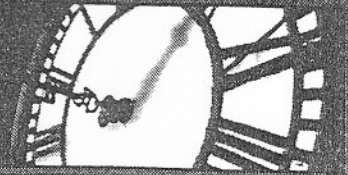


in

Local History



Thread City's main thoroughfare

At a time when Willimantic's once bustling and aesthetically pleasing Main Street continues its long decline with the falling into disrepair and demolition of its fine old buildings, it



Tom Beardsley

is perhaps necessary to look back and see how the Thread City's main thoroughfare began to develop as a service center for modernizing Windham County.

Main Street's eclectic range of architectural designs began to shape during the 1850s, after the building of the New London, Willimantic and Palmer and Hartford, Providence and Fishkill railroads through the town between 1849 and 1854.

The new railroads attracted many business entrepreneurs to Main Street, including 25-year-old James W. Walden (1825-1916), who opened a stationary store on the south side of Main in 1850. Walden's father, a wealthy merchant from Canterbury, had arrived in Willimantic in 1826 to provide groceries and produce for workers employed at the Windham Manufacturing Co.'s cotton mills on Bridge Street.

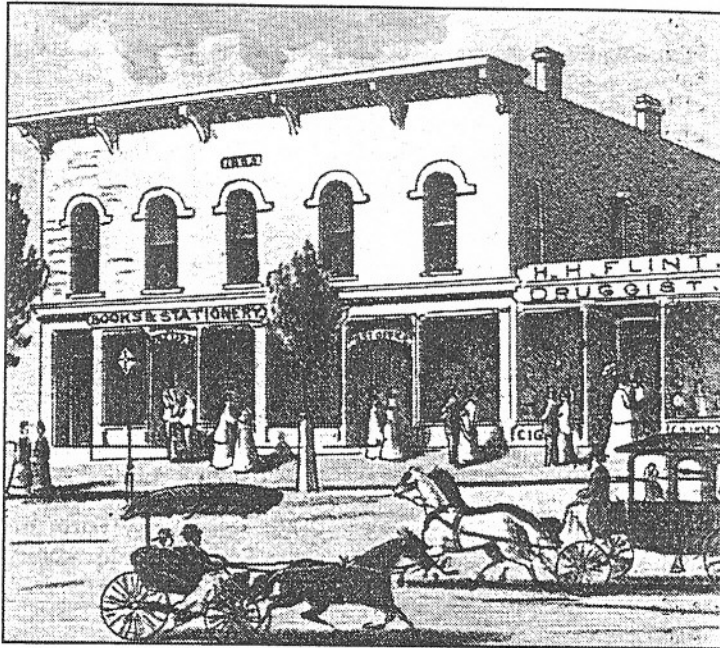
Walden's Willimantic stationary business flourished, and he became involved in local politics. In 1859 Walden was elected as a borough burgess, and the following year as state representative. In 1860, he became the first businessman in the borough to install a telegraph and patrons flooded into his store to hear the latest news. The first message relayed was Lincoln's election as president and the following year people listened in shock as news came over Walden's wire of the Union Army's defeat at the first

battle of Bull Run.

In 1862 Walden built one of the borough's first brick blocks to house his expanding businesses. The Walden Block still stands at 770-780 Main St. and is today occupied by the Apostolic House

of Prayer, the Calvary Chapel, of Willimantic, and the New York Fashion and Beauty Salon. In November 1862, a reporter for the

(Thread, Page 10)



1822 lithograph of the Walden block

Willimantic Journal noted Willimantic's thriving Main Street and filed a description of its active businesses, beginning with those in which Walden was involved:

"James Walden is the borough's Postmaster, Express Agent, News Dealer, Telegrapher, and Bookseller. As we look in upon him we find Mr. Walden and gentlemanly clerks as busy as bees, sending and receiving packages by Express, clicking telegraphic messages, distributing daily papers, and supplying the children with school books. We are a little surprised to find that Mr. Walden can keep so many irons in the fire and allow none of them to burn; but then he is a Yankee, and that explains the whole matter. With all his business on hand he has found time during the past season to erect a fine brick building, which will accommodate in one spacious apartment all branches of his business."

Walden became one of Willimantic's wealthiest citizens and purchased much real estate on the borough's expanding Main Street, including the National Hotel, which stood on the site now occupied by the Nathan Hale Hotel. In 1887, Walden sold his business to William Sweeney and became an insurance broker, and banker.

The Dime Savings Bank, of which he was president, became embroiled in a financial scandal during the economic depression of 1894. Walden went into receivership in 1896, sold his business interests and retired to Florida.

He died there in 1916. Walden's obituary noted that he had done much to build up Willimantic in his younger days "being active in many enterprises."

He had also financed Willimantic's first professional baseball team in 1884 and was chairman of the local Republican Party. Walden was buried in Willimantic, with full Masonic honors.

The Sweeney stationary store, established by Walden, was purchased by John Monaghan, and operated in Willimantic until the 1990s, making it one of the longest established businesses in Connecticut.

History