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Samuel Experience Amidon

The Amidon mansion on Prospect Street in Willimantic, pictured in 1894, has hardly changed in appearance over a century.



One of the most striking houses in the hill district of Willimantic stands at the southeast junction of Prospect Street and High Street. It's built in a classic Victorian style called Second Empire, which was highly popular in the United States in the period 1860 - 1880. Today, this house is better known as Newman Hall, the base of the Diocese of Norwich's directorate of college campus ministries,

administered by Father Larry LaPlante and his assistant Johanna Reilly.

America's Second Empire houses imitated the latest in French architecture. Their stylistic mansard roofs were named for the 17th century French architect, Francois Mansart. The style became very popular in France during the reign of Napoleon III (1852-70), France's "Second Empire." The box shaped roof provided extra space, and many older American houses were remodeled with mansard roofs. By the time the Newman Hall house was built in 1888, the style was on the wane, but this did not bother the builder of the house, Samuel Experience Amidon, one of Willimantic's wealthiest merchants during the late 19th century. S. E. Amidon was born in Sturbridge, Massachusetts on July 22, 1844. He was raised on a farm in Ashford, Connecticut. At the end of the Civil War, he took advantage of business opportunities in the Southern states. He arrived in Kentucky at the end of 1865 when the state was still under martial law. He worked for a newspaper distributor in Columbus, Kentucky, and then made a small fortune selling agricultural implements to sharecroppers. Amidon was a classic example of a northern "carpetbagger." However, he was broke by 1869, thanks to some "unwise investments." Amidon came back north and opened a general grocery store in Providence, Rhode Island. In 1872, he purchased a grocery store in the village of Quinebaug in Thompson, Connecticut. Amidon arrived in Willimantic in 1884 when he took over the grocery store of George Harrington, which had served as the Windham Company store, located in the building now occupied by the Schiller Sewing Circle Company -- the oldest surviving building on Main Street, having been built in 1825.

Amidon went into partnership with Willimantic grocer Charles Dimmick. Five years later, in 1889, Amidon and Dimmick purchased another large grocery store. The transaction was reported in the Chronicle on May 1, 1889: "The transfer of a large mercantile business has just taken place in the sale by Julius Pinney of his grocery store and meat market in the Willimantic Linen Company's store to S. E. Amidon and Charles

H. Dimmick, proprietors of the Windham Company's store. Amidon referred to this as his "downtown store," and the Schiller building of today was then his "uptown store."

In 1890, a local judge, John Manning Hall built a large brick block on the corner of Main and Walnut, containing apartments and a large store. The "Hall Block" was ready for occupation in January, 1891. The apartments were let, and Samuel Amidon and Charles Dimmick consolidated their growing groceries business. They abandoned the two old company stores, and relocated in the new store in the Hall Block at 877 Main Street. The Victorian Lady restaurant now occupies this store.

An account of the opening of Amidon's new store in the Willimantic Journal of February 5, 1892, noted that Willimantic's shoppers no longer had to put up with "dingy rooms saturated with the stuffy odor of salt cod and cheap molasses." Now they could shop in the finest grocery store in Connecticut. "The establishment is beautifully lighted and a glance at the line of shelf goods show that it is not exceeded in variety by any house in the state." The writer was also impressed with the store's vast storage space, "...in the rear and cellar," and its, "large and handsome refrigerator for butter."

In 1888 Willimantic's most well known grocer built his dream home at 290 Prospect Street. He lived there until his death in 1902. His widow, Amy Amidon, sold the house to S. Chauncey Hooker, the proprietor of Willimantic's most well known hotel. From this address, Hooker manufactured and sold his "Cockroach and Water Bug Exterminator." In 1920, the house was sold to Frank Alpaugh, with the agreement that Hookers could also live there for the rest of the lives. In 1952, the house became the property of the Willimantic Trust Company who sold it in the same year to Joseph and Sally Ferrigno. The Ferrigno family sold Amidon's fine house to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Norwich in 1982, and the following year Father LaPlante opened Newman Hall, named for a rector of Trinity College, Dublin, John Henry Newman.