

— HISTORY —

William Niles Potter: known as the dean of Willimantic businessmen

Part seven of seven

William Niles Potter was a significant figure in Willimantic history, and a stalwart of Willimantic's First Baptist Church. He was a ninth generation descendant from Robert Potter of Coventry in Warwickshire, England, who arrived in Lynn, Mass., in 1634, and in 1642 became one of the proprietors and purchasers of a tract of land in Rhode Island from the Shawmut tribe, later named Warwick.

William Niles Potter was born April 10, 1846, in Willimantic. His father, John Niles Potter (1809-87), arrived in Willimantic from Scituate, R.I., in 1830 to work at the Windham Manufacturing Co. and married Amy Dorrance of Willimantic on Nov. 7, 1833.

John and Amy Potter subsequently built a hotel on the site occupied today by the Nathan Hale Hotel, and in 1847 they purchased a large farm at the western end of the borough of Willimantic. This land was later developed as the town farm and the Willimantic Cemetery. In

1863, John Potter abandoned farming and became the steward of the Connecticut Literary Institute at Suffield. Potter returned to Willimantic in 1869 and purchased a farm on South Street. He remained there until his death.

William Niles Potter was the only son of John and Amy Potter who lived into adulthood. He grew up on his father's farm. The house was located in the vicinity the Veterans of Foreign Wars building. Potter studied at the Connecticut Literary Institute at Suffield, graduating in 1867, and subsequently taught there, but he returned to Willimantic with his parents in 1869.

On May 1, 1870, he became a shoe merchant when he entered into partnership with Armin Martin, to form the company Potter & Martin. Potter became sole proprietor upon the death of Martin. On May 1, 1920,



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Willimantic's merchants organized a party to celebrate Potter's 50 years in business in Willimantic.

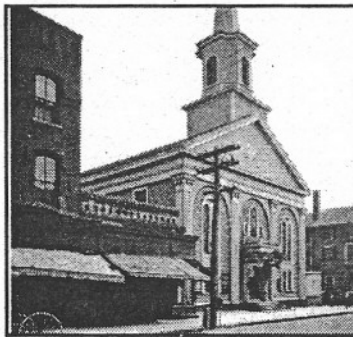
William Niles Potter married Estella Bump on May 4, 1874. Estella was born in Stockton, N.Y. She arrived in Willimantic to live with her aunt, after the death of her parents. She graduated from the Natchaug High School in 1873. The Potters had four children, Endora was born in 1875, Amy (1877), Arthur (1879), Ida (1882) and another son, William, died in infancy.

William N. Potter became intimately involved with the civic affairs of Willimantic. He was a devout Republican and cast his first vote in 1868 for Gen. Ulysses Grant. Potter was a founder of the Natchaug Lodge of the Knights of Pythias, and became highly prominent in the organization. In 1895-96. He was the Knights' Grand Chancellor of the State, and in 1897, he became the Knights' Connecticut State Exchequer.

In the 1870s, Potter was also a charter member of the Willimantic branch of the

International Order of Odd Fellows, the Obwebetuck Lodge No. 16. He was also an organizer of the Willimantic Board of Trade in the 1880s, an organization, which later became known as the Chamber of Commerce.

The growing city of Willimantic was the ideal place to organize a building loan company, and in 1891, Potter was a central figure in the chartering of the Willimantic Building and Loan Association, and was treasurer of that organization until his death. From 1892 until 1897, Potter was a Republican selectman in the



Potter's store, next to the Willimantic Baptist Church, can be seen in this 1905 picture.

town of Windham. He served three terms as first selectman, two as second and one as third selectman. Potter was also a member of the Windham Town Hall building committee during 1895-96.

Other than his civic, social and political roles in Windham, Potter was a staunch Baptist, becoming a trustee of the Willimantic Baptist Church in 1869, and its clerk the following year.

William Niles Potter died at his home, 146 Church St., on Aug. 7, 1937, at age 91. He was referred to as the dean of local businessmen.

Potter had retired from his shoe business the previous year, which meant he had been in business in Willimantic for 66 consecutive years.

From 1870 until 1879, his shoe business was located in the Windham Hotel block on the eastern corner of Main and Church. From 1879 until 1887, the Potter Shoe Co. traded from the Tilden block, and from 1887 until 1936 from a store at 2 Union St., located next to the church he served so faithfully during his long life.

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