

# The origins of the Chamber of Commerce

On the evening of March 23, 1905, the Thread City's great and good gathered in the Loomer Opera House to attend the Willimantic Board of Trade's fifth annual banquet.

Better known today as the Chamber of Commerce, local businessmen had established the board almost 20 years previously in order to encourage non-textile industrial concerns to locate in the city.

Membership on the board was by invitation only and once beckoned to serve on the borough's major association, local traders and industrialists could safely say that they had "arrived."

The board's senior offices gathered in their meeting rooms and at 7:30 p.m. they climbed the one flight of stairs that took them to the theater's banquet hall. They were met with rows of tables, "laid with 160 places on snowy cloths," and decorated with flowers and ferns.

A set of recently installed electric lamps brightly illuminated this grand scene. The officers, who sat on the top table opposite a stage occupied by Helmold's Orchestra, included local dignitaries such as attorney Thomas D. Kelley, grocer Frank Larrabee, historian and writer Allen B. Lincoln and South Windham industrialist George Hatch.

Waiters "glided noiselessly" about as they served the various courses which included little neck clams, chicken soup with rice, saltines, finger rolls, green salmon with parsley sauce, potato Parisian, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes and turnips, olives, pickles, celery, peach a la romaine, escalloped oysters, coconut kisses, caramel cake, ice cream and glaze nuts.

Once the guests had consumed this fine fare, it was time for the speeches. President Frank Larrabee called for order and sadly announced the

death of board member John Killourey. County Clare-born Irishman Killourey had operated one of the city's leading undertaking and livery stable concerns at Jackson Place and from the Adams House located on the corner of Union and Center streets.

A staunch Democrat and city council member, Killourey had also been a leading officer in the local branch of Ancient Order of Hibernians.

After this sad duty, Larrabee introduced the toastmaster, the Rev. Ashley D. Leavitt, the Willimantic Congregational Church's popular pastor, who served the city between 1904 and 1908. When Leavitt proposed a toast to the city of Willimantic, attorney Thomas D. Kelley arose and spoke eloquently of his affection for his adopted city. Kelley, like his late friend Killourey, was a son of Ireland and he applauded the city's industries, churches, schools and fire companies. Kelley concluded with a toast that claimed, "It is a small city, but there are those here who love it."

After lengthy speeches from local politicians and a representative from the Connecticut Agricultural College at Storrs, the evening's final speaker was Allen B. Lincoln, a prominent

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Tom  
Beardsley

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person in the state's Prohibition Movement.

Lincoln spoke of the city's bright future and boasted of Willimantic's trolley car system and railroads.

However, he warned that Willimantic was an "absentee landlord" town and stressed that it was up to everyone in the room that evening a century ago, to work with the owners of the city's largest industries to ensure that all local needs were met.

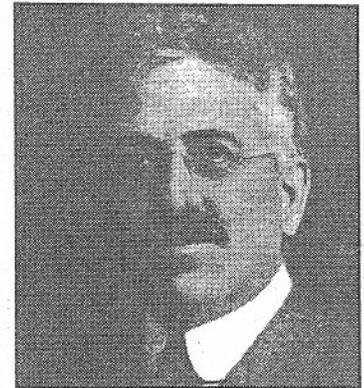
Lincoln pointed out the problems the town faced. The European Hotel, which stood on the southwestern junction of Main and Railroad streets, had recently burned. He appealed for local businessmen to demolish this old "tinder box" and replace it with a fine, modern brick block.

He also pointed out the dangerous grade crossings, and appealed for the erection of tunnels and footbridges in order to end the carnage caused when steam locomotives ran over unwitting pedestrians.

In closing, Lincoln pointed to the success of the city's Normal School and educational institutions. It would be ideal if the city could establish a technical school and Lincoln proposed that it be built on the Witter lot on the northeastern junction of Main and High streets.

A technical school was established, but 20 years later in an old silk mill on Bank Street. The Witter lot became the location for the city's new post office in 1911.

The toastmaster announced that Lincoln's remarks were the last of the evening. The sighs of relief from the well-fed board members were very audible.



Allen Bennet Lincoln, the  
1905 Board of Trade speaker.