

History

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The **Willimantic Public Library**. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "**The Chronicle**" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Laundry blaze kept firemen busy

Part One

Before the days of domestic washing machines, those who could afford it sent their weekly wash to commercial laundries. During the early years of this century, Willimantic had two such laundries, the Maverick Laundry and the Thread City Laundry.

At noon on May 6, 1908, downtown Willimantic office workers, leaving their places of employment to take lunch, noted that the Maverick Laundry on Main Street was ablaze, and clouds of black, billowing smoke engulfed the city center. Within minutes of the alarm being sounded, the Excelsior and Hilltop Companies were aiming high-powered jets of water at the conflagration, and police were holding back hundreds of fascinated spectators.

William Asher's Maverick Laundry was located in one of Willimantic's oldest Main Street buildings. It was built in the 1830s by the Willimantic Congregational Society, and acted as their church until the present edifice was built on the corner of Walnut and Valley streets in 1870. In 1908, the structure was owned by local



Tom
Beardsley

attorney George W. Melony, and thus known as the Melony Block. It housed the Maverick Laundry in its western section, Auguste Blanchette's furniture store was in the middle section, and George Walker's saloon was located in the eastern section. The second floor housed the offices of the Asher Mangle Co., and two tenements occupied the third floor of the ancient building. The lot to the west of the Melony Block is occupied by William Asher's Willimantic Garage. It was torn down in 1912 to allow for the construction of a new YMCA building and Gem Cinema, now hidden beneath unattractive concrete breeze blocks. Today, the Melony Block lot is occupied by the Beller Block, 822-828 Main St.

It soon became apparent that the Melony Block fire had

started in the drying room of the Maverick Laundry, located in the building's basement. A number of large carpets had been hung to dry and these caused masses of dark, choking smoke, which overcame the first firemen to enter the building. It looked as if the old building would surely be burnt to the ground.

Wednesday was the Maverick Laundry's busiest day. Much work had been completed and was ready for delivery to points across eastern Connecticut — but all the clean laundry was lost in the blaze. Consignments from the Pomfret School, the Hooker House Hotel, the Windham Hotel, and the Stafford Springs Hotel had gone up in flames, along with the clothing recently cleaned for the Italian laborers building the Scotland dam.

The laundry's drying room extended beneath Auguste Blanchette's furniture store, and badly burnt its floor and a number of pianos and many items of household furniture. The fire had also spread to the adjoining cellar of George



This photograph was taken from the roof of the Hotel Hooker and reveals the aftermath of the Melony Block fire on Main Street ... May 1908. Note the large flat iron on the post just above the laundry sign. Also note the horse-drawn fire equipment.

Walker's saloon and burnt barrels of beer and bottles of liquor. But the fire was extinguished before it could burn through to the saloon. On the second floor the office equipment of William Asher's Mangle Co. was saved; and the occupants of the two tenements on the third floor escaped injury.

Precisely one hour after the original alarm, the recall was sounded. It had taken the Excelsior and Hilltop Companies

about 40 minutes to extinguish the fire. The fireman had also removed the numerous baskets of burnt wet clothing. They noticed that the drying machinery in the basement was placed on oily, wooden floors, and this

had helped the fire to quickly spread. It first looked as if the first floor of the building would collapse into the basement, but sterling work by the firemen saved the building.

Continued next week