



Fran Funk

This is what remains of Whiting Hayden's magnificent courtroom in the Hayden Block in downtown Willimantic. The 24-foot-high room has been halved to create office space below.

## Many walked through its doors

A three-part series on the historic 1879 Hayden Block ends with this look at the building's non-political occupants during its 117-year existence.



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Other than its contribution to political history, the Hayden Block has had an interesting commercial history, too. The courtroom was abandoned when the new town hall was built in 1896.

The first floor has housed a large number of diverse activities. From 1880 until 1888, the entire first floor was occupied by Willard Hayden who operated a news depot, book and stationary shop that also sold wallpaper, window shades, cornice poles, curtains and curtain fixtures. From 1890 until 1898, the west shop in the block — closest to the Savings Institute — was the Marble Front Clothing House, "dealers in clothing, hats, caps, trunks, bags and men's furnishings, Anderson T. Walker, proprietor."

Between 1894 and 1897, the building's east shop was home to the offices of the Willimantic Electric Light Company and the Citizen's Gas Light Company.

In 1900, the Hawkins & Barstow Clothing Company took over Walker's space. In 1902, Mary Rollinson opened a confectionery and fruit shop and an ice cream saloon in the building. In the same year, the Knights of Columbus took over the vacant courtroom and made it their headquarters.

In 1904, A.P. Benner, a dealer in monumental marble and granite, opened a store in the building.

In 1904 and 1905, Willimantic's Ancient Order of Hibernians met in the courtroom. The Irish society disbanded in 1906, and the courtroom lay unused for several years, but new tenants arrived in 1914, when the Willimantic Board of Trade & Businessmen's Association held its meetings there. The association became the Willimantic Chamber of Commerce in 1917, and held meetings in the Hayden Block until 1943.

In 1906, James F. Clune opened a piano and organ showroom, and in 1909 he rented the courtroom and transformed it into a movie house called the Elite Nickel Moving Picture

Theater. This survived for two years. In 1910, the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co. opened a grocery store in the building, trading from there until 1917, when it was taken over by the Grand Union Tea Co., which stayed until 1926.

From 1925 until the outbreak of World War II, the building had numerous tenants, such as the Tanney Corp. variety store (1925-1927), Woolworth's 5, 10 and 25 cent store (1927-1933), and the H.L. Green Co. department store (1934-1940).

The building's offices were used by a number of President Roosevelt's New Deal agencies.

From 1944 until 1947, Santo Mattasa operated a news dealership. Nancy Lee Starkel's Dancing School taught Willimantic's youth to skip the light fantastic, and, during the same period, Irené M. Tantro was proprietor of Irené's Ladies Apparel Shop. In 1954, Louis Ganzler's shoe shop, the Bootery, was taken over by Franklin Prague's Sundial Shoes, which traded well into the 1970s. In 1942, the Star Furniture Co. opened in the Hayden Block and by 1948, it operated two of the ground floor shops.

In 1950, Star Furniture was taken over by the Surplus Center. Proprietor Sam Gordon remembers the courtroom on the second floor. It had ceilings 24 feet high, and attractive woodwork. The furniture and fixings had been torn out, and Sam used the old courtroom as a toy store. In later years, the ceiling was lowered and more offices were installed. In 1948, Edward T. Rocheville opened a popular women's clothing store, which traded until 1957. And, in 1957, Cecile Deschene opened a snack bar, the only time the building housed a restaurant of any description. It closed in 1969, and became Don & Ron's Snack Bar.

The offices in the building were in much demand during the 1950s. Renters were Dr. Ernest A. Bolt, R.J. Waldron, an architect, Retail Insurance Credit Insurance Investigators, and Valuation Associates Incorporated Appraisals. In 1970, Richard Rita operated an employment agency; the local office of planned parenthood arrived in 1972.

Gordon remained at the Surplus Center until 1987.

Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, was the scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum from 1990 to 1995.

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