

— HISTORY —

A gunfight wakes up the village

Part One of Two

At the end of July 1881, a clerk in the Johnson & Williams store, which stood at the corner of Babcock Hill and Machine Shop Hill roads in South Windham, observed that a window had been tampered with. The storeowners suspected a robbery and set a trap.

Williams waited in the attic with a pistol, and just after midnight two men climbed onto the store's roof and climbed in through a window. Johnson had asked his



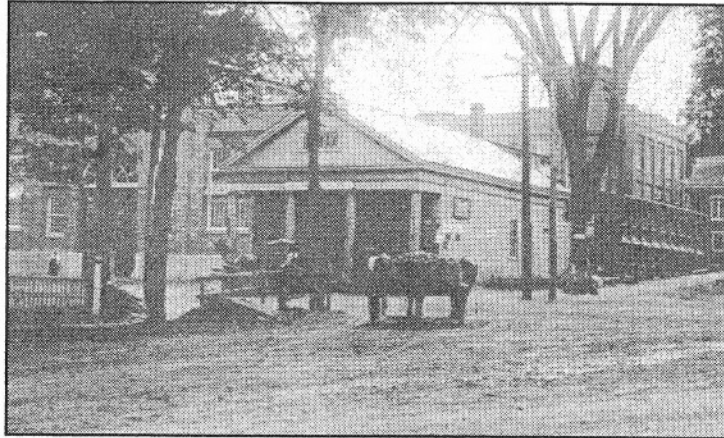
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friends E.W. Avery, Fred Chamberlin and Robert Binns for help and the latter arrived with a shotgun. The trio took up a position at the store's rear door. As Johnson approached the front of the building he discovered a man peering through the window who saw him at the same instant, and nine shots were exchanged in quick succession. Binns and Williams opened fire on the burglars inside the store, and one directly hit by a blast from the shotgun fell to the floor. The other two fled.

The gunfight aroused the village, and when the wounded man was carried into the store, a large crowd collected. The shotgun charge had entered the burglar's right side just below the ribs, making a hole large enough to put two fingers in, and some of the shot had gone straight through his body. Dr. Hills was called from Willimantic and as he dressed the wound, he found a pistol bullet in the man's shoulder, which had entered through the back of the neck.

The wounded burglar was taken to the almshouse in Willimantic, and a search of his pockets revealed a wrench, tobacco, \$23.06 in cash, a small silver watch, a compass, a key, and a card bearing the name of a liquor firm in Cincinnati, Ohio. A soft felt hat, a crowbar, a dark lantern, and a drill and drill-stock, with which a hole had been started in the safe, were found in the store.

Evidence of the gunfight was also found. Two bullets struck the pillars in front of the store, one struck a tree across the road, one struck Guilford Smith's house and was buried in the clapboards, one passed entirely through the end of the store, and one was lodged in the rear door of the store from the inside. The ladder used by the



The Johnson & Williams store in South Windham is pictured about 20 years after the 1881 gunfight.

robbers to get upon the roof was taken from the Smith and Winchester factory. The burglar was cared for by Dr. Card, but refused to answer any questions.

Crowds of people visited the almshouse to get a look at the villain. They noted that he had a scarred face and had lost part of one ear. The *Chronicle* reported "He is undoubtedly one of the most desperate and accomplished cracksmen in the country, and probably holds a high place among the fraternity. About the only regret that he seems to entertain is that he should receive his deathblow in a 'little, nasty job like this out of my legitimate busi-

ness,' as he expresses it. He admits that he would indeed have felt cheap and provoked if only the cash, which the safe contained — about \$12.00, had been obtained."

The burglar refused to disclose his identity, and to have his photograph taken, so Dr. Card administered injections of morphine and local photographer Charles Townsend took the robber's picture while he slept. Dr. Card removed 15 bullets, a tack nail, and a paper wad from his wounds, and believed the mysterious burglar would recover.

Next Week: The identity of the mysterious burglar is revealed

Looking back: 125 years of the Chronicle

125 Years Ago this Week:

In the news: "Miss Chesboro's school was recently visited by a small rodent quadruped of the *musasculus*, species which frightened some and amused others. As music sometimes charms animals, we suggest that the next time his mouseship appears, the school sing the popular song Eileen L. Anna."

"A ripple of excitement was caused Tuesday noon by finding in Willimantic river, the dead body of a male infant. It was discovered by a boy who was fishing, floating near the bank opposite the Willimantic Linen Co.'s new mill."

Advertisement: H.L. Edgerton keeps constantly on hand tonic beer, porter & ginger ale, English ale drawn from wood, bottle lager expressly for family use.

100 Years Ago this Week:

In the news: "The case of Broughton vs. Broughton was tried. The defendant did not put in an appearance. The plaintiff asked for a divorce on the ground of intolerable cruelty. They were married in 1879 and up to May, 1901, she made numerous threats to kill him. Judge Shumway granted the divorce."

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