

Scenes from the Past



photo—courtesy Caroline Glenn.

Sesso's granddaughter Caroline Glenn is seen to the right of her father standing in front of the shop in this 1949 view.

History has a way of repeating itself and in the case of the former townhouse at 1627 17th Street, NW that history involves a shoe store being located in the ground floor today, as it also had been beginning in 1920, then operated by Carmine Sesso.

The house was built in 1884 for an African-American government clerk named James A. Payne at a cost of \$2,200. He had been born in Virginia in January

of 1832, likely enslaved. He married his wife Rebecca at the close of the Civil War, about 1864. She had been born in Virginia in October of 1837, also likely enslaved. Together, they had nine children, but only 7 of whom were alive in 1900 and living with them at 1627 17th Street. In 1904 they moved to 1443 Corcoran Street, and the 17th Street house was rented to various families by a succession of owners until 1920.

In 1920 that shoe repairman Carmine Sesso bought the house and moved his store from a rented space at 1509 17th Street, where Komi restaurant is located today. He obtained a repair permit on June 4, 1920 for "excavation of the cellar 20 feet by 13 feet, six feet deep." Stories passed down from the Sesso family recall that Carmine and his friends dug the cellar out by hand following the issuance of the permit.

Sesso had been born in Montella, Italy on September 18, 1888, where he obtained a minimal education. He was the son of Gaetano Sesso (1838-1919) and Petronilla



photo—courtesy Kelsey & Assoc. private collection.
1627 17th Street home of the shoe repair shop today and the housewares store on the second floor.



photo—courtesy Caroline Glenn.
Carmine Sesso.

Moscarello Sesso (1846-1919).

At the young age of 18, Carmine left his family and traveled aboard the S.S. Deutschland, departing Naples, Italy on February 22, 1907 and arriving in New York City on March 3, 1907. He indicated that he traveled with just \$15 in his pocket, and listed himself as a shoemaker. He could neither read nor write, according to the immigration official, and was headed to stay with his brother Antonio who then lived on 8th Street, SE. By 1910, however, he was enumerated in the census living with his other brother Henry Sess (sans the final o) at 1307 V Street, NW.

On September 18, 1913, Carmine and Bessie Elizabeth Biancaniello (1895-1945) were married at St. Peter's Church on Capitol Hill. Sesso obtained another permit on July 22, 1920 to install a show window on the ground floor of the former residence, creating a shop for his shoe repair business and family living quarters above.

Just a few days later, on July 27, 1920, Sesso obtained another permit to build a private garage behind the house. It was built at a cost of just \$500 and was positioned at the very rear of the property, facing the paved alley. Another permit was issued in late 1921 for the small addition of a rear brick shed-like structure, built at a cost of \$350.

Family members, including granddaughter Caroline Glenn, recall that Carmine would purchase red and white grapes from the New York Avenue market, and make his own red, white, and rose varieties with a grape press and

three large barrels located at the rear of the store. A very steep set of stairs was cut into the rear of the shop as well, through a closet floor, so that the family could reach the living quarters above without having to leave the store.

The 1925 City Directory has Carmine Sesso listed as a shoemaker, who had opened his shop on the ground floor of 1627 17th Street coined "Artistic Shoe Repair." He obtained a permit on October 14, 1924 to erect a metal sign measuring an impressive 10 feet by 16 inches that read "Work Done While You Wait," to be



photo—courtesy Caroline Glenn.
Carmine Sesso shown in this vintage photo with his wife Bessie Biancaniello and her sister Elvida Biancaniello.



photo—courtesy Caroline Glenn.
Carmine Sesso's daughter Alice as seen in front of the shop about 1932, pictured in her first communion dress.

attached to the exterior of the building. He became a naturalized citizen on August 7, 1928.

The Sesso family was enumerated at the 17th Street address in the 1930 census where they enjoyed a radio in the house — one of the more unusual questions asked of occupants that year. Sesso estimated that the house was then worth about \$6,000.

As inherited and estate title holders, Bessie, Carmine, Helen, and Raymond F. Sesso appointed a trustee on November 8, 1985 to sell the property that same day to Hae Won Lee and Young J. Lee. They would continue to own and rent the building until they themselves sold it in November of 1995 to John F. and Jennifer J. Spalding, with the Rev. Freeman Spalding added to the title a year later. The ground floor of the building today is appropriately rented to a shoe repair business, while the second and third floors of the former living quarters are occupied by John Spalding's adjacent True Value Hardware store's Housewares shop and offices, respectively.

—Paul Kelsey Williams
Historic Preservation Specialist
Kelsey & Associates, Washington, DC



photo—courtesy Caroline Glenn.
Bessie Sesso shown at the entrance to the private family quarters adjacent to the side alley, now the entry for the housewares store upstairs.