

March 14, 1998

## Remembrances of a Main Street Hotel

**The Turner Block is pictured in 1894. Note the construction work being conducted on the west corner of Main and Church. This is the Murray Block being built -- better known today as the vacant Hurley's store building.**



Many will recall that a fine large building, once a grand hotel, stood on the Liberty Bank site on Main Street. It was originally known as the Commercial Hotel, but was better known as the Windham Hotel or the Turner Block. Albert S. Turner (1842-1900) built it in 1877 to take advantage of Willimantic's growing rail traffic. Turner Street in Willimantic was named for Albert Turner's father, Thomas Turner. The block housed a large number of stores, and its rear portion still stands on Church Street. Albert Turner had operated

a highly successful dry goods store in the "Sodom" area of town in the years following the Civil War. His wealth and prestige was reflected in the fine house he built at 35 Maple Avenue in 1873.

Albert Turner was proprietor of the Commercial Hotel from 1877 until 1890, hiring various managers to run the operation. In 1891, he sold it to George Challenger, who renamed it the "Windham." The following year, Turner repurchased the property and installed his son, Fred Turner, as proprietor and manager of the major store in the block, Apothecaries Hall. This early drug store or chemist was the major dispenser of medicines in Willimantic for many years. In 1893, Apothecaries Hall was moved from the front of the Windham Hotel, and relocated in the same block at 23 Church Street. Turner's store was advertised as selling "drugs, medicines, paints, oils, etc." Apothecaries Hall closed in 1900, and Fred Turner took up photography, producing a number of well known postcard views of the Willimantic region. He died in 1943, aged 73. George H. Prouty managed the Windham Hotel from 1893 until 1898. During this period it was once referred to in the *Willimantic Journal* as the "Hotel De Cockroach." The hotel closed in 1899, and was reopened in 1900 by C. Clinton Helmold & John T. Philbin, as the Plaza Hotel. It appears as a backdrop in many photographs to President Theodore Roosevelt, who made a speech outside the hotel on August 23, 1902. Two years later, Stymest S. Irvin purchased the Plaza, and it became known as the Irvin House Hotel until 1912. The next time you visit the Liberty Bank, check out the panoramic shot of Willimantic's Main Street taken in the early 20th century. The Irvin House Hotel can be clearly seen, dating that photograph sometime between 1904 and 1912. The appearance of the automobiles would suggest it is dated closer to 1912. In 1913 the Irvin House became the Windham Lodging House, operated by Louis Feiner. This survived until 1928. From 1928 onwards, the building was used as offices, shops and apartments until it burnt down in 1968.