

December 12, 1992

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

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

1892

Lester Eaton and Frank Martin, the Republican Party's first and second selectmen representing Chaplin, were sensationally arrested and jailed after a visit to nearby Willimantic. They were charged that they "willfully, wickedly, cruelly and unlawfully influenced one Allen Geer to stay away from the election day ballot on November 8, by causing him to be unlawfully restrained and confined in the house of one Alonzo Coburn of the town of Hampton against his will; and of hiring Coburn and his wife to confine and restrain Allen Geer in their house for the purpose of preventing him from attending said elector's meeting."

Eaton and Martin denied the charges, but refused to pay \$500 bail, imposed by the judge, the Justice E. Frank Bugbee, and remained in jail until their trial, which caused a sensation in Chaplin. It was revealed at the trial that Allen Geer, a pauper of the town of Chaplin, was a registered democrat and generally voted the democratic ticket. As a pauper he remained under the direction of local selectmen. However, the democrats were keen to recruit his vote, and despite the fact that he was "infirm in body and mind" they went to Hampton and attempted to take him from Coburn's house, where he slept on a mattress in the back of a wagon kept in the barn.

The Church vestry at Chaplin Centre was packed by voters wanting to witness the trial of Eaton and Martin. The defendants withdrew their plea of not guilty and pleaded for a trial in a higher court on the grounds of insufficient evidence. They paid their \$500 bail and were freed. It was widely considered that Eaton and Martin were innocent, and that this was a political action launched by sore losing democrats. Geer was in the habit of voting for the party who took him to the polls, and it was revealed that during the 1890 election, democrats took Geer to the polls, and "almost carried him to the voting booth, put a ballot in his hand...and guided him by the arm while he put his vote in the box." Lester Eaton claimed that Geer was not fit to vote, whether it be for republican or democrat, and that his forthcoming trial would reveal his innocence.

1917

Military service flags were draped from many homes, clubs and factories in the city. Each star on the flags represented how many family members or factory workers were currently serving in the U.S. armed forces. A 12 x 8 foot flag was draped from American Thread's main office. It had 41 stars, signifying that 41 ATCO employees were now serving in the military. Willimantic Lodge 1440, Loyal Order of Moose flew a flag with

23 stars, 21 enlisted men and two officers. The officers, Lts. Charles Jenkins and William Keating, were represented with large stars situated in the center of the flag. Blue stars on the Moose flag represented living men, red stars represented wounded men, and black stars represented dead men. The Jordan Automobile Company had a flag with four stars. The honor of being the family to have most members in the forces went to the Morrisons of Park Street, who had four sons signed up for Uncle Sam. Mrs. Owen O'Neill erected a 30 foot flag pole from her home on the corner of Prospect and Church streets. It flew the Stars and Stripes and could be seen from almost every point in the city. Her husband, Dr. O'Neill was a medical officer serving at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia.

The abandoned Turner silk mill on the southwest corner of Bank and Valley Street was purchased by the newly formed Willimantic Development Company for \$24,000, and leased out to the Foster-Stewart Company of Brooklyn, New York, manufacturers of linen and cotton fabrics. The company had recently won massive contracts from the U.S. army and found that their Brooklyn factory was too small. They agreed to lease the Turner mill for ten years, and pay 7 per cent on the investment, as well as paying taxes, rent and insurance. If business continued to boom, the company promised to purchase the mill outright by 1919. In turn, Willimantic gained 75 jobs. Before the war, the Foster-Stewart Company had manufactured store awnings and hammocks.

## 1942

The Willimantic State Teachers' College Library Department sponsored an illustrated lecture by Kurt Weiss, a nationally known writer and illustrator of children's books, published by Doubleday and Doran. Weiss had traveled extensively around the world, and had lived for many years in China. He based his books upon his wide experiences. After the well attended lecture was over, Weiss made large chalk drawings of characters which appeared in his books.

President Roosevelt's war production chief, General W. S. Knudsen, paid a lightning visit to Willimantic to tour the new Pratt & Whitney aircraft plant on West Main Street. This was the 38th war plant visited by Knudsen and his staff on a nationwide tour to check upon the efficiency of material supplies. He was "most impressed" with the new Willimantic plant.

The Willimantic board of aldermen appointed a local housing authority to work with the Federal Housing Administration to build more housing in the city. The first meeting was held in the Nathan Hale Hotel, and then moved on to the local Chamber of Commerce offices. It was planned to build 369 family units through conversions, and 185 new family units to assist in the housing of the influx of workers employed at the town's new aircraft plant.

## 1967

The Willimantic based Electro-Motive Manufacturing Company announced that they

intended to open a new plant in Kingston, Jamaica. Executive vice-president and general manager, Joseph Flanzer, explained that the idea to open an overseas plant was his. He had looked at sites in Mexico, Japan and Formosa, but decided upon Jamaica because it was nearer to the U.S. mainland, and the inhabitants spoke English. Flanzer stressed that the Company were combating rapidly rising labor costs, as they had suffered a 40 per cent loss in business during the last year. He attributed the loss to competition from manufacturers using foreign plants or labor.

Flanzer went on to explain that the electronics components industry utilized one of the largest percentages of hand labor in present day manufacturing operations, and labor costs amounted to 45 per cent of each dollar's sale cost. Twenty major U.S. electronic manufacturers, including RCA, Admiral and Philco were operating plants in Formosa, where the hourly pay rate was 12.5 cents per hour -the U.S. minimum wage had just risen by 35 cents. Electro-Motive, as part of the Electronics Industry Association, had petitioned President Johnson to establish import restrictions on component imports, but he had refused the request, and said he would veto such legislation.

The Kingston plant would employ 100 people and produce capacitors. Flanzer squashed rumors that the Willimantic plant was to close, and that some workers would be transferred to Jamaica. The company intended to send only one maintenance man from their plant at Florence, S.C., to arrange for the installation of equipment. Jamaican laws, while not restricting foreign nationals, encouraged preferential treatment in employment for island residents.