

Willimantic tomatoes throughout the land

Joseph Allen Lewis (1829-1900) operated one of the largest fruit, vegetable and plant nurseries in Connecticut from the Civil War until his death.

It was located in Willimantic, adjacent to the Eli Hewitt farm on what would become Jackson Street, and the junction with Ash Street. By 1890, Lewis had 16,000 square feet under glass, and was growing produce over a 100-acre area.

There was such a great demand for his fruit and vegetables that in 1892 Lewis erected a large cannery on upper North Street.

He then distributed his canned tomatoes and apples across the United States, thanks to Willimantic's excellent railroad facilities.

Lewis doubled the size of the cannery in 1894 as the demand for his canned tomatoes, apples, squash, strawberries and pickles rapidly grew. Furthermore, the area's farmers used the canning facilities to preserve their produce. During the summer months,

Lewis was employing almost 100 people in his cannery.

Lewis' canned tomato ketchup was particularly popular, and the business seemed set to

expand, even during the depression years of the mid-1890s. However, in August 1895, the still night air of Willimantic was rendered by the "brazen clang of the big bell in the tower on Bank Street."

People rushed from their houses and saw large sheets of flame shooting into the air atop the hill district. Irwin Morse rang the alarm on from box 63 near Bugbee's Upper Jackson Street store, when he noticed fumes emanating from the Lewis canning factory.

The fire broke out in the boiler room at the northwest corner of



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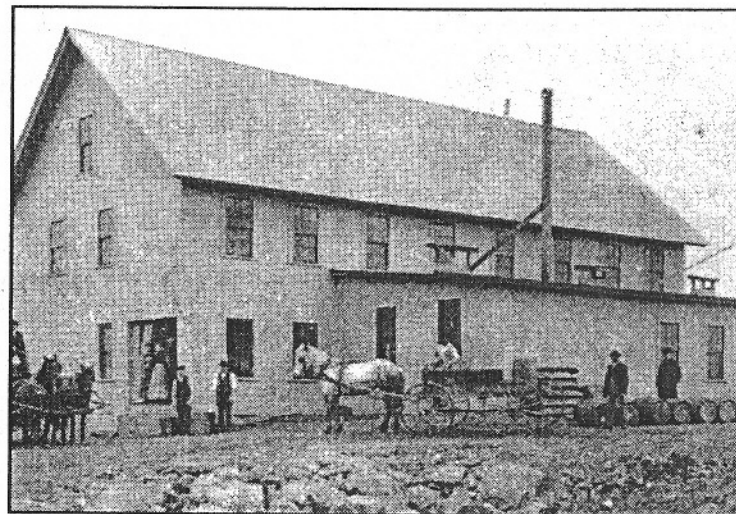
the factory, and quickly spread. The different companies responded quickly, but it was a long run pulling their fire carts, and by the time the Montgomerie's had arrived the cannery was a pile of blazing ruins. It was a "spectacular and glorious blaze" and lit up the adjacent countryside like daylight.

Lewis was distraught. He lost his factory and machinery, 500 barrels of ketchup, \$1,000 worth of tin cans, \$400 worth of wooden crates and boxes, and \$300 worth of bottles.

Furthermore he had 25 acres of ripening tomatoes to process, ready to fill a \$7,000 order. It was discovered that the boiler did not cause the fire, and it was thought that arson was the cause.

The fire was quickly brought under control, but unfortunately Assistant Fire Engineer James Tighe fell through the floor of the burned building into the cellar, and dislocated his shoulder when landing on tomato barrels.

He was quickly conveyed to his



The Lewis Cannery on Upper North Street

home at 36 Prospect St. after Dr. Weldon fixed his shoulder.

Lewis continued his business, right up until his death in 1900. The Lewis nurseries were located in the area today occupied by Normandy Avenue, Terry Avenue, Ann Street, and Hope Street, between the railroad and Jackson

Street.

He also had holdings on the hill, but sold them off in the 1890s. Lewiston Avenue is named for him. Maybe Willimantic would have become as famous for its ketchup as for its cotton thread had it not been for the fire.

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