

— HISTORY —

One more historic building being allowed to crumble

Along with the Chapman Block (1876) and the Murray Block (1894), the Nathan Hale Hotel is just one more historic Willimantic city building being allowed to crumble away. The hotel's builders, the Willimantic Community Hotel Corp. (WCHC), could hardly have forecast this sad fate when the hotel officially opened on Nathan Hale's 150th birthday in 1926.

The WCHC consisted of 400 local stockholders, who raised more than \$300,000 of capital in a two-year-long fund raising drive to build a brand new, modern hotel in Willimantic. Built in 1879, the Hotel Hooker was beginning to look its age, and local businessmen were concerned that the city was losing trade, because visitors were leaving to stay overnight in Hartford and Providence.

The building contractors, Day and Zimmerman of Philadelphia, commenced construction in 1925 under the direction of the

American Hotels Corp., which operated 23 hotels nationwide. The architects, George B. Post and Sons of New York City, designed a Georgian style, five-story-high structure, with

an exterior of red brick and painted ivory trimmings. Promotional material pointed out that this fine, new hotel stood on Willimantic's principal thoroughfare, which was also the main highway between Boston and Hartford.

The new Nathan Hale Hotel had 100 guest rooms, each designed in a colonial Adam style, with curtains made of printed mohair. The hotel's lobby was 50 feet long and 19 feet wide, and had a beautiful terrazzo floor — a mosaic design consisting of highly polished pieces of marble or granite. The new hostelry was furnished



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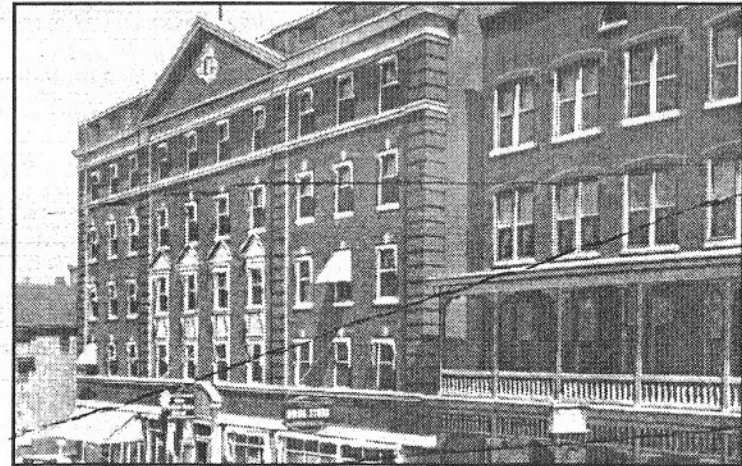
throughout with colonial Chippendale furniture, oriental porcelains, rugs, sofas and ladder-back chairs. The walls were painted in a soft golden, two-toned yellow, and the lobby led to the expansive, main dining room, 54 by 21 feet, which had an ornate, central skylight. It too was painted in golden tones, and the draped mirrors were fixed to the walls, to give an effect of windows.

The Nathan Hale Hotel's official opening took place with much aplomb on September 22, 1926. The WCHC's senior officers, including William P. Jordan, James P. Bath, John Ahern, George S. Elliott, James B. Fullerton, P. J. Laramec, and Leslie Hartson were treated to a sumptuous banquet in the hotel dining room the following evening. Theresa Sprague, a well-known opera singer from Boston, was engaged to perform a number of stirring, patriotic songs to entertain the guests.

After dinner speakers made many civic gestures, but the hotel's "father" and leading proponent, William P. Jordan, noted that tourists coming over the Boston and New York roads were bound to be impressed by the dignity of Willimantic's new hotel.

Moreover, the city's great manufacturing plants had long attracted the world to the "Thread City," and now it no longer had to turn them away.

Today, a lack of parking is cited as one reason why visitors no longer come to Main Street. Will all be solved when the Chapman Block and the once grand Nathan Hale Hotel are transformed into parking lots? There is continued regret expressed regarding the demolition of the city's east end in the early 1970s. Nevertheless, a second period of demolition looms.



Nathan Hale and Hooker Hotels, circa 1930.

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