would practice carpentry and home building, using a barn behind his house as a workshop and materials storage area. One of his commissions (reported in the 12/13/1893 *Cranford Chronicle*) was a \$4,000 remodeling of the Denman House. (Considering that \$4,000 would have bought you a very nice house in 1893, it must have been quite a remodeling job.)

#### Veteran Activities

William became one of the first members of Uhlrich Dahlgren (Elizabeth, NJ) Post No. 25 of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), in which he would hold virtually every post over the succeeding 50 years. The GAR was a fraternal organization of Union veterans and one of the first advocacy groups in American politics (promoting patriotic education and voting rights for Black veterans, and helping to make Memorial Day a national holiday). Staunchly Republican (Lincoln’s party) with a peak membership of 490,000, no Republican politician could afford to ignore it.

Over the coming years Mendell would attend virtually every National Encampment of the GAR as well as some New Jersey GAR Encampments, and attend reunions of the 30<sup>th</sup> New Jersey. It’s mementos of those events that we have on display. That collection (as it stood in 1921) was recorded as one of the items exhibited at Cranford’s 1921 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration.

William Mendell took the GAR charge to promote patriotic education (and perhaps himself to a degree) quite seriously. In addition to marching in virtually every Memorial Day parade in Cranford, he would also visit its schools and give talks to the students about patriotism

and the Civil War. The students gave him a Lincoln biography in thanks, which is part of our exhibit.

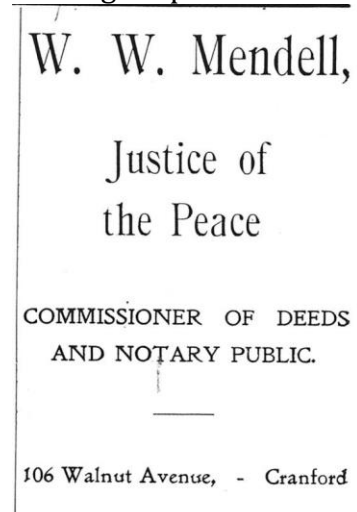
Mendell also helped Civil War veterans gain pensions, with especial efforts to help Black veterans (who had served in segregated United States Colored Troops – USCT – units) obtain deserved pensions and to be allowed burial in the Civil War veterans section of Fairview Cemetery. As a GAR officer, Mendell would often serve in honor guards for its deceased members, and assure that their graves were appropriately marked with government-issued veterans tombstones.

### Political Life

Mendell was a committed Republican, and over the years would throw his hat in the ring for a number of local and county positions. But the position he will always be remembered for was his 1878 appointment as Justice of the Peace, at which point he would become “Judge” Mendell. It was a position he would hold for the next 50 years.

#### **From 1907 Cranford City Directory**

Mendell’s first appointment came 10 years before Cranford’s first police court. As well as hearing disputes between locals over monies owed for purchases or services rendered,



“Judge” Mendell was the first stop for those apprehended by local police. It was his job to hear the charges and to determine if the accused should be sent on to jail in Elizabeth pending trial. From the records of such hearings reported in the local papers, Mendell was a stern judge.

### Local Celebrity



The Cranford newspapers regularly reported the “Judge’s” birthdays, his and Mary Elizabeth’s anniversaries, and his frequent travel to attend GAR Encampments and 30<sup>th</sup> Regiment reunions. They even reported when his horse “Grant” broke his leg in the stable and had to be put down.

Unfortunately, on November 17, 1921, Mary Elizabeth Mendell died at age 83, pre-deceasing the “Judge” by nine years.



MRS. W. W. MENDELL.

The “Judge” would remain active, filling his official position, attending schools on Memorial Day, and even marching in the 1926 parade with 10 other Civil War veterans - this after suffering a stroke as well as being struck by a car after attending a GAR ceremony in Elizabeth, both in 1924.

In his final few years the “Judge” at last began to fail, and he was forced to give up his official duties in 1928. His daughter Millie increasingly took care of him. Finally, the July 31, 1930 *Cranford Citizen and Chronicle* reported that Cranford’s oldest citizen at age 94, “Judge” William Mendell had succumbed to a cerebral hemorrhage at his 106 Walnut Avenue home. An era had ended, and a window onto America’s Civil War forever shuttered.

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