

History

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Laundry fire was the center of a local scandal

Part Two

William J. Asher was the proprietor of the Maverick Laundry on Main Street. It was engulfed by fire on May 6, 1908. Asher was one of Willimantic's earliest Jewish residents. He built the fine Queen Anne-style house at 321 Prospect St. in 1900. Asher had arrived in Willimantic in 1888 and purchased the Connecticut Steam Laundry at 828 Main St. He installed up-to-date boilers and machinery and renamed it the Maverick Laundry.

In 1898 he organized the Asher Mangle Co., and began manufacturing mangles in the building. Lack of space caused him to move the business to New London, but the head office remained in the Melony Block. Fortunately Asher's plans, drawings, patents, correspondence and account books that were in the 1908 fire were all saved. His desks, telephones and office furniture were taken from the building by members of the Excelsior Hook and Ladder Co., and placed across the street in front of the Hooker Hotel.

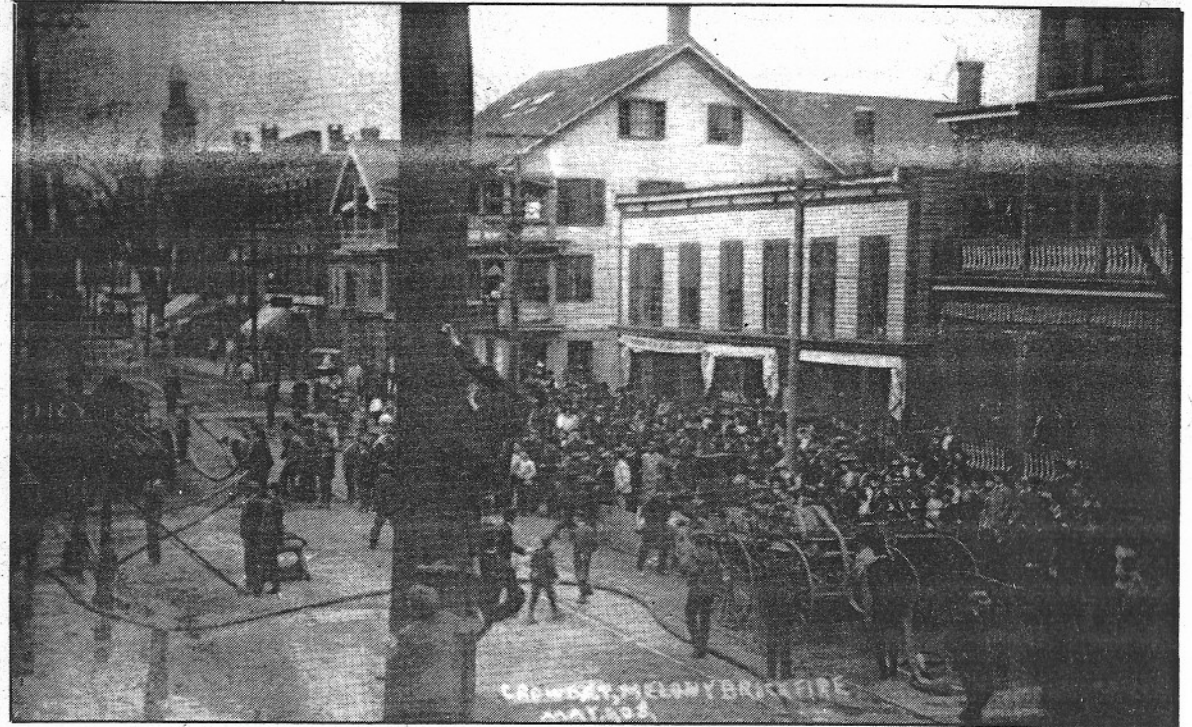
This particular fire revealed a local scandal regarding the funding of the city's fire companies. The Excelsior and Hill Top men fought the fire in their own clothes, and their jackets, pants and shoes were ruined. The city did not provide the companies with enough boots and protective



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rubber overcoats. A recent requisition for 24 pairs of boots and 24 rubber overcoats was refused by the alderman, along with a request for an extra thousand feet of hose. A spokesman for the Excelsior Co. stated that every inch of hose owned by the city was now wet, and would have to be dried out. If another alarm rang, the city would be in trouble, as the wet hose could not be rolled up until it was dry.

Willard Bowen of the Maverick Laundry revealed that the company did not have a penny of insurance, and had lost about \$7,000. Auguste Blanchette also had no insurance and had lost about \$6,000 of goods and furniture, and much was smoke-damaged. Saloon keeper George Walker was insured, and he would be able to replace the beer and liquor lost in the fire. Mr. and Mrs. George Brewer and Mr. and Mrs. George Brown occupied tenements on the third floor. They were also uninjured, but the fire did not reach them. They were driven out of their tenements by the heavy smoke. Building owner



Young boys climb a telegraph pole to get a better look at the firefighters tackling the Melony Block fire in May 1908.

George Melony watched the blaze. He told a reporter that he was well insured.

The floors of the building's first story were badly burnt, and the floor of Blanchette's store had gone down into the cellar, taking down iron bedsteads and bedroom furniture. A heavy safe also fell into the basement and just missed Henry Congdon. Fire Chief Webster was highly pleased with the way his men had dealt with the blaze, and kept it to the cellar and first floor.

The following morning, Auguste Blanchette moved his remaining furniture into Asher's Willimantic Garage next door, and began repairs. He was also selling smoke-damaged goods at knock-down prices. Asher and Bowen hoped to have the Maverick Laundry in operation within one week, and were sending their laundry to the Thread City Laundry and to a laundries in Norwich, Hartford and Worcester, Mass. Local insurance men, George S. Elliott, A.J. Bowen, Melvin E. Lincoln paid out more than \$9,000 to

building owner George Melony. Shortly afterwards, the fireman received their new boots, coats and hose.

The Melony Block was repaired, and it remained on Main Street until 1937. On Jan. 5, 1937, Abraham Beller purchased the building from Albina Belanger. Later in the year, the century-old building was razed, and a modern block of shops and offices was built on the plot. The building is still known today as the Beller Block.