

August 5, 2004

The Card Home on Pleasant Street has been a Willimantic fixture for almost a century. A wealthy tailor and ready-made clothing retailer named John G. Keigwin (1825-99) built it in 1869. Born in Griswold in 1825, Keigwin had a significant impact on Willimantic's 19th century development.



Tom Beardsley

Keigwin's mother was a Hibbard, a member of a wealthy, long-established Windham family. When Keigwin's father died in 1827, she left Griswold and returned to the family home in Windham. Mrs. Keigwin eventually remarried and moved to Buffalo, N.Y. However, she died there shortly afterwards, and Keigwin was sent back to Windham, where his uncle, Elisha Hibbard, raised him.

In 1839, Hibbard sent Keigwin to Colchester's prestigious Bacon Academy. On returning to Windham, Hibbard's friend John Tracy hired Keigwin as a bookkeeper at the Windham Manufacturing Co.'s mills on Bridge Street.

After Elisha Hibbard's death in 1850, Keigwin used his inheritance to establish a clothing and tailoring store in Willimantic, which prospered as the borough grew.

In November 1862, Keigwin took out a large ad in the Willimantic Journal: "John G. Keigwin, at his stand in the Brainard Building, offers as usual, great bargains in ready-made clothing, hats and caps. John thinks if he cannot give his customers particular fits, and suit them from top to toe, both as regards quality — and price, then there is no use trying."

During the Civil War, Keigwin began to invest heavily in Willimantic's development, and in partnership with Allen Lincoln and Edwin Burnham, he built the



Keigwin's Commercial Block, built in 1866, was located on the north side of Lincoln Square and housed the Candy Kitchen. The Union Block stood on the south side of Lincoln Square, just west of the Willimantic Trust Co.'s building. Both blocks are visible in this 1945 photograph.

Commercial Block and the Union Block just after the Civil War. The former was located just east of the Liberty Bank, and the St. Valentine's Day fire destroyed it in 1968. The latter block was located at the opposite side of the street, across from the entrance to Church Street, and was demolished during redevelopment in 1974.

Keigwin entered local politics in 1862 when he was elected as a Willimantic borough Burgess. He sat on the board of Burgesses for 18 years and became a leading figure in the state Republican Party. He also served on the board

of relief and as a justice of the peace, state representative and registrar of voters.

In 1878, Keigwin sold his clothing and retail business to Jerome Baldwin and Joel Webb and entered into a partnership in the plumbing, stove and crockery business. He also dealt in real estate in the expanding borough, but Keigwin particularly focused on his political career.

However, in 1881 his keenness for the Republican cause placed him in hot water. The state Superior Court summoned him to explain for illegally tending the ballot box on Election Day in his role as Windham's registrar of voters. The Democrats demanded his head. However, the judge was Keigwin's close friend and he dismissed the case.

In 1887, Keigwin was a central figure in establishing Willimantic's Board of Trade, better known today as the Chamber of Commerce. He was also a member of several other voluntary associations including the Oddfellows, Knights of Pythias and Shriners. As a young member of the Windham Eastern Star Masonic Lodge in 1851, he had lobbied for its relocation from Windham Center to Willimantic, and towards the end of his life, he founded the Connecticut Masonic Veterans Association.

Keigwin passed away in his Pleasant Street home in February 1897 and was buried with full Masonic honors in the Willimantic cemetery. He died a wealthy man. His property, assessed at \$32,000, included his Pleasant Street home, valued at \$6,500. The Commercial Block (\$14,300), and a half share in the Union Block was worth \$8,300.

Keigwin's widow and his daughter Eva continued to live at 154 Pleasant St., until Mrs Keigwin's death in July 1900. Dr.

David Card's widow, Hannah T. Card, purchased the house several years later. Her late husband had been concerned that the city had no facilities for the elderly. His will stated that after the death of his wife, funds from his estate should establish such a home. Mrs. Card died in 1915, and left her entire estate "to establish, conduct and maintain a Home for the Aged in Willimantic."

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.