

— HISTORY —

George W. Burnham, the 'watchdog' of the treasuries

In January 1907, George Washington Burnham, the "father of Connecticut Spiritualism," died in his home at 82 Pleasant St. He was probably one of the most well-known men in the city and was famous for never missing a town meeting. His nickname was the "watchdog of the Willimantic and Windham treasuries," and he regularly attacked what he believed to be ill-conceived ideas. In his 70s and 80s, Burnham repeatedly commented that he had absolutely no confidence in the town selectman and the city councilmen.

George W. Burnham was born in 1818 at Milford, Ohio, a son of William Burnham of Windham and Sally Kasar of Canterbury. The couple moved to Ohio shortly after they married to live in a Shaker colony there. The Burnham family returned to Connecticut in 1824 and settled in the Shaker colony in Enfield. William Burnham became one of the colony's leaders, but in 1834 he abandoned

the Shaker faith and returned to Windham, where he died in 1835.

The first 15 years of George W. Burnham's life had been spent in Shaker colonies, and this doubtlessly shaped his religious ideas later in life, when he professed that he hated the Shaker faith. At age 16 he went to live with his uncle Lucius Burnham, and worked on his farm at Windham. At age 17, he taught school in Windham's Christian Street district, earning \$10 a month. In 1837, Burnham relocated to Hartford and was employed by a hauling company. Burnham eventually became a partner, and earned a relative fortune hauling railroad tracks as Connecticut's railroad system was taking shape in the year prior to the Civil War.

Burnham returned to Windham in 1842, and purchased a



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farm. Shortly afterwards, in partnership with his cousin Edwin Elisha Burnham, he purchased the old Swift store at Windham Center and became involved in the grocery business. In 1863 the Burnham cousins purchased a lot in Willimantic and built a brick block that became the divider between lower Main Street and Union Street.

As Burnham's fortune grew, he organized a fire insurance company and a furniture store and began purchasing property across the expanding borough on lower Main Street, Church Street and Pleasant Street, where he built his fine home in 1867.

Burnham entered the Universalist Church in 1836, but he converted to Spiritualism and in 1857 was elected president of the state association of Spiritualists. The Willimantic Spiritualist Church, established by Burnham in 1864, attracted some of the borough's leading families, such as the Haydens, Jillsons and Hatches. In 1869 Burnham and the well-heeled Spiritualists built a fine church edifice on Bank Street.

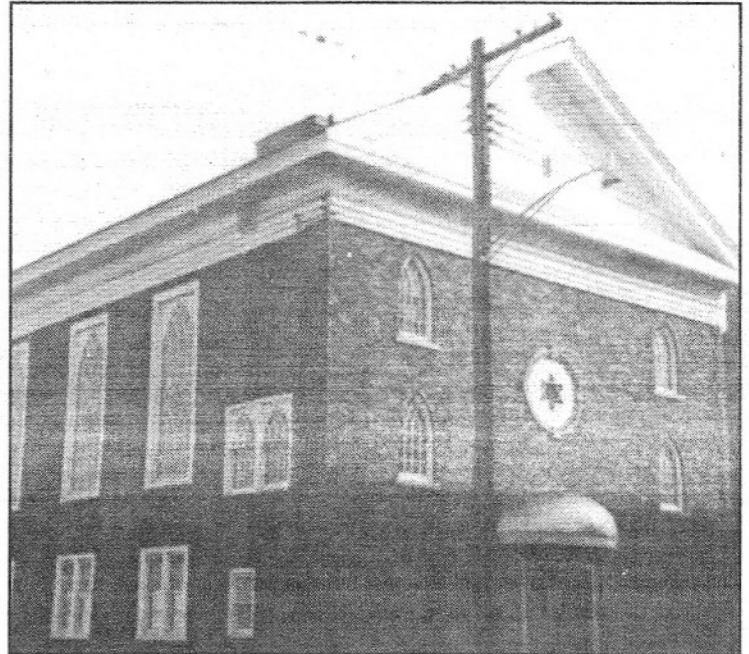
The new Spiritualist church was named Excelsior Hall and it operated as such until the early years of the 20th century. It also gave its name to the Excelsior

Hook and Ladder Co. which built a firehouse on Bank Street in the 1880s. Burnham was also a prominent figure in establishing and developing the Spiritualist campground at Niantic.

The Willimantic Spiritualist Church later served as the Scenic Cinema, a Jewish temple and an African American church before it was demolished during redevelopment in the early

1970s,

Despite his many business involvements, Burnham was a leading figure in civic affairs, serving as a representative to the General Assembly, a town selectman, a borough burgess, a justice of the peace and as the commissioner of the borough water works during their construction during 1885. He fitted much into his 89 years.



George W. Burnham's Excelsior Hall on Bank Street in 1952 when it was serving as the Temple B'nai Israel Synagogue.

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