

— HISTORY —

The Turner Block gave Teddy the sense of a ‘big city’

When Teddy Roosevelt visited Willimantic in 1902, he addressed the crowds from his carriage, which had halted at the junction of Main and Church streets. This prospect gave Willimantic a “big city” appearance, as two fine Victorian buildings stood in the background.

The Murray and Turner blocks stood on each corner of this intersection, and each had British connections. Ayrshire born Hugh C. Murray, the city’s dry goods magnate, built the former in 1894, and Mancunian Thomas Turner, a leading merchant in the city since the Civil War, had built the latter in 1877.

The Turner Block housed commercial stores and a hotel, and was built to take advantage of the increased trade brought to the borough by the Air Line railroad after 1872. The first hotel in the block, the Commercial, was a sophisticated place that challenged the supremacy of the city’s finest hostelry, ran by Seth Hooker. However, the

Commercial Hotel changed hands in 1890. It was renamed ‘The Windham,’ by George Challenger, and its fortunes began to decline.

In 1897, George Bradstreet leased the hotel, and renamed it the Plaza Hotel. However, in 1900, Bradstreet left for the Paris Exposition, to operate hotels and restaurants for American tourists, and the vacant Plaza was then leased to two entrepreneurs from Clinton, Massachusetts, John Philbin and Clinton Helmold.

Numerous photographs of Roosevelt’s brief sojourn in Willimantic feature the hotel during this period, and depict its crowded windows with people craning to get a view of the president.

The Plaza Hotel’s rooms



Tom Beardsley

remained mainly vacant, but its bar quickly became Willimantic’s most popular watering hole. However, the bar’s profits were not enough to keep the hotel afloat, and Helmold, a talented violinist and conductor, departed to lead the Loomer Opera House’s orchestra. Philbin remained, and decided to develop the hotel’s saloon.

He relocated it from the second story to street level, installed an ornate mahogany bar, new fixtures, a piano, and hired a pianist who had worked in the Coney Island music halls.

Despite Philbin’s outlay, and the Plaza bar’s popularity, he lost a fortune. The rent, and butchers’ and grocers’ bills went unpaid, and waitresses, chambermaids, clerks, night porters and bartenders were laid off.

A New London hotel company showed an interest in taking over

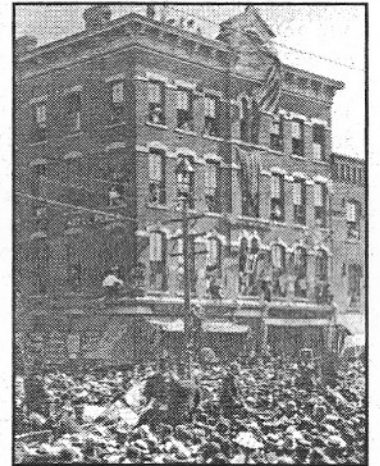
the struggling Plaza, but when this fell through Philbin made a quick exit, and on July 9, 1903 he left for Providence on the 6:15 a.m. train, never to be seen again.

Fred E. Turner, the hotel’s owner, discharged the remaining help, and informed the hotel’s six boarders to vacate the premises. It was estimated that the departed Philbin owed more than \$5,000, and that he had been assembling a nest egg from the bar profits to enable his getaway.

Nevertheless, Turner claimed that Philbin’s rent was paid in full, but that the abandoned hotel’s rooms were in a “discouraging condition.”

The hotel remained vacant until 1905, when it was taken over by Stymest Irvin, who operated it as the Irvin House Hotel until the late 1920s. The Turner Block was partially damaged in the St.

Valentine Day’s fire in 1968, and was demolished as part of redevelopment in the early 1970s.



President Roosevelt addresses the crowds in front of the Plaza Hotel in 1902.

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