

July 18, 1998

## Thomas J. Kelley Important Cog in City's Political Machine

Thomas J. Kelley .



Among Willimantic's famous Irish-Americans none stand out more than Thomas J. Kelley, who was born in Athlone, Ireland on January 9, 1854. He came to the United States, an orphan, in 1862. Kelley arrived in the growing borough of Willimantic in the early 1880s, and found employment as a grocery store clerk, but he studied law at night school and through correspondence courses. Kelley was taken under the wing of an Irish-American lawyer called James T. Lynch, and the prominent Windham attorney William A. King.

Thomas J. Kelley was admitted to the state bar on January 6, 1896. He became an important part of the city's dominant Irish-American political machine, a staunch member of the "Demmykratic" Party. He and Frank Bugbee represented the town of Windham in the State Legislature, was

Willimantic town clerk, a councilman in the city government, a corporation council under the dominant Democratic administrations at the turn-of-the-century, and was also a member of the town's school committee. Kelley married Helen Murray shortly after arriving in Willimantic, and the couple had ten children. Unfortunately, only four were surviving when Thomas Kelley died in 1927. They were Arthur T. Kelley, a local attorney who was the father of today's local attorney Richard (Dick) Kelley -- law must run in the blood, Willimantic Fire Chief Henry J. Kelley, Robert E. Kelley of Dixon, Illinois and Helen J. Kelley of Yonkers, New York. Thomas Kelley had four sons who served in World War One. His son Thomas A. Kelley had served with the Canadian Royal Air Force, and was killed in an airplane crash in Honolulu.

Kelley was a charter member of Willimantic Lodge No. 1311, BPOE, and was the third exalted ruler of the Lodge in 1916. He was also a grand knight and district deputy of San Jose Council No. 14, Knights of Columbus, and had previously been a member of the Willimantic local of the Ancient Order of Hibernians.

Kelley had many talents and interests beyond law. He was an accomplished artist and penman, and also a passionate advocate of the development of Willimantic. He was serving as corporation council for the city of Willimantic during the footbridge debate. In 1903, a town meeting voted to build a trolley car bridge in the position of the current footbridge -- but a subsequent meeting was held to rescind that vote. Kelley was amazed, during this meeting, when Eugene Lincoln, a prominent businessman,

produced plans to build an underpass along Main Street, beneath the trolley tracks, along which horses and people could travel. Kelley reminded Lincoln that the meeting was to decide whether or not to build a bridge so trolley cars could avoid the railroad underpass south of the narrow Jillson bridge. An underpass along Main Street would not ease the congestion along South Main Street (Windham Road). He noted that those opposing the bridge scheme were the same people who had opposed the building of the town hall and the new high school a decade earlier. Despite Kelley's desire for a trolley car bridge, he and his fellow bridge committee had to admit defeat and agree to a less expensive footbridge -- but he did have the pleasure of being one of the first people to walk across the completed footbridge in 1906.

Thomas Kelley was also passionate about baseball. As a young man he had formed a team called the Willimantic Arctics, and he was a director of Willimantic's first professional baseball team in 1884. Seventeen years later, Kelley became founder member of the Willimantic Baseball Association that funded a professional team, the Willimantic Colts, from 1901 to 1906. In 1905 the Colts manager Danny Dunn resigned to prepare a campaign to run for mayor of Willimantic, and Thomas Kelley took over the management of the Colts.

Kelley died suddenly, on the morning of May 28, 1927, in the apartment at the rear of his law office at 762 Main Street. He was 72 years old. His clerk Emma l'Heureux discovered Kelley's body. Medical Examiner Dr. Mason was summoned and pronounced that the cause of death was a cerebral embolism. The city of Willimantic had lost a great advocate. Thomas J. Kelley was sadly missed.