

History

The days when the Alert Hose Co. put out fires

(Part Two of Two)

In March 1905, the city of Willimantic experienced one of its most serious fires when two downtown business blocks, the European House and Harrington buildings, were virtually burned to the ground.

A hallway was located between the City Drug Store and P. F. Sheehan's news store, in the building, which doubled as the ladies entrance to the European House Hotel. The flames spread rapidly down this hall.

The Alert Hose Co. focused on the flames from Main, and the Montgomery Hose Co. focused upon the Railroad Street side of the fire. Fire Chief Donahue climbed onto the roof of the hotel to direct operations, but fell some 15 feet to the ground, and was unconscious for 20 minutes, but he gained his senses and continued with his duties.

Fifteen minutes after their arrival the fire companies had ten streams of water aimed at the massive fire.

The members of the Excelsior Hook and Ladder team stripped their truck of its ladders, hooks, lanterns and tin-cutters and began tearing up the roof to get at sections of burning timbers. It soon became apparent that the European House was doomed, so the fireman began to focus on the neighboring Harrington building, which was occupied by the J. F. Carr Co.

The roofs of both buildings were covered with tin, and it became



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almost impossible for the fireman to withstand the heat of the hot metal as they attempted to cut through it. The roof of the hotel eventually collapsed, causing the floor of the second story to give way, and the debris fell into Mathieu's shoe store and Sheehan's news store.

The fire was brought under control by 7:30 a.m., but the flames were not entirely extinguished until 11 a.m. During the fire, J.F. Carr passed sandwiches and coffee among the firemen, and after the fire gave each foreman a box of cigars for their hard work. Those affected by the fire were the building's owner, Denis Shea, the hotel proprietor, John McQuillan, Pierre Mathieu, the shoe store owner, P. F. Sheehan, the newsdealer, Danny Dunn, owner of the news and tobacco shop, located on railroad Street, John McDonough, the hotel's saloon proprietor and Edward Gavigan, the proprietor of the hotel's barber shop.

There were 12 boarders at the hotel, and all escaped unharmed and most of them lost all their possessions.

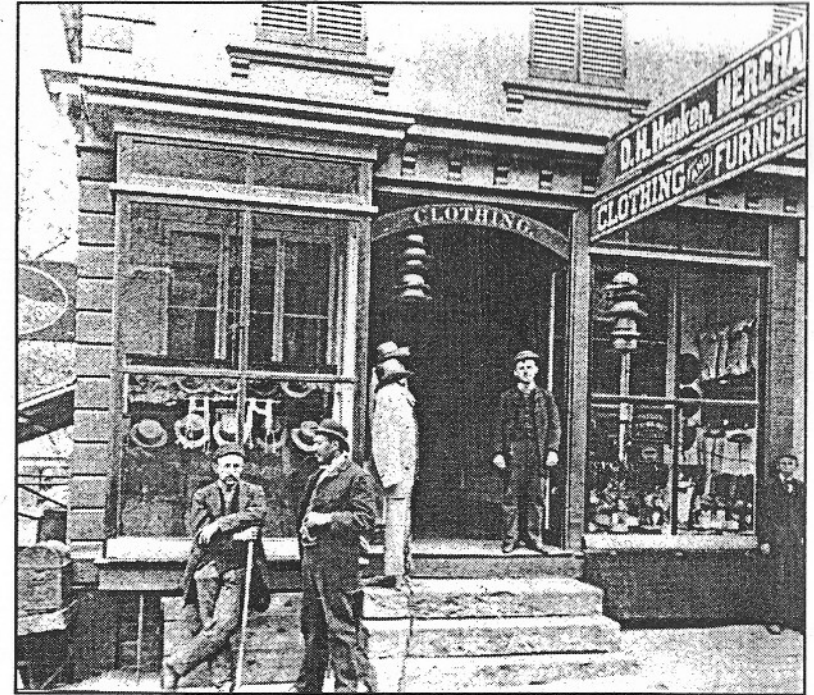
Shea owned the entire building, and the City Drug Store. He had \$8,000 insurance on the structure, which was valued at \$12,000. He lost a \$1,000 of goods in the fire. McQuillan's losses were greater. The only things he could recover from the gutted building were some iron bedsteads.

McDonough rescued the saloon's cash register, and small amounts of liquor. Shoe dealer Mathieu lost \$2,000 worth of stock, and newsdealer Sheehan lost everything. John Dondero, who ran a fruit stand on the Railroad Street side of the building, lost all his stock, worth \$400.

Barber Gavigan was the luckiest. He was able to rescue his two barber chairs and all his tools. Danny Dunn's stock of periodicals, fine cigars and tobacco was badly damaged by water, but he had \$2,000 worth of insurance.

Willimantic's ex-mayor George Harrington owned the building adjacent to the gutted hotel. It contained a shoe store ran by the J. B. Paulhus Co., the offices of Dr. T.R. Parker, and furnished rooms occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Searles. Harrington had \$6,000 worth of insurance. Dr. Parker lost everything, papers and instruments, as did Mr. and Mrs. Searles. Paulhus considered himself lucky, because his stock of shoes for the spring season had not yet arrived.

It was discovered that the fire had begun in the hotel's kitchen, but there were suspicions that



The D.L. Henken Clothing Store and the Ladies Dining Saloon entrance are featured in this 1890 photograph of the front of Willimantic's historic European House Hotel.

the fire had been set, because the firemen reported at least six separate fires throughout the building.

The fire insurance claims were met, and arson was never proved. The European House was not demolished, despite extensive damage.

It was extensively remodeled over the years, but the building that evolved on that site did not survive, and was demolished in

1974 during redevelopment.

Log on to www.threadcity.com and read more historic articles, and view rare historic photographs of the city and region.

If you enjoy viewing old photographs of the town, then come to the Willimantic Library Thursday at 7p.m., and on Feb. 15 to view a series of slide shows entitled "The Windhams and Willimantic, 1870-1970."

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