

A forgotten name

It is a forgotten name today, but for a decade at the end of the 19th century, Julius Pinney (1845-99) was Willimantic's most prolific businessman. He suffered



Tom Beardsley

from cancer of the jaw and died on the last day of the 19th century at 54. Nevertheless, Pinney packed a lot into his relatively brief life.

Julius Pinney was born at Staffordville into one of northeastern Connecticut's leading families. Reflecting his standing in the community and the system of deferential democracy prevalent in the 1870s, voters sent him to represent Staffordville in the state House of Representatives when he was only 23. In addition, he and his brother-in-law operated one of Staffordville's leading mercantile stores. Pinney's success in this business came to the notice of Manchester's Cheney Silk Co. and in 1881, it hired him to operate the company store.

In 1877, the Willimantic Linen Co. had built a company store and library, now occupied by the Windham Textile and History Museum. Eight years later, the company put the store on the market.

Julius Pinney purchased it in April 1885 and relocated to the Thread City from the Silk City to operate it. He successfully managed the company's old general store for the next five years, making significant profits in the butchery department, thanks to

the work of Alonzo Dwight Spellman (1862-1953), who went on to become Willimantic's leading butcher during the first half of the 20th century. The Spellman and Co. Sanitary Meat Market was located at 27 Church St. from 1902 until 1958.

In 1889, Pinney sold the old company store to S.E. Amidon and Charles H. Dimmick, proprietors of the Windham Co.'s store on Bridge Street, so he could concentrate on a new venture. Pinney had become the local agent for the Welsbach incandescent gas burner, which claimed to be superior to the recently developed electric incandescent burners that were beginning to light up Willimantic's major public, industrial and commercial buildings. He also became a director of the Citizen's Gas Light Co., which developed the old gas works, which once stood on the banks of the Willimantic River, west of the footbridge.

From this venture, Pinney moved into local politics and real estate development. In 1890 voters elected him warden of the borough of Willimantic, a post today the equivalent of Windham's first selectman. Pinney also worked assiduously to build up one of Willimantic's first suburban developments during the early 1890s. This was the Whittemore Park estate, which included Ashland Street, an extension of North Street, Anthony Street, Whittemore Street and Park Avenue. These streets were laid across a 30-acre farm that Pinney and his partner, James

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James Griffin Martin, had purchased from Albert Whittemore.

In 1892, Pinney and Martin donated about 8 acres of the old Whittemore farm to the city of Willimantic as a park, if it maintained the "watering tub and pipe on Jackson Street." Today this area is the Alex Caisse Park, but for most of the 20th century, it was called Whittemore Park.

In 1894 Pinney became involved in some dubious financial dealings involving a local bank and a silk company and he left Willimantic in early 1895. He operated the Hope Woollen Mill in his home town of Staffordville, then moved on to Boston where he became the director of an asphalt company. He became the company's Caribbean and South American agent and resided in Venezuela, Barbados and Trinidad. However, in 1898 he became ill with jaw cancer and returned to his hometown where he died on



Julius Pinney

New Year's Eve 1899.

Julius Pinney's role in Willimantic's rapid post bellum growth is overlooked today because of his relatively short stay in the Thread City. Nevertheless, in nine years he operated the city's leading store; developed gas lighting, a suburban estate and became involved in political and civic organizations. Pinney was a member of Windham's Eastern Star Masonic Lodge and the Independent Order of Oddfellows.