

November 28, 1998

Hooker House Hotel: Then and Now

Then - Hooker House Hotel 1894.



The lens of H. W. Rich's camera caught the Hooker House Hotel in its Victorian pomp in this 1894 photograph. A chamber maid looks out from the balcony, and a large group of well dressed, bowler-hatted men look out from the front porch at the cameraman. It is perhaps no coincidence that a bar and billiard room was located directly behind them. Note the 1926 Nathan Hale Hotel in the modern view, built because the Hooker's 100 rooms could not cater for the city's growing number of visitors.

However, changing social conditions led to the decline of the newer building. The days of the small town hotel have long gone, replaced by the out-of-town motels built across the country during the 1950s.

The builder of this fine hotel, Seth Chauncey Hooker (1836-1923), was born in Sturbridge, Massachusetts. He arrived in Willimantic from Colchester, Connecticut in 1882 to take a five year lease on the Brainard Hotel (demolished 1892) which stood on the site occupied today by Hurleys. He opened his new hotel on Main Street, Willimantic in February, 1887. The Hooker House Hotel built up a reputation as one of the finest hotels in Connecticut. It boasted gas lighting, electric bells, speaking tubes, and hot water in each room. Guests also had access to a bathroom on each floor, and an hydraulic elevator. Its restaurant could cater for 250 people. The building behind the hotel was an extensive livery stable, ideally located as travelers were constantly transported to and from the railroad station.

Now -- Hooker House Hotel.

On closer inspection, a comparison of the two photographs reveals that the street level has been slightly raised. A raised walkway can be seen in the older picture, which travels down the length of the Bank Street side of the building, towards a rear entrance. Below this walkway, it appears that there is some commercial activity. Note the



figure peering from below the level of the sidewalk. He looks like, and probably is, a barber. The small, wood-framed building to the left of the Hooker, demolished in 1925, contained a jewelers store, a saloon and a millinery shop.

The Hooker House is now the Seth C. Hooker Hotel, but it retains the name of the original proprietor. The fine raised entrance porch and upper balcony have gone, replaced by a wrap-round brick addition. The glass blocks placed above the modern front entrance would suggest a 1940s modification. However, the spirit of the original building has been recaptured by the addition of a new, fenced open balcony, complete with tables and umbrellas. At the time of writing, plans have been discussed to turn the old Hooker House Hotel and the neighboring Nathan Hale Hotel into artists' residences and workshops.