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Ancient Saloon Embodied 'Sodom'

A July 4, 1912 picture of the Cardinal Saloon in Sodom..



Last week we looked at the life of a prominent Willimantic French-Canadian, Clement Hurteau. The Cardinals are also a leading, well-known local French-Canadian family. Paul Cardinal today operates Cardinal Appliances in town, and the Cardinal Funeral Home operated in Willimantic for many years.

A Cardinal probably forgotten by many is Sylvanie Cardinal (1869-1933). His legacy to Willimantic was an impressive

commercial building that once stood at the heart of "Sodom" on the northeast junction of Main Street and Ash Street. But before we look at that building, let's take a look at the origins of the district of Willimantic long known as "Sodom." There are several versions of how this name came about. Because it has long been identified with its early French-Canadian settlement, many believe that it derives from a French corruption or pronunciation of an English term. For example, the most popular theory in circulation states that "Sodom" derives from the "franglais" term "cinque dam" or fifth dam on the Willimantic River. Say that quickly with a French accent, and maybe it would sound like "Sodom." Many other interpretations of Willimantic's "Sodom" have evolved over the years to detract children's fascination with a term deriving from the wicked Biblical city in Palestine. The term was actually coined in the early 19th century by pious Windham Center villagers who were shocked by the energetic behavior of the workers in nearby Willimantic's first cotton mill, built in 1822 by a Rhode Islander named Perez Richmond. The mill was located adjacent to the Willimantic river in the western section of what is today Recreation Park. A small community grew next to Richmond's mill, and was called Richmond Town. It soon boasted saloons and brothels. All this was too much for the moral residents of nearby Windham village, who referred to Richmond Town as worse than Sodom and Gomorrah. The area became known as Wellesville in the 1840s, and eventually it grew into the eastern section of Willimantic -- but the name "Sodom" stuck when French Canadian and Irish families settled in the area after the Civil War.

The "Sodom" area constituted the entry into Willimantic from the east, and as the city expanded in the late 19th century, this crossroads section of Sodom became a vibrant commercial area. And it was here at the turn of the century that Joseph Caillouette built a house, saloon and package store. Joseph Delude joined him in partnership. A French-Canadian carpenter named Sylvanie Cardinal took over the Caillouette and Delude saloon in 1909. The Cardinal Saloon became a center of French-Canadian social life for more than a decade. It became so well known, that this section of "Sodom" was named

"Cardinal Square."

A highly popular lager beer among mill workers, in those pre-Prohibition days, was brewed in Providence, Rhode Island. The "Eagle Red Star Ale Pilsener Beer" sign was prominently displayed at the entrance to the Cardinal saloon. Another sign proudly announced "Eagle Ale and Lager, Providence." Sylvanie Cardinal proudly advertised his business as a fine purveyor of wholesale and retail wines, liquors and cigars.

The 1919 Volstead Act introduced Prohibition, and the Cardinal Saloon at 3 Ash Street was forced to close its doors. The Cardinals continued to live there for many years. In 1934 Max Rabinowitz purchased the old saloon building, and in 1938 he opened the Max Rabinowitz & Sons Grocery Store. Perhaps the Gods were not pleased that the historic saloon had become a grocery store, because it was badly flooded by the 1938 hurricane. Indeed, most of "Sodom" was underwater after the storm had hit. The Rabinowitz Grocery Store continued to operate out of the building until 1965. After the departure of various other occupants, including Cumberland Farms, the vacant building was torn down in 1992. Recently, it was suggested that the vacant lot upon which it stood should be turned into a park. How about building another saloon there instead!