

June 23, 2005

## A grand celebration

Windham's oldest Masonic body, Eastern Star Lodge No. 44, F. and A.M., celebrated its centenary in 1898 with great aplomb. Thread City's Masons invited lodge members



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from across the region to attend the Willimantic celebrations and on the morning of Nov. 3, trainloads of Masons arrived at the railroad depot from New London, Norwich, Putnam and Stafford.

Eastern Star lodge officials arranged for carriages to pick the guests up and take them to an introductory luncheon held in the Masonic hall located in the United Bank building block and at the Hooker House Hotel.

The main exercises of the day commenced at 1:30 p.m. in the lodge rooms, where Eastern Star officials wined and dined their guests. Following this, the senior Masonic officers walked up Main Street and had their collective photograph taken on the town hall steps by local photographer Charles Townend.

From there, they joined the grand parade heading down Main Street. This highly colorful procession turned left onto Church Street and left again onto Valley Street and headed to the Willimantic Congregational Church.

No one in Willimantic could recall such a vivid procession in the city. Past Eastern Star Lodge Master Richard L. Wiggins headed the parade. The Tubbs Band of Norwich followed him, along with representatives from the St. John Commandery and the Knights from the Blue Lodge.

The latter were in full regalia and impressed the crowds with their waving plumes and glittering swords. Amid the parade, the grand officers from the lodges and others of prominence rode in carriages pulled by white horses.

When the parade members arrived at the Willimantic Congregational Church, there was standing room only in the large auditorium. The wives of Eastern Star officials directed the distinguished guests to seats on the platform. The band took position at one side and the famed singing quartette from Boston's Tremont Temple Baptist Church took their place in the choir gallery. After an organ prelude and an overture by the Tubbs band, the Tremont Quartette sang "Lord, Thou Has Been our Dwelling Place."

The Rev. Willard C. Norris, the Eastern Star lodge's chaplain, and Judge Charles N. Daniels, the chairman of the committee of arrangements, made an address of welcome.

The Rev. Edgar Clark then followed them onto the platform and gave those present a history of the Eastern Star Lodge. Clark was currently the pastor of the Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church of Plymouth, Mass., but had been a member of the Eastern Star lodge the years following the Civil War.

He reminded those present of the lodge's famous members, such as Capt. Gurdon Hebard, "the conservator," who presided as Lodge Master during the difficult

anti-Masonry period. Hebard had been in charge of the artillery units that defended New London during the War of 1812. His portrait adorned the lodge's meeting room. Clark also mentioned chief justice and Congressman Eliphalet Dyer, Connecticut Gov. Samuel Huntington, Solomon Loring, a Revolutionary War officer and Sherman Dewey an uncle of Admiral Dewey, who was fighting in the Spanish-American War.

Dr. Morris Watson Prince, professor of history and political science at Dickinson College, followed Clark onto the stage, and defended the Masonic movement, in an eloquent address that dismissed all critics of Masonry.

When the speeches were over, the Tubbs Band and Tremont Quartette entertained the church guests with a program of music and song. After the church service was complete, the guests walked over to the Excelsior Hall on Bank Street and enjoyed a sumptuous meal provided by the female members of the Eastern Star Lodge's Radiant Chapter.

During the evening, the Tubbs Band conducted an hour-long

open-air concert in front of the United Bank building. At 9 p.m., the lodge held a Masonic banquet at the Hooker House Hotel. Owner Seth Hooker prepared 250 meals and supplied the liquor for a long list of toasts.

Everyone in the room cheered loudly when Judge D.A. Lyman gave a toast for "Old Windham." He noted that love of home was one of the noblest aspirations of the human soul and how proud he was to be a native of Windham, "May Eastern Star Lodge celebrate its bicentenary in a city of 100,000 souls," he said.

The Eastern Star Lodge increased its membership during the early years of the 20th century. However, disaster struck just before Christmas in 1925 when a fire partially destroyed the United Bank building and damaged the lodge rooms. However, the following summer the lodge relocated to the Washburn Block, which stood on the corner of North and Valley streets. The lodge remained here for half a century, before relocating to its present location on Route 6 in North Windham where it still conducts its functions for a third consecutive century.



The Eastern Star Lodge held its meeting on Main Street from 1885 to 1926.

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