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10 ALBUM, Chronicle, Saturday, December 15, 2001

— HISTORY —

The closing of Hurley's marks the end of an era

Part one of three

The closure of Hurley's marks the end of a chain of clothing and retail stores on Main Street in Willimantic that date back to 1879. It also marks the vast changes in retail marketing that have occurred in the last 40 years since the advent of mall shopping.

In 1879 a 30-year-old Scot, Hugh Clark Murray, arrived in Willimantic and opened a small dry goods store on Union Street.

On his death in 1919, Murray's *Chronicle* obituary referred to him as a "leading figure in the mercantile and industrial life of the city." He had spent two years in Florida in an attempt to recover from ill health, but he



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died at his home, 20 Turner St., on June 17.

Murray was born on March 1, 1849, in a small cotton mill town named Catrine in Ayrshire. He left for the United States in 1871, landing in Boston. He came to Willimantic in 1879, and in 1880, on completion of the Loomer Opera House, Murray moved his Boston Store into one of the stores located on the ground floor of that building. By the 1890s, the Boston Store occupied all five retail stores in the opera house block.

The financial panic of 1892 and 1893 saw many of Murray's local competitors go out of business. Murray had built up a reputation in those difficult financial years as a financier, loaning money out to local firms and individuals hit by that severe recession.

The "canny Scotsman" bought out his competitors, paying them in much needed cash. In 1892, the historic Brainard House hotel on the corner of Main and Church was demolished, and Murray erected an imposing department store building. The new Boston Store opened for business on March 17, 1894. It was the largest store of its kind east of the Connecticut River and its reputation for high-quality goods soon grew.

The building was heated by steam, and lit by gas and electricity. But the new-fangled elevator



Hugh Clark Murray's Boston Store opening for business in 1880 in the Loomer Opera House block. Murray is the bearded figure at the right of the group.

was the most pleasing attraction for customers. The store had millinery, furniture and carpeting departments on the top floor. In 1894, the *Willimantic Journal* proclaimed, "The new store is a marked departure from old methods and it is doubtful if in any other New England city of the same size there exists an establishment so metropolitan in its character or one offering so great a variety from which to select."

Murray was passionately involved in all schemes to improve his adopted hometown. He was a stockholder and a director of many Willimantic businesses and industries.

Murray was a long-serving president of the Willimantic Savings Institute, a director of the Windham National Bank, a founder and president of the Windham Silk Co., a director and bondholder of the Quidnick-Windham Cotton Co., a director of the Vanderman Manufacturing Co., a director of the Rockville-Willimantic Lighting Co. and held wide stockholdings in the SCS box manufacturing company, the Rossie Velvet Co. and the Willimantic Industrial Association.

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