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14 ALBUM, the Chronicle, Saturday, September 11, 1999

## History

# Fire department determines cause of Jordan block blaze



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### Part Two

At one point during the fire it looked as if the Jordan Block's western wall would collapse as it began to bulge from the heat, but it held and stopped the fire from spreading. Much of the Jordan brothers' stock was heavy and as the floors burnt, the stock crashed to the floors below.

The cloud of sparks and flames illuminated the sky and could be seen for many miles. The fire was under control by 6:20 a.m. The majority of firemen were recalled, but several remained to quench small fires that constantly sparked up.

The Bijou cinema was managed by Frank Cantilena. He found that the movie projector, his "moving picture machine," was saved because it was enclosed in a fireproof booth made of asbestos. But all the films, which were not his property, were destroyed. He was insured for \$1,500 by the Philip S. Hills Agency in town, but he thought his loss was closer to \$2,000.

At the height of the fire, the firemen discovered they could

not get access to the rear of the building because of a train of New Haven railroad freight cars located on a siding at the rear of the Jordan Block. The firemen contacted the yard foreman and a switching engine was used to remove the freight cars. The fire had also damaged the telegraph lines of the Western Union, that ran on poles along the railroad line at the rear of the building.

Despite the close attention of the city police, and the fire police, it soon became apparent that a great deal of merchandise from the building had been looted. A roll of tailor's cloth was found further up Main Street, laying in the road. Someone commented that they had seen it fall from a wagon.

Many amateur photographers came the following morning to take pictures of the smoldering ruins, and crowds of American Thread workers assembled as they walked to work. There was also a movie crew in town, shooting scenes for a film called "A Twentieth Century Elopement," and they filmed the building's ruins. On closer inspection, it was realized that this Willimantic landmark would have to be torn down. The interior was a charred mass of timbers and bent and twisted iron and steelwork. Despite this tremendous setback, the Jordan brothers announced their intention to rebuild.



Willimantic Fire Department

The Jordan Block is shown shortly after the fire had been brought under control on the morning of Nov. 23, 1916.

The Willimantic Trust Co. engaged Doyle and Murphy to remove their safe and bank counter, and to set them up in George Gifford's store on Church street — but the Jordan brothers were unfortunate as their vast indexing system, and detailed inventories were totally destroyed. The Jordans had one of the best equipped hardware stores in the east, and sold goods all over the country. They hired a vacant store in the Chronicle building at 10 Church St. and stocked it with nails, roofing paper and tiles to continue in business.

It was believed that a faulty

furnace in the basement of the Jordan Block had been responsible for the conflagration, but an inspection by Fire Chief Foley revealed that the fire had begun next to the piano in the Bijou cinema, worked up to the roof, and entered the Jordan building through its side windows.

At 11 a.m. on Nov. 25, the west wall of the Jordan block collapsed. It was a minor miracle that no one was killed. Five minutes later the east wall collapsed and crashed into the ruins of the old wooden movie theater. A workman for Doyle

and Murphy, August Hokeson, was trapped as he removed fixtures and fittings from the Willimantic Trust Co.'s rooms. He was badly cut and bruised. Six workmen for Foley and Henry were also injured as they removed the Trust Co.'s safe to transfer it to the Trust's new quarters. It was believed that the vibrations caused by these workmen, vibrations from passing trams and a strong wind, brought the walls down. Three special trams carrying Harvard fans to the varsity football game at Yale had passed close by the Jordan Block in quick succession.

The police and fire chief at once closed off the road. Discussions took place at the town hall as what to do about the remaining rear wall, which was swaying in the wind. Mayor Danny Dunn agreed that it would be wise to dynamite the rear wall to collapse it. Samuel Pocar, who was in charge of the city's new sewer construction, was handed the job. He arranged for 12 holes to wall to be drilled in the wall to receive the sticks of dynamite. About 50 pounds of dynamite was used. A large crowd assembled when the news spread around town that the wall was to be blasted, and the police had difficulty in keeping onlookers away. It was a recipe for disaster.

Continued next week.