

## — HISTORY —

# John Hickey made impression on city's Irish-American population

Several generations of Willimantic-area residents will recall the J. J. Hickey Co. drug store, located on lower Main Street before redevelopment. John Hickey (1835-1910), the founder, was born in County Tipperary, Ireland. However, he did not fit the profile of a starving Irish immigrant driven from the home country by the potato famine.

John Hickey was the son of a wealthy farmer and shortly after his father's death in 1847, Hickey's family set out for Boston on the steamer *George Washington*. He was educated at a private academy in Massachusetts and arrived in Willimantic in 1852, where he worked for several years for the Jillson family. However, just before the Civil War, he followed opportunities in Iowa and Mississippi. Hickey

returned to Willimantic in 1863 and with his brother established a provisions store, specializing in teas, coffees and spices.

Hickey quickly became one of the leading citizens in Willimantic's expanding Irish community. He became firm friends with the Rev. Florimond DeBruycker, and helped him to develop the St. Joseph's parish. Hickey invested widely and wisely in land and property in the expanding borough and was able to contribute to the building costs of St. Joseph's Church in the 1870s.

In 1875, Hickey became a



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founding member of Willimantic's first Irish fraternal organization, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and in the same year built a fine house at 154 Jackson St., which became the center of Willimantic's "Irish lace curtain" community. In 1881 Hickey was a charter member of Willimantic's Grand Army of the Republic, Francis Long Post, and in 1888 became the Willimantic Savings Institute's first Irish-born director.

In 1866, John Hickey, who was referred to as "a shrewd son of Ireland" in a local biographical history, had married Mary Hickey, a native of County Clare, Ireland. Between 1868 and 1884, the couple had 10 children, six daughters and four sons. All were educated privately at the Catholic Academy at Baltic. Hickey's son, John Joseph Hickey, born in 1869,

became his father's partner in the J. J. Hickey drug store, which was established in 1892 in the building that once stood at the northwest junction of Main and Jackson streets, in a location that today is directly opposite the Thread City Crossing bridge.

After setting his son up in business, Hickey retired and cared for his many properties. He was a keen Democrat, but was excluded from serving on the borough and city councils as the Republicans dominated Willimantic politics in the post-bellum era. Nevertheless, towards the end of his life he was a member of the board of relief

and a tax assessor. One of his last contributions was to establish St. Joseph's Hospital in 1907.

John Hickey died in October, 1910 at 75, and was buried in St. Joseph's cemetery. His funeral cortège was the longest the city had ever seen, in recognition of his significant contributions to Willimantic's rich Irish-American culture, and in the building up of the Thread City.



John Hickey

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