

A power struggle in the county

Part one of two

Last month Willimantic lost a significant piece of its history with the demolition of the 1876 Chapman Block. However, the Savings Institute has partly offset the continuing decline of Willimantic's Main Street by preserving an important piece of north-eastern Connecticut's heritage. The bank has refurbished the old Windham County Courthouse and rooms used by selectmen and borough burgesses located in the top story of the Hayden Block.

This is the marble-fronted building located east of the Savings Institute's headquarters, which served as the longtime home of the Surplus Center. Built in 1879 by Whiting Hayden (1818-86), this fine structure had one central purpose — to re-establish the town of Windham as the county seat of government. When Windham lost its shire town status in 1819, western Windham County slipped into relative decline.

The county's locus of power moved east to the industrialising Quinebaug River valley towns bordering Rhode Island and it took 60 years for Windham to gain sufficient economic and political power to reclaim its former ranking. The industrial towns of Killingly, Putnam, Thompson and Plainfield were satisfied with the post-1819 arrangement, as Brooklyn was more convenient to reach than Windham green, where the old county courthouse had been located since the early 18th century. However, in February 1879 a committee of 20 notable Windham citizens traveled to the General Assembly to request the return of the Windham County Superior Court. This action pitted Windham's Willimantic, Killingly's Danielsonville and Putnam against each other in a long struggle to win the prestigious title of county town.

Connecticut state officials informed the town fathers at Windham, Killingly and Putnam that they should provide a suitable courthouse and jail if they desired their town to become the county seat. They had to raise taxes to provide the funds to build such facilities.

Soon afterwards, Willimantic's Whiting Hayden, a retired cotton manufacturer, presented plans to the Windham selectmen for a marble and brick building to house stores, town offices and a courthouse.

Hayden offered to build it at his own expense if the town paid him \$800 a year rent on a 10-year lease. The Windham selectmen agreed, and ground for Hayden's edifice was broken on a vacant lot on Willimantic's Main Street in April 1879. The building's elegant courtroom was frescoed and furnished by July 1880, and opened to the public for a preview. The visitors remarked that it was without doubt Connecticut's most

imposing court chamber. Nevertheless, the county court was still at Brooklyn and Windham had to fight of serious competition from rivals in the Quinebaug River Valley.

Representatives from eastern Windham County's mill towns cast envious eyes over the Hayden Block, Windham's ostentatious seat of potential county power. Despite only being in existence since the 1850s, the town of Putnam and the borough of Danielsonville lusted for the mantle of regional power and posed a serious threat to Windham's bid.

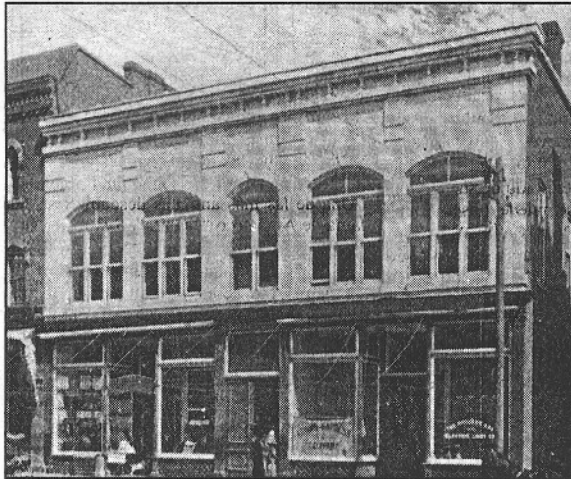
However, Windham town fathers felt that if they could absorb one of its rivals for the county seat, the other would withdraw from the contest. Consequentially, the towns of Windham and Putnam secretly hatched the "half-shire" plot: a plan to hold alternate sessions of the Windham County Superior Court at Putnam and Willimantic. However, at the same time Windham's officials had been in secret talks with General Assembly officials. In addition to Hayden's grandiose courthouse, town fathers had offered to provide a



Tom Beardsley

county jail free of charge if state officials awarded Windham alone with the coveted prize of shire town.

Continued next week



The Hayden Block in 1894

Advertisement

HOSMER
MOUNTAIN BEVERAGES
Exceptional
SOFT DRINKS
423-1555
<http://hosmer.pds2k.com>

Advertisement

Advertisement

SAVE
PETROLE
• Prompt, Profession
GASOLINE • D
Delive

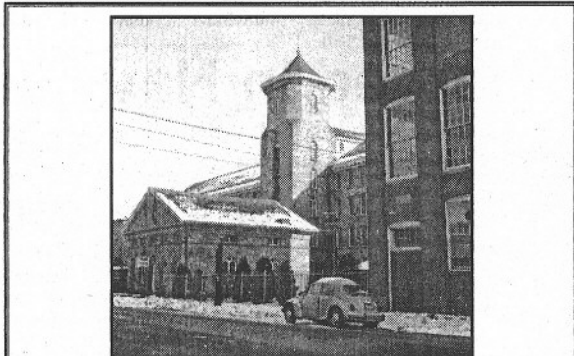
24 Hour Emergen

Call Today

WE'RE MOV
OUR MESS
ENTIRE
STOCK!



Westies #1
SHOE OUTLET
"The Best Shoes at the Best Price"



The American Thread Mills pictured in January, 1978. Production was still underway in the plant, and also in the dyehouse which can be seen to the right. In 1994 this was one of the first American Thread structures demolished by Windham Mills as part of their redevelopment project. The dyehouse was built in 1910.

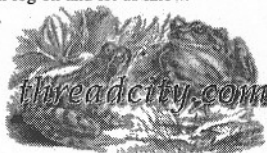
Local history articles by Tom Beardsley, who has been writing for the Chronicle since 1992, are published in the Album section of Saturday's Chronicle or log onto www.thechronicle.com, go to "links", then "sites of interest", to Thread City.

Don't forget to visit the Discussion Forum while at Thread City!

If you'd like to donate photographs for this series, request specific historic pictures or seek information log on and let us know.

Tom Beardsley
ThreadCity.com
www.threadcity.com

Windham's History
Web Site



Your Gateway to Eastern Connecticut
Sponsored by the Chronicle

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.