

— HISTORY —

Willimantic's 'Old Reliable': the Wilson Drug Co.

Willimantic's "Old Reliable" pharmacy served the borough and city for almost 150 years under a number of owners. It is best known as the Wilson Drug Co. at 723 Main St. where it had been located since its 1829 founding by Dr. Newton Fitch. The store then had a succession of owners, including John Perkins, Alfred Howes, Dr. Jason Safford, Lucius Fuller, and Willard Fuller. Frank Milton Wilson purchased the business from Fuller in 1878.

Frank M. Wilson was born in Mansfield in 1849. His father, Milton B. Wilson was born in Scotland, the country not the town, and was an expert in the art of papermaking. He came to the United States to work with Charles Smith and Harvey Winchester at South Windham. Frank Wilson's mother's ancestors were described as "the sturdy yeomanry of New England," having seen service in the French and Indian and Revolutionary wars. Wilson's maternal grandfather, William Metcalf, was a direct descendant of deacon Timothy

Metcalf, who began to clear the Mansfield swamps and forest in 1737 to establish the Metcalf farm. Milton Wilson married William Metcalf's daughter, Harriet Metcalf in 1846.

Frank Wilson attended Rockville High School, and was hired in 1867 as a clerk in Dr. Fred Rogers' Willimantic drug store. In 1878 Wilson formed a partnership with John Leonard, and purchased Willard Fuller's drug store at 723 Main St. A taste of a 19th century drug store can be gleaned from this *Chronicle* description of the Wilson and Leonard drug store as the Christmas of 1879 approached:

"Wilson & Leonard have adorned their pleasant store very tastily with evergreen, and have spared no pains to make it attractive to people who are out in



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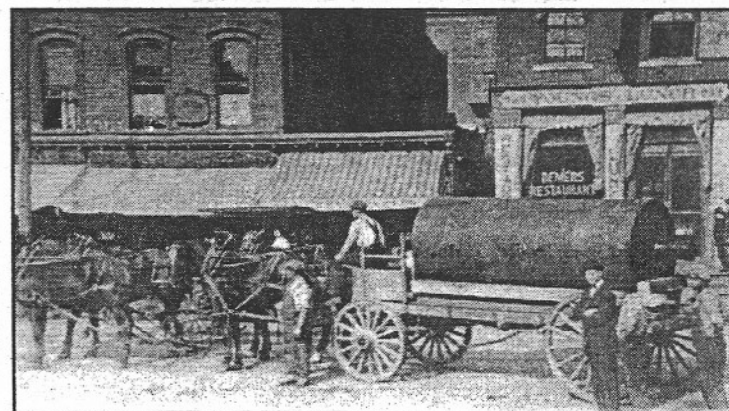
search of presents and Christmas goods. Their holiday display is unexcelled by any in this section, which a glance at their window of beautiful goods will prove. Nice foreign and domestic toilet articles of Celluloid, Florence and Hard Rubber, beautiful goods, perfumes, druggists' sundries, fine leather goods, gentlemen's toilet cases, also ladies', foreign and American grasses for house adornment, the first that has been introduced in town, cut glass goods, and a large variety of attractive goods. A visit will pay you."

The business thrived as Willimantic grew in the 1880s, and Wilson was elected president of the Connecticut Pharmaceutical Association. In 1890, Wilson took William P. Jordan as a partner, but Jordan left in 1898 to open a hardware business in the city. Wilson was also greatly involved in civic affairs. Wilson was vice president of the local board of trade and the Willimantic Building and Loan Association. He was a borough

burgess from 1888-93, and represented Windham in the state legislature in 1895.

Wilson's first wife died in 1893, and he then married Lucy Byles of Ashford. The couple had two children, Dorothea and Milton. The Willimantic community was greatly shocked on May 1, 1900 when it heard that Frank M. Wilson had collapsed and died of a heart attack while playing with Dorothea, age 3, and Milton, age 2,

at their Church street home. Lucy M. Wilson carried on the business, and incorporated it in 1904. She became president and removed to Hartford, leaving the management to Frank Smith and Wilfred Gagnon. The Wilson Drug Co. would continue trading on Willimantic's Main Street until the 1970s, until it could no longer compete with the chain pharmacies such as Walgreens.



The Wilson Drug Co. in 1905 as seen from Railroad Street. A piece of machinery is being taken up Main Street from the depot.

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