

— HISTORY —

The origins and history of the section known as 'Sodom'

Alice Smith of Columbia alerted me to a series of photographs taken by her father in Willimantic in the 1930s and 1940s, and I recently featured an enlarged section of a picture of Cardinal Square on Threadcity.com's picture of the week section.

This sparked a lot of memories for the web site's readers, generating much response on the site's discussion forum. That photograph is reproduced here, and features Buster's Tavern and Bergeron's fruit store at Cardinal Square in 1938.

The Cardinal Square area of Willimantic is better known as "Sodom," a name that has nothing to do with the fifth dam or the "cinque dam" on the Willimantic River, nor with the behavior of French Canadian workers who came to Willimantic during the 1925 strike.

It dates back to the 1820s, and describes the activity in the taverns and brothels that sprang up around Perry Richmond's cotton mill, built in 1822 on the Willimantic River near its junction with the Natchaug and Shetucket Rivers. The area later became known as Wellesville, but even after the Willimantic Linen Co. purchased the mill and village in 1877, the name "Sodom" persisted.

In 1909, Sylvanie Cardinal purchased a saloon built at Sodom in the 1890s, and the junction of Ash and Main streets and routes 14 and 66 also became known



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as Cardinal Square. The name became synonymous with Sodom, and persisted long after the saloon closed due to Prohibition. At the time of the 1938 flood and hurricane, the old saloon building was occupied by Max Rabinowitz's grocery store. In the 1940s and '50s the Cardinal Square area boasted three grocery stores, three taverns, a photograph shop and two gas stations.

"Brian" lived in Cardinal Square from 1954 to 1972, in the house next to Bergeron's fruit and vegetable store. He recalled the days when customers could run tabs at this store, and when the Bergerons moved to Windham Road, they continued to deliver groceries to his parents' Ash Street home. Brian also recalled the steel barrel, with the light on the top, located at the junction to create a traffic circle. The view from the family's living room

window enabled them to watch it being struck and damaged at least once every week.

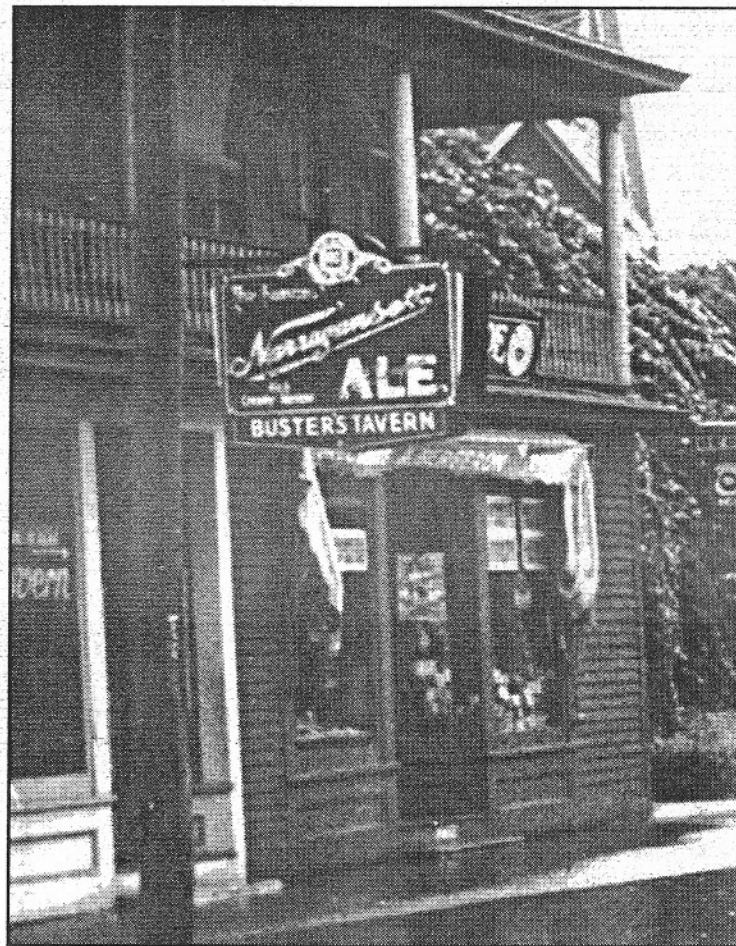
Evelyn Phaneuf Chalifoux remembers Cardinal Square well. Her family lived on Brook Street, and she has happy memories of "Sodom."

Evelyn's father owned Leonard's Restaurant, as it was known then, and Mr. Handfield operated the barbershop located in the small building between Buster's Tavern and Leonard's. Evelyn, however, was born "over the river" on South Street, but her husband was born in the house next to JoJo's "down Sodom."

A sign in the window of Buster's Tavern indicates that entrance to the saloon was in the rear. It was apparently a favorite watering hole for local millworkers and only served beer.

One reader recalled that his uncles had "some real good times" at Buster's on Saturday nights. Part of the building in which Buster's Tavern and Bergeron's was located was taken over by Tony's Pizza in 1973, and remodeled after 1978.

The barrel has been replaced by traffic lights, and Cardinal's Saloon has been demolished — but this area will always be known as "down Sodom."



Buster's Tavern and Bergeron's store are part of a larger picture from the flooding prior to the 1938 hurricane.

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