

— HISTORY —

# The Turner block: once thriving, finally demolished

For almost a century, a fine hotel and mercantile building stood on the site occupied today by Liberty Bank. It was built on the northeast corner of Main and Church streets in 1877 by local merchant Thomas Turner (1819-82), and demolished in 1970 during downtown redevelopment.

Turner was born in Manchester, England, and came to the United States in 1842. He was hired as the overseer of a woolen mill at Daleville in Willington, and when it closed, he relocated to Willimantic and entered the Lord and Taylor mercantile business. Turner was a devout Methodist and played a leading role in establishing the Methodist church on Church Street, and the Willimantic Methodist Campground on the outskirts of the borough. After briefly dabbling in business in New York City with his son Albert S. Turner (1843-1900), Thomas returned to Willimantic in 1859, and the pair opened a dry goods store on Main Street.

The Turners were one of the

first families to open up the Hill district to development, purchasing real estate on the so-called "side hill" in 1867. They laid out Maple Avenue, and divided it into building lots.

Goodrich Holland, the founder of the Holland Silk Co., was one of the first customers, and he built a grand mansion on the avenue the following year. Shortly afterwards, the pair laid out Turner Street. This was the location to be in post-bellum Willimantic and Albert S. Turner built a house on Maple Street in 1873.

In 1874 Thomas Turner built a brick block of stores on the corner of Main and Church, but in 1877 he moved it back along Church Street, and constructed the Commercial Hotel block on the site, which was long considered the borough's finest building.

Albert Turner took over as the



Tom Beardsley

proprietor of the Commercial Hotel after his father's death, and established the Apothecaries Hall drug store in the building. He retired in 1890 and leased the hotel to George Challenger, who operated it as the Windham Hotel until 1900. In the same year he installed his son Fred E. Turner (1869-1943) as manager of the drug store. Fred Turner then took up photography, and produced a number of well-known postcards of the Willimantic region.

After Albert Turner's death in 1900, the Turner Block was sold Clinton Helmold and John T. Philbin, who operated it as the Plaza Hotel — this name and building is etched in public memory, as it is the structure located behind President Teddy Roosevelt as he addressed the crowds during his visit to the city in 1902.

Stymest S. Irvin purchased the block in 1905, and operated the Irvin House Hotel until 1912. From 1913 until 1928 it was known as the Windham Lodging House, and for the next 40 years until it was demolished, it operat-

ed as an apartment house, and housed a wide variety of stores such as the Church-Reed Co. and the Country Squire. The original

Turner Block survives, and is located on Church Street behind Liberty Bank.



Photographed shortly before its demolition in 1970, the historic Turner block looks isolated.

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.