

June 16, 2005

Masonic Lodge members were an elite class

Part one

During the fall of 1798, a group of leading citizens from Lebanon and Windham petitioned the Worshipful Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons for a charter to establish a Masonic Lodge in Lebanon. They were successful and Eastern Star Lodge, No. 44, F. and A.M. received its charter on Nov. 7, 1798.

The lodge held its first gathering in a Lebanon meeting house on Nov. 28 and afterward met in a room fitted out in a private house on the road from Goshen to Bozrahville.

The increasing number of members from Windham resulted in the introduction of a meeting house on Windham Green and the lodge held alternate meetings in Lebanon and Windham until 1809, when members abandoned gatherings in Lebanon.

From that year until 1851, Eastern Star masons met in a hall above a store on Windham Green.

In exploring the cultural role of voluntary associations during the 19th century in industrializing America, historians agree that organizations such as the Masons provided much needed rituals for a society professing no class system.

Members endured elaborate initiation ceremonies, wore colorful costumes and uniforms and conducted regular parades and marches.

Moreover, lodges had close links to local political structures and formal and informal meetings provided ideal opportunities for creating social and professional networks for local businessmen and politicians.

An exploration of the 19th century minute books of Windham's historic Eastern Star Lodge, formed in Lebanon in 1798, reveals these processes in practice.

The Eastern Star Lodge's development can be broken down into two phases: 1798 to 1829 (pre-urbanization) and 1849-85 (post-

urbanization).

The biographical record of its founding members and officers during the first phase reveals their high status and standing in the community.

They consisted of landowners, politicians, physicians and military officers and after 1823 the pastor of the Windham Congregational Church.

The end of the Eastern Star Lodge's first phase coincided with the rise of the Antimasonry movement, when the Windham Masons found it prudent to suspend operations during this "cyclone of nonsense, prejudice and dirty politics." Consequently, meetings were intermittent during the 1830s and 1840s.

The lodge fully reinstated meetings in early 1849, the year the railroad came to the borough of Willimantic. In September 1851, the Masons abandoned their hall in the Windham Center village and relocated the three miles to the expanding borough.

After occupying several locations, the Eastern Star Lodge rented the basement of the Willimantic Congregational Church until 1857. After that, they met in a centrally located business block until 1885. Membership grew during this period, but at the same time, Willimantic was experiencing high rates of immigration.

In 1862, the borough's population of 2,955 consisted of 499 Irish born immigrants, who mostly lived in crowded, unsanitary conditions where smallpox outbreaks were common. Incidences of drunkenness, organized dog-fights, rowdiness and a riot between the Irish employees of two cotton mills, conducted with clubs and knives in 1863, did nothing to enhance their local



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reputation.

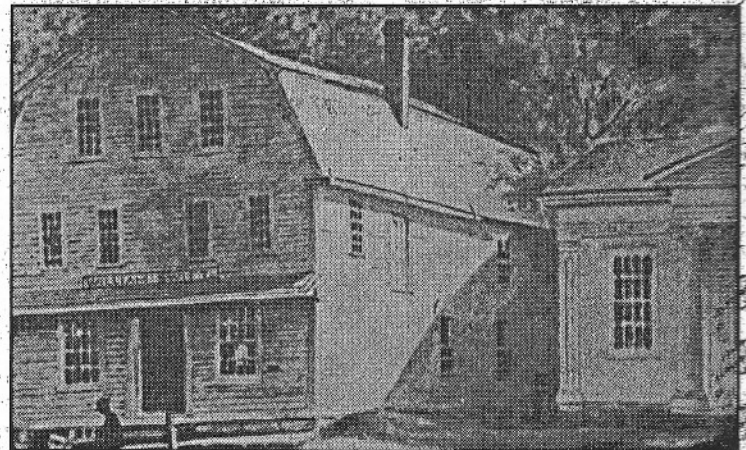
In 1865, Irishman John Hickey petitioned for admittance to the Eastern Star Lodge, but the selection committee rejected him. However, Hickey was not the stereotypical immigrant Irishman. The privately educated sons of a wealthy Irish farmer, John Hickey, and his brother, Michael, had traveled to the United States in some style aboard the steamer George Washington in 1849. In 1863, they arrived in Willimantic and opened a provisions and drug store for millworkers.

Excluded from membership in Windham's Eastern Star Masons, the prospering Hickey brothers

organized a local branch of the Ancient Order of Hibernians at Willimantic. They contributed substantial funds for the building of St. Joseph's Church, and John Hickey became a director of the Willimantic Savings Institute.

The Irish were not the only ones excluded from membership in the Eastern Star Lodge. Further demonstrating association exclusivity, the lodge submitted all those applying for membership to an exacting application process and expected a high code of behavior from those admitted.

Continued next week



Windham's Eastern Star Masons held meetings in William Swift's store on the Windham Center Green between 1809-51.