

Have local news?
Call city editor George Chappell, 423-8466, ext. 340

Seth Hooker has a place in city's history



Tom Beardsley

Seth Chauncey Hooker was born Feb. 23, 1836, in Sturbridge, Mass. Unfortunately, his name has become synonymous with the world's oldest profession, but Hooker deserves his rightful place in Willimantic's history.

In 1887 he opened what was then considered to be the finest hotel east of the Connecticut River, on Main Street in Willimantic.

Hooker left school at age 8 and worked briefly in a cotton mill in Fiskdale, Mass. He left the textile industry and found work as a polisher in a gun factory, a trade which gave him employment in Meriden and Middletown.

Shortly after the Civil War he purchased a restaurant in Bridgeport, and opened the city's first pool hall. He subsequently developed a restaurant and pool hall in nearby Milford.

Hooker's apprenticeship in catering, pool halls and saloons provided him with the experience to enter the hotel trade. Hooker took over as manager

of the Bradley House Hotel in Southington, and he later built a hotel in Colchester.

In 1882, Hooker heard that the Brainard House Hotel is nearby Willimantic was looking for a new owner. He purchased it and totally transformed the fortunes of the old hotel. Built in the 1850s, it stood on the site now occupied by Hurley's Men's Shop.

The Brainard House Hotel had a sleazy reputation, and Hooker set about improving its image. He cleared out long-term residents, redecorated the rooms and organized a top-class menu which attracted numerous visitors passing through the city via the busy railroad depot.

But the ramshackle wooden structure was deteriorating rapidly, and Hooker decided to build a brand-new, top-class hotel in the city. In August 1885, he purchased a prime lot on the corner of Main and Bank streets. Work began during the spring of 1886, and the Hooker House Hotel was ready for its first guests by February 1887.

The hotel was designed with wide, central-access corridors. Each floor had bathrooms and the 100 "bedroom chambers" were steam-heated and lit by gas. A barber's shop and pool hall could be found in the basement.

Hooker was quick to take advantage of the arrival of the Willimantic Electric Light Co. in town and, in September 1888, the hotel was wired for electric lighting. A month earlier, the new building took advantage of Main Street's first sewer, an 8-inch-diameter pipe, to serve the growing business district.

The hotel became a family affair. Hooker's wife, Sarah (Lounsbury) Hooker was the "matron of general overseer" of all the sleeping apartments above the first floor. Jeanie Hooker was employed as head waitress. S.A. Hooker was appointed steward, and D.F.



Hotel Hooker, Willimantic, Conn.

This postcard of the Hotel Hooker was available at the local Woolworth's store at the turn of the century.

Hooker was the superintendent of the pool hall and sample room.

Other employees included a cook, pastry cook, porter, assistant porter, night watchman and an attendant for the hydraulic-powered elevator.

Hooker also provided a free horse and carriage to transport guests to and from the railroad station.

The Hooker House Hotel built up a reputation as one of the finest hostleries in New England. In 1898, when the directors of the Coats Cotton Co. arrived in Willimantic from Manchester, England, to view the Willimantic Linen Co. before they purchased it, they lodged in the Hooker House Hotel and took advantage of Seth Hooker's restaurant, or "table," considered to be the finest in eastern Connecticut. The hotel's dining room seated 250 people.

The old Brainard House Hotel was demolished in 1892 and Hooker had no serious competition in the region. He was the owner and proprietor of the hotel until 1909, a period of 22 years, one month and one day. He retired at the age of 73. Hooker was the founder of

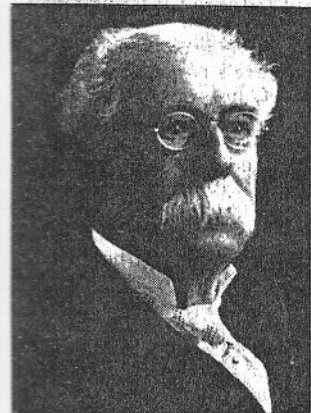
the Windham Venerable Club in 1904, a special organization where one had to be a Windham resident aged 70 or over to be a member. He organized a big dinner for members at the Hooker Hotel annually until 1912. In 1905, the combined ages of the Venerable Club's 50 members was 3,841 years.

"Uncle" Chauncey, as Hooker was fondly known, died on Jan. 30, 1923, a few weeks before his 87th birthday.

The Hotel Hooker went into a steady decline because of the arrival of the motor car. There was little opportunity for motorists to park when they lodged at the hotel. The building of the Nathan Hale Hotel in 1926 was another nail in the Hooker House's coffin, as was the decline of the city's railroad trade.

The controversies surrounding the Hotel Hooker in recent years tend to mask its important history. Are there any other hotels in eastern Connecticut as old as Willimantic's 110-year-old landmark?

Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, is a former scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum.



Seth C. Hooker

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.