

## History

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# 1916 fire destroyed Jordan Block

### Part One

It was considered the greatest loss Willimantic had ever experienced when the Jordan Block on Main Street was destroyed by fire on Nov. 23, 1916. Also destroyed was the Bijou cinema theater, located in an adjacent wood-frame building. It was calculated that the entire loss amounted to more than \$200,000.

Willimantic's most famous commercial block was originally built in 1874, and known as the Hamlin Block. It was purchased by Marshall Tilden in 1894, who added wings, a new frontage and an extra story. It then measured 120 by 70 feet with basement. Tilden operated a dry goods store there with George Courtney until 1904. It was purchased by brothers Fred D. and William P. Jordan in 1906, who conducted a hardware business there. The Jordan brothers' Willimantic hardware store was one of the most well known in the state.

Other than housing the hardware business, the Jordan block was home to Henry Friar's tailor shop and contained the lodge rooms of the Natchaug Lodge, No. 22, Knights of Pythias, who lost all their belongings in the fire ex-



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cept for an American flag and two swords. The Thread City Cyclers were also tenants in the building and they lost their furniture, pool and billiard tables and a piano. Those items were insured and could be replaced, but the cycling club, formed in 1886, lost all its framed historic photographs. Also lost were cups and silver trophies. Despite the tragedy, the club still intended to go ahead with its Thanksgiving Night minstrel concert at the Loomer Opera House.

Three young women, Clara Lincoln, a thread inspector at American Thread, Margaret Moorehead, a employee of the Windham Silk Co., and Mary Colbert occupied rooms on the third floor, and they narrowly escaped with their lives. The Willimantic Trust Co. occupied a section of the first floor, but their banking business escaped the worst of the fire — but it did not escape a soaking.

Smoke and water damage was extensive. The adjacent cinema building did not burn down completely, and it was believed that the fire had started there.

Officer Michael Cronin was on the Main street beat that night, and he smelled smoke some time before the fire was actually discovered. He searched the street, found nothing and thought that the smoke had come from a passing locomotive. A few minutes later he spotted a small flame on the second floor of the Bijou theater. That was at 2:12 a.m. Cronin attempted to activate alarm box No. 43. It did not work, and he had to run all the way to the Bank Street fire house to raise the alarm. There were also alarm box problems there, and it was 3 a.m. before fire crews arrived at the building, but by then the fire had spread from the Bijou into the Jordan block.

The fireman set eight streams onto the buildings and extinguished the Bijou blaze, but the fire was raging inside the Jordan Block on the second and third floors. The fire exploded boxes of ammunition on the second floor, and a contemporary observer exclaimed that Main Street sounded like a Eu-



The Jordan Block, pictured here in 1904, was considered to be one of the finest commercial blocks in New England.

ropean battlefield. There were also explosions from the paint and oil cans stored in the basement. Fred Jordan was one of the first on the scene, and he rushed into the building and saved the company's account books and cash from the safe. Onlookers helped to remove showcases, stoves, crockery, cutlery, ammunition, tinware and other merchandise.

The firemen were thankful that there was not a strong wind that night, as the fire could have rapidly spread along the south side of Main Street. The Jordan Block stood opposite the old Jillson House, and this part of eastern Main

Street was thickly settled in 1916 with tenements and businesses. Several fireman were slightly hurt in the blaze. At 5 a.m., William "Lefty Smith" of the Alert Hose Co. came into contact with a live electric cable in the alley next to the Bijou, and was knocked unconscious. He was rushed to St. Joseph's Hospital, and revived. Another fireman fell from a ladder, but was not seriously hurt. Frank Lincoln of the Hilltops and Roy Downer of the Alerts received badly cut heads from falling glass, and received stitches at St. Joseph's Hospital.

*Continued next week.*