1. Meet the Dukenfields

On a mild winter day on January 29, 1880, a baby was born a month earlier than expected to Kate Dukenfield. The birth occurred at the Arlington House in the borough of Darby. Located on the northeast corner of Main and Mill Streets in the town's center, the Arlington House was an unpretentious inn, where Kate and her husband, Jim, worked. A hearty British immigrant nearly forty years of age, Jim tended bar for the inn’s guests, numerous horse traders, local dock laborers, and mill workers who drank well into the night. When Kate suddenly experienced labor pains she was rushed to a room where she gave birth. According to family legend, Kitty, an African American soothsayer and hotel employee, placed a golden spoon in the boy’s mouth. She predicted that the newly arrived infant was “going to get someplace.” Kitty was prophetic. Later known as W. C. Fields, the baby grew to become, “the foremost American comedian,” Harold Lloyd stated.¹

Located about five miles southwest of Philadelphia, Darby was settled in 1662 by eight Quaker families, who were encouraged by William Penn to form a community nestled in a bucolic area between two waterways, Darby and Cobbs Creeks. The town, named after the English city of Derby, is the birthplace of John Bartram (1699–1777), America’s first botanist, who created the country’s first botanical garden on his homestead, which today is a 45-acre national historic landmark. The town claims to have the nation’s oldest public library (1743), which still serves patrons today.

When Fields was born, Darby had grown into a bustling mill town and freight transportation center with 1,776 inhabitants, but during the day, thousands of workers crowded the town’s center. Darby Creek served as a navigable passageway on which barges brought supplies for the borough’s many factories, mills, farms, and stores. Sawmills, tanning mills, and textile mills provided commodities for its settlers and for shipment to other communities. The mills’ chimneys combined with the smokestacks from other industries emitted a perennial gray haze over the town and a smelly odor, which varied according to which way the wind blew.

A. F. Wertheim, W. C. Fields from Burlesque and Vaudeville to Broadway
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The exact location of Fields’s birth remains a subject of considerable controversy. Known as the Gateway to the South for many travelers on their way to Philadelphia and other destinations, Darby once included thirty-nine hotels, taverns, and boardinghouses. The hotels catered to travelers; the boardinghouses lodged numerous mill laborers; and the noisy taverns hosted hardened drinkers noted for their late-night carousing. The Buttonwood, the town’s most famous historic hotel, has often been mentioned as a candidate for Fields’s entry into the world. But the hotel underwent construction in 1879 and, unlike the Arlington House, was an upscale lodging unlikely to hire the Dukenfields. (George Washington is rumored to have slept here and given a white horse.) Other inns such as the Blue Bell do not match the birthplace’s description.

An early history of Delaware County described the Arlington House’s origin and its brief period to serve liquor. “In 1880 the stone house which had formerly stood near the old Steel mill, and was moved bodily several hundred feet to the main street, was licensed as the Arlington House, but after a brief period the court refused to continue the privilege there.”² The Arlington stood adjacent to the three-story Griswold textile mill with its large brick smokestack hovering over the town. Harold S. Finigan, longtime Darby resident and store owner, recalled that his grandfather owned the Arlington House and hired Jim Dukenfield as the manager. The Arlington was known as a noisy establishment noted for its nightly revelry at the bar where Fields’s father busily poured shots of whisky and sometimes sang for the guests. After a short time, the Arlington House closed as an inn and tavern. Its failure to obtain a renewed liquor license might have caused its closing, leaving Jim unemployed, a circumstance he regularly experienced.

Finigan’s grandfather decided to convert the inn into a furniture store. A photograph taken in 1922 of the Darby Furniture Exchange matches a description of the three-story Arlington House with its stone facade and rectangular belvedere on the roof, which served as a fire lookout and offered a birds-eye view of the town.

The paternal side of Fields’s ancestry hailed from England, a heritage that played a significant role in his career. John Duckenfield, Fields’s grandfather born in 1810, traced his lineage to the aristocracy. (The family’s surname has several variations in spelling.) John’s grandfather was Lord Dukinfield of Cheshire, a wealthy aristocratic landowner in northwest England. John’s father was George Dukinfield, the lord’s third son, who failed to inherit the lord’s estate due to the laws of primogeniture that passed wealth to the firstborn son. When close friends of Whitey