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Windham House Hotel one of the best in the land

In 1877, Willimantic dry goods magnate Thomas Turner (1819-82) built an extensive brick block on the corner of Main and Church streets, which housed retail space and



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a brand new hostelry, the Commercial Hotel. Turner intended to challenge the dominance of Willimantic's premier hotel, the Brainard House, which stood on the opposite corner of Main and Church. The Brainard was a rambling, wooden structure built a generation before, but now Turner was offering guests all modern conveniences.

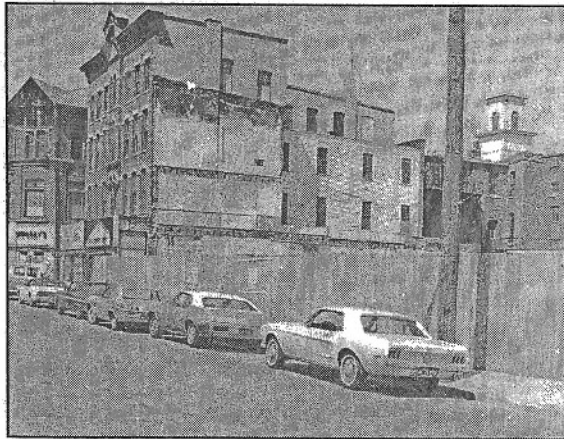
Slowly, the once grand Brainard Hotel went into decline and in 1893, another local dry goods magnate, Hugh C. Murray, purchased it. He subsequently demolished the decaying hotel and built one of eastern Connecticut's finest department

stores on the location, which is today the home of the Frogview Marketplace. Accordingly, two attractive brick blocks adorned the junction of Main and Church streets.

Thomas Turner leased the Commercial Hotel to several managers and in 1888 he handed control over to his son Albert Turner, who changed the name from the Commercial Hotel to the Windham House Hotel.

However, Albert Turner's timing was poor. The following year, Silas Hooker, who came to the city in the 1870s from Colchester to manage the Brainard House Hotel, built the Hooker House Hotel on the corner of Main and Bank streets. The Hooker Hotel quickly became the region's finest hostelry, thanks to its elevator, electric lights and piped water. Albert Turner could not compete and in 1892 filed for bankruptcy.

Later that year a well-known hotelier from Boston, George Prouty, came to Willimantic and leased the Windham Hotel. Prouty was the proprietor of



The Windham House Hotel building, pictured in the early 1970s, shortly before demolition.

Boston's Richmond Hotel on Tremont Street and had built up a fine reputation in the trade. He immediately undertook a remodeling program. Prouty removed everything from the interior, leaving just the bare walls. He disposed of all the fixtures and fur-

niture at auction and hired a team of carpenters, painters and paper-hangers to put the place in shape. They tore down partitions, laid new floors in each room and repainted the woodwork.

Prouty removed the barbershop, which was located in the build-

ing's southwest corner, repainted it and installed oak panelling, a handsome billiard table, pool table and bar. He was obviously aware of the success of the Hotel Hooker's poolroom and bar and very conscious of Seth Hooker's famed restaurant.

Consequently, Prouty upgraded his culinary departments on the first floor and hired a top class chef. New reading rooms stood next to the dining rooms and these were adjacent to a newly decorated lounge and parlor. Also on this floor on the eastern side was a "sample room" where traveling salesmen could display their goods and next to this Prouty built a new office for the hotel manager and private apartments for himself.

The third and fourth floors contained 44 sleeping apartments, which included 28 on the third and 16 on the fourth floors. Prouty totally redecorated these rooms and installed quartered oak panelling in each chamber, along with Brussels carpets and tapestries. The best rooms were in the

hotel annex, which fronted Church Street. This structure still stands at the rear of Liberty Bank and it then contained larger rooms with hot and cold running water.

In the main block, each sleeping chamber had an outside wall, with a window decorated with lace curtains. Moreover, Prouty knew how popular the elevator was at the Hooker, so he installed a new Graves model in the Windham Hotel, which traveled between the first and fourth floors and lined its interior with handsome oak panelling.

The Chronicle announced that the refurbished Windham Hotel was now one of Connecticut's finest hostelries and how this thriving new city sorely needed such an institution. Furthermore, George Prouty was a very genial man, who invited all to come and tour his restored hotel.

The redevelopment program of the early 1970s provided funds to demolish the old hotel and Liberty Bank built a new branch on the site of the historic Turner Block circa 1974.

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