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George Nason's legacy

George K. Nason (1845-1906) prospered greatly from Willimantic's phenomenal economic growth after the Civil War.



Tom Beardsley

Accordingly, it was a great shock when the city awoke to the news that one of its premier businessmen had collapsed and died following an operation for appendicitis.

A century ago the public held individuals such as Nason in high regard because they could trace their ancestries back to so-called revolutionary stock.

Accordingly, genealogy became somewhat of a boom business as the wealthy and well-heeled scrambled to find their place on the Yankee elite ladder by seeking out revolutionary relatives.

Often overlooked in the short biographies and long obituaries that celebrated their lives was the fact that their ancestors had stolen property from fleeing Tories, or that many had supported the king of England. Fortunately, for Nason, his ancestors had been active revolutionaries in Rhode Island and his obituary writers stressed that fact.

Nason was born in comfortable circumstances in Wickford, R.I., where his father was a leading builder and contractor. The elder Nason initially directed his son towards a career in the state's textile industry, but George ultimately trained as a toolmaker in a rifle and pistol manufactory in Providence.

At the end of the Civil War, Nason joined the police force, but noting the boom in southern New England's post-bellum woolen industry, Nason used his father's connections and capital to establish a woolen cloth manufactory in Holden, Mass.

In 1879, Nason's connections in the Rhode Island-based woolen network brought him to south Coventry.

The previous year Horace Kimball of Providence had purchased Coventry's largest woolen manufacturing plant, the Mill Brook Woolen and Washington Mills — which stood near Bradbury Lane — and hired Nason to operate the concern.

Nason oversaw the operation, which manufactured top class satinetes and cassimeres for the clothing industry.

Nason's rolls of fine woolen cloth were shipped to Providence and made ready for the market. It was rumored that a roll of Nason's cloth was used in a suit made for President Rutherford B. Hayes. However, Nason soon realized that better business opportunities were available in nearby Willimantic.

The Connecticut economy was booming in the early 1880s and Willimantic took great advantage of its transportation and waterpower facilities. During the Civil War, Lebanon's Hyde Kingsley came to the Thread City and in partnership with Silas Loomer, established a lumber yard adjacent to the railroad station.

In 1872, Kingsley left the partnership and purchased a tract of land at the corner of Church and Valley Streets, on which he established the business that later became known as Willimantic Lumber and Coal.

Kingsley profited greatly from this venture, and in 1882, he retired and built a fine Victorian mansion at 133 Prospect St. Kingsley leased the yard to the Coventry-based Rhode Island woolen manufacturer, George Nason, who purchased the entire concern when Kingsley died in 1886.

Under Nason's ownership, the Church-Valley lumberyard became one of the largest in eastern Connecticut.

In early 1888, he commenced construction of a mammoth lumber storage building that faced onto Valley Street.

Thanks to the city's location on the railroad network and to a nationwide building boom, Nason was able to ship his lumber and building supplies across the nation.

He also manufactured dressed and undressed lumber, shingles, clapboards, laths, house finish and building materials, such as the ornate decorations that are found on many of Willimantic's grand mansions in the town's hill district.

Nason also supplied lime, cement, plaster, firebrick, doors, sash, blinds and various kinds of glass. Little surprise then, that when he built his fine mansion at 159 North St. in 1894, all his building materials were of the finest quality.

Nason became intimately involved in local politics and became a major figure in the local Republican Party.

It was at his behest as first selectman that local businessmen formed the Willimantic Board of Trade in January, 1887.

Board members unanimously elected Nason the chairman of the board's committee on trade and manufacturing.

Despite his important civic, economic and political input into Willimantic and his integral role in Coventry's rich industrial history, Nason is a forgotten figure.

However, his memory is preserved in his fine house on North Street and by his large monument in the Willimantic Cemetery, where he was buried with full Masonic honors.

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