

History

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The controversial trial against the Warners begins

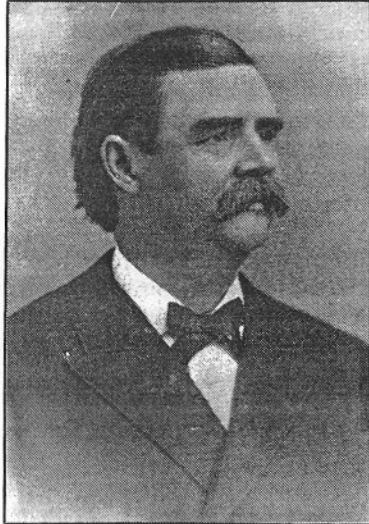


Tom
Beardsley

Part Three

The Warners' controversial new newspaper, the Sunday Herald, managed to enrage everyone in 1897 Willimantic.

They had been accused of libel, found guilty and were committed to the Willimantic lock-up, with the town drunks, because they could not raise \$400 bond each. Kate was ill and held in the hospital cell. Her bond was eventually paid by cousin Warren Collins of Columbia, but there was no bond for James Warner. He was transported to Brooklyn Jail, along with a man charged for intoxication. The Warners had friends in high places, and their critics were disturbed that locally-based state's attorney, John L. Hunter, had visited Kate in her cells in the Willimantic police lock-up on



Controversy flared in Willimantic when Windham State's Attorney John L. Hunter was chosen to prosecute the libel case against Kate Collins-Warner. Hunter and the Warners were close friends.

Church Street.

The libel case against the Warners received national coverage. The following appeared in the New York Evening Journal on Oct. 21, 1897. "Mrs. Warner, the editor of the Willimantic Herald, who has been arrested in that town on a charge of criminal libel, has for

several months made herself conspicuous by conducting a sheet which depended almost entirely upon personal innuendo for its vogue. The woman adopted the course of saying something disagreeable about everybody, disregarding the private rights of both men and women. This has been tried very often before in cheap journalism, but it has never succeeded even in large cities, and it was pretty sure to come to grief in a small town. Men will put up with a great deal of abuse in politics or religion, but they resent impertinent gossip about their habits, their appearances or their list of acquaintances. Mrs. Warner was apparently unable to draw the discreet line. And in so far she fell short of being a good editor and became only a mischievous gossip."

The trial began on Nov. 3, 1897. James Warner arrived in the city on the train from Brooklyn, handcuffed to a vagrant. He was taken in handcuffs and chains up Railroad Street to the sheriff's office on Church Street, back onto Main Street to the town hall, then on to the post office.

Hundreds of people lined the streets, and warmly greeted Warner. He was exquisitely dressed, as always, in a \$35 suit, and beamed a wide pleasant smile beneath his new growth of beard. He greeted the crowds lining Main Street by saying, "Well boys, they got me tied up."

The Willimantic Courthouse was packed. The first case featured John Thatcher who was charged for keeping a "house of ill fame" in Willimantic. There was great local interest because also appearing were Thatcher's five prostitutes.

This intriguing curtain-raiser was followed by the Warner case. The charges against the couple were read, and both pleaded not guilty.

The prosecution laid down its case and the defense commenced by proving that liquor was sold every Sunday in the saloon bar in Young's Hotel, which stood on the site occupied today by the Nathan Hale Hotel. The proprietor of Young's, Louis Beaudry, testified that he gave Herbert Leonard a box of cigars in the hope that he would turn a blind eye to his illegal Sunday

liquor sales.

A Willimantic official of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Ella Bennet, testified that liquor was sold openly on Sundays in Willimantic. "Men have gone past my house on a Sunday morning and staggered back to their homes in the afternoon. I know liquor has been sold at the Windham House (a famous Willimantic hostelry which stood on the corner of Main and Church on the site of Liberty Bank). I have heard it said that Leonard was winking at the business."

J.A. Lewis, the well known nurseryman in town, had heard from the liquor dealers that Leonard was a "very nice man," which inferred that he was the servant of the liquor sellers.

Sarah Way then testified. "I don't know that any liquor is sold on Sunday, but I know that my husband has been drunk on Sunday and not on Saturday." The Heffernan Tavern on Jackson Street was also notorious for its Sunday liquor sales, and was often referred to during the trial.