

# History

## Abel Brooks: an industrious man of character



Tom Beardsley

Part one of two

The European House Hotel and commercial block was one of the first major buildings erected on Main Street in Willimantic. Abel E. Brooks built it in 1859 on the southwestern corner of Main and Railroad streets, to take advantage of the borough's increasing railroad passenger traffic. Brooks was a well-known hotelier in town.

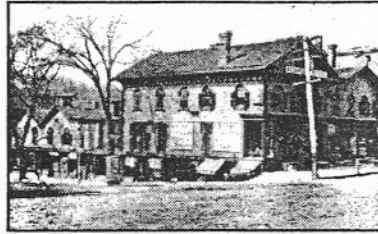
He kept a hostelry at Windham Green, and inherited the wooden statue of Bacchus, carved by English sailors incarcerated in the Windham Jail during the

Revolutionary War.

An 1861 credit report of Brooks stated that he was an industrious man, of good character, who kept a small hotel on the "European Plan." He also sold "Yankee notions," liquor, and ran a saloon from the building. He was considered to be "good for his contracts." The term "European Plan" refers to the method of boarding in Europe, wherein guests received a breakfast as part of their lodging fee.

Abel Brooks sold the hotel and commercial block to Luke Flynn in 1870.

Flynn was a prominent Irish-American, who served for many years as the borough's superintendent of streets. Flynn sold the hotel and block to Denis Shea, who purchased a building located in what was considered to be the best place for business in the city, and a source of "considerable revenues for its previous owners."



The European House Hotel.

Shea leased several businesses in the block, and John McQuillan ran the hotel. It burned to the ground in a dramatic fire in 1905, and several accounts of the fire provide an interesting social and business history of the city at the onset of the 20th century. We're provided with glimpses of the numerous businesses, which operated in a group of city center buildings, long before the advent of the suburban malls.

Just after 3:30 a.m. on March 20, 1905, Willimantic police Lt. Killourey and Patrolman Manly

were checking the shops and stores in the Opera House block on Main Street, when they noticed smoke and flames emitting from the European House block.

Manley rang the fire alarm, and Killourey rushed to the building to rouse the guests sleeping in the building. Killourey's yells awoke the hotel proprietor, John McQuillan, who rushed to each room to alert his guests. Everyone escaped from the building, but only with the nightclothes they were wearing.

Lizzie Stuart, the hotel's cook, attempted to return into the blazing building to recover \$1,500 she had hidden in a bureau in her room, and had to be physically restrained by the police.

Lt. Killourey displayed great bravery when climbing a ladder into the bedroom of the McQuillans, located above the City Drug

Store, to rescue their small daughter. He went back up the ladder, and came down with Mrs. McQuillan who had been overcome with smoke.

The fire companies arrived and "worked like tigers" to stop the flames spreading down Railroad Street and along Main Street. When the companies arrived the blaze was concentrated between the European and neighboring Harrington blocks, but it quickly spread into the inner sections of the hotel along the hallways, and the firemen found they were fighting at least six separate blazes.

If you enjoy viewing old photographs of the town, then come to the Willimantic Library Thursday at 7 p.m. and again Feb. 8 and 15 to view a series of slide shows entitled "The Windhams and Willimantic."

Continued next week

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.