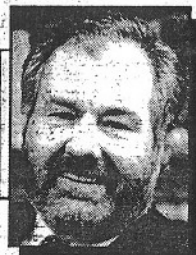


Hormisdas Dion was Willimantic's first French Canadian mayor



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Tom
Beardsley

The entire community was in shock when the Windham medical examiner, Dr. Louis Mason, announced the death of Willimantic's Mayor Hormisdas Dion on the morning of April 27, 1924. The 69-year-old Dion had suddenly collapsed and died with a heart attack. He had held office for 16 short weeks.

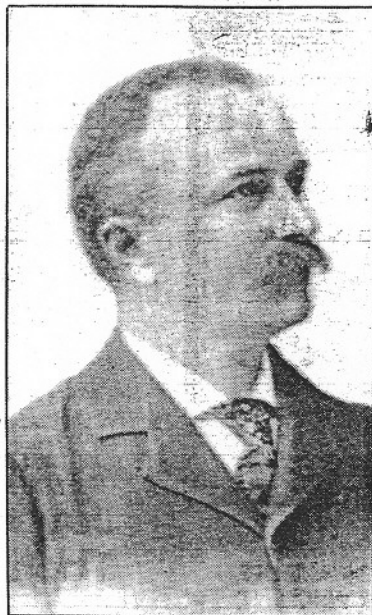
Dion, the city's eighth but first French-Canadian mayor, was born in Saint Pie, Quebec in 1855. He studied English at St. Cesaire College with the intention of heading south of the border. Like many thousands of French Canadians he found employment in New England's textile industry. In 1872, Dion was hired by the Ponemah Manufacturing Company in

Taftville as a clerk in the company store. He worked there for 14 years and rose to the position of store auditor.

Dion married Delia Bourque in Baltic in 1875, and, in 1886, the family arrived in Willimantic.

Dion invested his savings from his days in Taftville, and opened a grocery store and bakery. The store grew to be the largest in Willimantic, and at the time of his death the Dion Grocery Company had 20 employees, using three trucks and five horse teams to make deliveries. Dion invested wisely and became one of the largest landowners in Windham.

Tragedy struck when Dion's wife of 42 years died in April 1917. He dealt with his grief by becoming more involved with community affairs. He was already active in St. Mary Church, the Conseil Florimond No. 74, l'Union St. Jean Baptiste d'Amerique, and in San Jose Council, No. 14, Knights of Columbus. Dion was the first national president of the



Willimantic Mayor Hormisdas Dion, 1855-1924

St. Jean Baptiste Society Union in the United States.

Dion also was a staunch member of the Democratic Party and became active in Willimantic politics during Irish-American Mayor Danny Dunn's dominance of city hall

(1905-1917).

Dion served on the school board, the naturalization committee — convincing and encouraging hundreds of his countrymen working in Willimantic's mills, to become American citizens. He was also town assessor for nine years.

In December 1921, Dion challenged Willimantic's incumbent mayor, Republican Charles Gates, but lost by two votes. He returned to the fray two years later, and was elected mayor by a comfortable margin.

Dion's period of office lasted a little more than four months, but he made a profound impact in that short time. He was not a young man, but as the city's first French-speaking mayor, he threw himself into the job, working around the clock.

His last public appearance was the day before to his fatal heart attack when he attended the golden jubilee meeting of Connecticut's Women Christian Temperance Union at the Willimantic Methodist Church — the city was a hotbed for the

temperance movement despite, or maybe because of, its numerous taverns and saloons. Earlier the same day, Dion delivered the opening address of the American Thread Athletic Association's carnival in the armory on Pleasant Street. And that night he had a long conference with street superintendent John Sullivan regarding the forthcoming week's work on city streets.

Dion's body lay in state for a day, to be viewed by the mourning public. On the eve of the funeral, the Al-Pierre Tabarin on Valley Street was the scene of an elaborate ceremony, performed by national officers of the St. Jean Baptiste Society. The funeral at St. Mary Church was one of the largest ever witnessed in the city, reflecting Dion's local and national prominence in French Canadian affairs in the U.S.

Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, was the scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum from 1990 to 1995.

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