

August 22, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

A WEEKLY REVIEW OF LOCAL NEWS
ITEMS FOR 1892, 1917, 1942 AND 1967

1892

A special meeting was called of the Court of Burgesses to discuss the feasibility of building a "central bridge" to connect Pleasant Street with Railroad and Main Street. Attorney John L. Hunter, chairman of the special committee which had been formed to study the problem, presented plans of the proposed bridge to the meeting. They had been compiled by engineer W. B. Shaw of Boston for a cost of \$150. Mr. Hunter informed the committee that the plans were worth \$500, but Mr. Shaw agreed to produce the drawings for the fee procured by the Burgesses. The meeting was adjourned until the following month, but it would be another 14 years before the footbridge bridge would be built. It opened to the public in 1906.

Silas F. Loomer, owner and proprietor of the Loomer Opera House, was one of the best known individuals in town. The death of his mother, Mrs. Vilitia Loomer, caused great sadness in Willimantic. She was Willimantic's oldest resident at the time, and was well known for her colorful reminiscences of the past. Mrs. Loomer, who had resided on Union Street, was born Vilitia Lincoln in Columbia, Connecticut in January, 1804. She married Joseph P. Loomer of Columbia in 1826, and had lived on Union Street, Willimantic since 1864.

1917

The worst electrical storm in living memory caused extensive damage in Willimantic. The storm began at 7. 15 pm on August 21, and lasted until 9 pm. Two buildings were burnt to the ground and many more were damaged by lightning. The trolley car service came to a standstill. A large number of local roads were still built from packed gravel - the storm washed most of them away. Sand and debris was washed down the streets of the hill district and piled up on the crosswalks on Prospect Street and Valley Street. Walnut Street was turned into a rushing river. A bolt of lightning struck the steeple of the First Baptist Church, ripping out several of the boards over a 20 foot section, throwing them into Lincoln Square, Union Street and Temple Street. This was calculated to be the 4th time that the steeple had been struck by lightning since the church was built in 1858. The lightning also struck the steeple of the First Congregational church in Coventry, and virtually destroyed it.

Adelard Monast lived in a house on the corner of Valley Street and Watson street. A bolt of lightning leveled his chimney, and passed down into the house. The bolt knocked several pictures off the wall, and blasted out the stove pipe of the kitchen

stove, blowing soot around the house. It traveled down into the cellar, and blew off the cellar door. Luckily, no one was injured.

The Western Union Telegraph Company was hard hit. The storm demolished almost 60 of their wire carrying poles in the area, and Willimantic was cut off from surrounding districts. Over 600 people lost the use of their telephones, as SNET lines were blown to the ground. Barns were burned in Hampton and a ice house in Mansfield, owned by Diodore Delage, was burnt down with the estimated loss of 3,000 tons of ice.

1942

The 2,000 employees of the American Thread Company in Willimantic were delighted with the decision of the War Labor Board to advance the wages of everyone employed in the textile industry by 7.5%. The War Labor Board brought together the industry's unions and management and supervised negotiations - this was considered to be a supreme effort considering the animosity that existed between textile union and management officials nationwide. The textile industry was notorious for the very low level of unionization among its workers.

Local 460, Textile Workers' Union of America quickly ratified the wage increase at a largely attended meeting held at the Polish National Home. The meeting was chaired by the union's local field representative, Edward C. Cluney. Romeo L. Benoit, president of the local, explained the details of the raise to those present. It was backdated to June 15, 1942. This meant an average lump sum payment of \$35 for each of the industry's 500,000 employees. Mayor Russell Hinman addressed the gathering and stated that the raise was a sign that Willimantic was about to move ahead. Congressman William Fitzgerald then congratulated the members of the local for their hard work and organization. He was followed by union organizer Miss Jean Antonaccio and the retired labor commissioner of Rhode Island, Thomas McMahon, who both made stirring speeches. McMahon had been highly involved in organizing the 1925 strike at ATCO's Willimantic mills. The serious defeat inflicted on the union at that time had virtually wiped out local union representation, which had only recently been revived by the exigencies of war. After Miss Antonaccio had led the singing in a moving rendition of "God Bless America," those present received free refreshments, and proceeded to dance the night away.

1967

William Olds, executive director of the Windham Area Community Action Program (WACAP) announced that permission had been granted for WACAP to take over the old Post Office building at the corner of Main Street and High Street. Paul Healey, the regional director of public building services of the General Services Administration, which owned the building, directed the property administrator of the Office of Economic Opportunity in Washington DC, to hand the building over to WACAP.

The local community program took responsibility for all renovation costs and utility

fees, and intended to loan space to the State Department of Education and the Manpower Training Program. Under the latter program, three classes for unemployed or under employed persons would be held in the old Post Office. It was also planned to move the typing and shorthand classes currently held at Windham Tech, to the Post Office building and introduce a basic education program there. WACAP intended to store food commodities in the building for the Food Services Program, as the present storage facilities at Storrs were overcrowded.