

How Hugh Murray made his fortune in Willimantic



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Recently, we looked at the history of Main Street's Haylen Block, and the life of its Yankee builder, Whiting Haylen. The vast building, located at the west corner of the junction of Main and Church streets, was known by generations as "the Murray Block," named for Hugh Clark Murray, a Scotsman who's name is synonymous with the late 19th century growth and prosperity of Willimantic.

Hugh Clark Murray was born on March 1, 1849, in Patrine, Ayrshire. He left school at age 12 and found work in a dry goods store in his hometown. He moved onto Glasgow, emigrating to the U.S. in 1871. Murray arrived in Boston and was hired by the Logg, Brown and Taylor store

as a clerk. From Boston he moved onto Providence and clerked for the store of Collender, Macauslan and Troup.

Thirty-year-old Murray arrived in Willimantic and opened the "Boston Store" in 1879. On completion of the Loomer Opera House in 1880, he moved into one of the stores located on the ground floor of that building, and remained there until 1893.

The financial panic of 1892 and 1893 saw the majority of Murray's local competitors go out of business. Murray purchased their bankrupt stores, paying the owners much needed cash. He also built up a reputation as a financier, loaning money out to local firms and individuals hit by that severe recession.

This rapid expansion required larger premises and he built the imposing three-story building on the corner of Church and Main on the site of the old Brainard House Hotel. He opened his new Boston store for business on March 17, 1894. It was the biggest dry



HUGH MURRAY

goods store east of the Connecticut river and its reputation for high quality goods soon grew. It was also the first building in Willimantic with its own elevator.

In 1909, Murray wound down his interests and formed the H. C. Murray company which consisted of Murray as president, James P. Bath as treasurer and J.B. Riordan and Robert M. Bath as directors.

Hugh Clark Murray was

closely involved in all schemes to improve his adopted city, investing heavily in Willimantic's leading industries. He served as president of the Willimantic Savings Institute (1906-1915), where he built up deposits from \$350,000 to \$750,000, and was a director of the Windham National Bank.

Murray was founder and president of the Windham Silk Co. (1901), and a director and bondholder of the Quidnick-Windham Co. (1911). He was a director of the Vanderman Manufacturing (1897), a director of the Rockville-Willimantic Lighting Co., and he held wide stockholdings in the SCS Box Co., the Rossie Velvet Co. and the Willimantic Industrial Association. Allen B. Lincoln noted in his "History of Windham County" (1920) that whatever Murray became involved in, prospered.

Murray was highly superstitious, believing that March was his lucky month. He was born, started his business and completed the construction of the Murray Block in March. He was also instrumental in get-

ting the footbridge built in 1906. And why not? When people stepped off the new bridge, they were faced with the Murray Block. He was also a founder of the Willimantic Baseball Association, which launched the Willimantic Colts, a professional baseball nine which competed from 1901 until 1907 in a stadium located on Memorial Park.

From earning two shillings a week in Ayshire as a 12-year-old clerk, Murray became one of the wealthiest men in the history of Willimantic. His grand mausoleum in the Willimantic cemetery would support that thesis. Murray was a Republican, but he never became directly involved in city or state politics. He spent two years in Florida in an attempt to recover from ill health, but he passed away on the morning of June 17, 1919, in his Turner Street home.

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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