

October 24, 1998

## Hurleys Then and Now

**Then -- the Hurley block in 1894.**



In 1894, a volume of photographic views, entitled "The Thread City" was published by H. W. Rich to celebrate the recent granting of Willimantic's city charter. It is a remarkable historical document which portrays the young city a century ago. This was the time when Willimantic was in its pomp, in its prime, a prosperous industrial city. I recently went around the town and took photographs at Mr. Rich's 1894 locations, to compare the Willimantic of 1894 to the

Willimantic about to enter the 21st century. As you'll see over the forthcoming weeks, the results are sometimes surprising. The changes are dramatic. But on other occasions it seems as if time has stood still.

We'll start the tour of 1894 Willimantic at Main and Church. Hurley's Men's shop is located in one of Willimantic's landmark buildings, the Murray Building. It was erected in 1894 by Scotsman Hugh Clark Murray and housed the Boston Dry Goods Store. It stands on the site of the old Brainard Hotel, built before the Civil War. The old ramshackle, wooden hotel was built to cater for the increasing number of railroad patrons who came to Willimantic after the railroad had opened up through the borough in 1849. In the 19th century, this area, across from Railroad Street, and on the corner of Main and Church, grew to be the commercial heart of the city. Church street was crowded with businesses, and some thought it would soon challenge Main street's commercial dominance. This was truly downtown Willimantic.

Compare the photographs. The Murray building is brand new in 1894. The telegraph poles have gone to be replaced by decorative trees. On Church Street, the old "Daily Willimantic Chronicle" building stands between the Methodist Church and Murrays. Both buildings have gone, replaced by a parking lot. Also note the height of the Boston store's

**Now -- the Hurley block today.**



windows in the older photograph. This was the Victorian department store style, one of high, extravagant, colorful window displays. Today, the facade has been lowered by several feet. Also note the building to the left of the Murray store. Gone is the fine mansard roof and dormer window. And of course, there was no motorized transport a century ago, a buggy and two horses await their owner, on a Main street that has yet to be paved.