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Loomer Opera House: Then and Now

Then - The Loomer Opera House seen here in 1894, was demolished in 1940.



One of Main Street's finest buildings was built in 1879. The Loomer Opera House graced Main Street until its demolition in 1940. Its builder, Silas Loomer (1824-1899) was born in nearby Hop River, Columbia -- a typical nineteenth century Yankee entrepreneur who dabbled in lumber, banking, insurance, politics and theatrics -- but sometimes it's difficult to distinguish between the latter two careers.

The *Willimantic Chronicle* was delighted by the borough's brand new addition, and in March, 1880 it editorialized that, "there is not so fine a building in our state east of the Connecticut River as this Loomer Opera House Block. The structure is quite a massive one, and in all of its proportions, materials, adornments and style, it is a delight to the eye. We predict that Mr. Loomer will find his investment a good one." Indeed. The theater was in its prime as Mr. H. W. Rich captured it in his lens in 1894.

Comparing the two photographs, it is far from obvious that we're viewing the same location -- the junction of Main Street and North Street. This prime downtown commercial lot was snapped up by the Woolworth Company during the Depression, and in 1940 it built the art-deco building now occupied by Nassiffs. The theater block had a bakery, Samuel Chesbro's Drug Store, Hugh Murray's Boston Store and Seth Hooker's bar and billiard room, plus a number of business offices.

Now -- A new art deco building, which houses Nassiff's For Sports, was built in its place.

The actual vaudeville theater had 1,100 seats, and a 60 foot wide stage, 40 feet deep. Opening night was in December, 1880. But Mr. Loomer ignored the tastes of Irish and French Canadian millworkers, and hired an operatic company for the night of dedication. The *Chronicle* was shocked; "But when the announcement came that the operas of *Fatinitza* and the *Bells of*



Normandy were the entertainments which had been selected, and that they were to be presented by the Sans Souci Opera Company, much disappointment was expressed . . . The opening of this house was something that everybody took an interest in, but in order to have pleased everybody, Sara Bernhardt or some other person of equal notoriety should have been engaged, but the house could have been filled with even lesser lights." The Willimantic public responded by filling less than half of the seats on the opening night. Well, it was the Loomer OPERA House!

Some Mill Two facts and statistics: The unique suspended roof created a massive open space on the fourth floor, which measures 400 feet by 70 feet. It was originally planned to hold a celebratory ball in the largest, interior space in the state of Connecticut. The attractive gothic tower is 125 feet high. The mill is built from gneiss stone quarried from the bed of the Willimantic River. Two hundred and seventy eight acres of meadow land in Columbia were flooded to create Columbia Lake in 1865, to ensure a consistent water supply to drive the new mill's water wheels and turbines.