

HOTEL WINCHESTER

By Ellen Knight¹

Downtown Winchester has not had a hotel since the 1940s, yet, along with some boarding houses, the town did once have a hotel, long ago demolished and generally forgotten. Were those walls still standing and able to echo the events they witnessed, quite a variety of scenes would be revealed, including a few dark and unsavory ones.



Before construction of the railroad overpass, the view north from outside the Brown and Stanton Block, 559 Main St., (on the right side of the photo) was unobstructed and included the Richardson Block, later known as the Hotel Winchester.

Originally known as the Richardson Block in honor of its builder, Sumner Richardson who built it in 1872, the building was not built as a hotel. It was, like the earlier Lyceum Building and the later brick edifices still standing on Main and Mt. Vernon streets, a building for mixed use. Its first claim to fame was that it was built of brick.

Legend has it that the bricks were salvaged from the great Boston Fire. According to a newspaper story printed in 1941, "old timers contended that some of them were picked up and brought to Winchester by the late Jim Mulligan who then drove a spike team for Palmer's Mahogany Mill on upper Main Street. On his trips hauling lumber past the Somerville Brick Yards, Mr. Mulligan was accustomed to pick up the bricks which fell from teams leaving the yard and were left for anyone who wanted them. For a long time Mr. Mulligan brought the bricks to Winchester and as he passed his home on upper Main Street, threw them into his yard. When Richardson's Block was built he sold the lot to the builder and they were used in the building."²

On the other hand, in 1944, Patrick Croughwell related the story told him by his father that Boston's Mayor William Gaston gave Richardson the bricks to help clean up after the great fire of 1872. After being hauled out in Samuel Richardson's ox cart, Richardson hired a group of boys living on Swanton Street to clean off the mortar, for which they earned 50 cents for a day's labor.³

Richardson's Block was the tallest in town, having three floors and a large hall at the top, which was the site of dancing parties and meetings of social and fraternal organizations. According to the 1941 *Winchester Star* story, the Hall was known as the Red Men's Hall, but when the Adelpia Club held its meetings there in the 1870s it was called Adelpian Hall.

The Reform Club (dedicated to the reclamation of alcoholics) maintained rooms in the building in 1876, and the Town Library was located on the second floor of the building for a time commencing in 1874. The Fortnightly (women's club) at one time conducted a cooking school in the building.

"Old timers aver that the old Knights of Labor, who were active in the leather industry in Winchester years ago, made their headquarters in the building, their leader at the time being Jim Mooney, a man who ran a tavern of sorts in the block and who was known far and wide for his tall silk hat and wooden leg."⁴

In the 1880s, Joseph H. Tyler purchased the property, hence known as the Tyler Block. On his death in 1892, his daughter Gertrude inherited it. No longer living in town, she put it in trust with the New England Trust Co.

Apparently, it was then that the building became a hotel. According to an 1894 map, the building had a lunchroom and bakery on first floor with a bake house and oven attached to the back. The 1895 Blue Book states it had, "first-class rooms with steam heat" where "meals can be had at all times."



The Hotel Winchester is visible behind the trolley, which is passing the White Building at the corner of Main and Church streets.

The first known appearance of the name Hotel Winchester was in 1897, in the local business directories. At some point, it gained the nickname, Cannonball Hotel.

When Gertrude Tyler Morton died in 1903, ownership of the Tyler Block passed to her mother. Though Mrs. Tyler owned the building, the hotel business had several proprietors. By 1905, after

a few other managers came and went in quick succession, Joseph H. Murray and his wife took over running the hotel.

For some years the hotel did a good business, having a restaurant on the first floor and hotel rooms above. It had both short- and long-term lodgers. In those days, under the terms of certain hotel licenses, operators could not refuse accommodations to those who demanded them. The Murrays' son William once said that "as many as 30 transients had 'demanded' accommodations at the hotel on special occasions and had been put up on beds in the hall."

At some point, the old hall was demolished and another floor added for increased living quarters. For a time the hotel maintained a stable at the rear of the building in which six horses were kept regularly and horses of transients were put up.

In 1914, Murray met an untimely and tragic end on Christmas Eve when, surrounded by holiday shoppers, he slipped and fell at a Boston intersection in front of an electric trolley car and was fatally injured. His widow, Caroline, continued to manage the hotel for about another decade.

Upon Mrs. Tyler's death in 1920, the building was owned privately for a time, but later was taken over by banking interests, from which, in 1924, James Cullen purchased it and leased it for retail use and apartments. Cullen sold it in 1940, when plans for a supermarket were formed. In 1941, it was razed for the building of a First National supermarket.

REPUTATION

In the second volume of *The History of Winchester*, one reads that, despite the building's original respectability, in its later years the hotel "became something of an embarrassment to Winchester's genteel reputation" being used primarily by a few traveling salesmen, transients, and semi-permanent boarders and gaining "a somewhat seedy reputation."⁵

One story told in 1941, when the building was doomed, dates to about 1912 when the hotel was under Joseph Murray's management. "One night a woman with a young child came to the Hotel to spend the night. Her appearance and that of the child aroused Mr. Murray's suspicions and he called a Boston detective agency who had men at the Hotel in 20 minutes and the woman in custody. The child had been kidnapped from a prominent New York family and a good sized reward came to Mr. Murray for his part in the affair. The details were reportedly carefully kept from the papers because of the prominence of the family involved." The details are, in fact, still unknown.

The story of a brutal crime met the eyes of readers on the front page of *The Winchester Star* of July 16, 1926. A girl's body found dismembered and packed in two cardboard boxes and a burlap bag near the wall of a cemetery in Mattapan was identified as that of a girl born in the Hotel Winchester.

Edith Louise Green, born in 1907, was reportedly known to many in town, though she had lately moved. When very young, she became a state ward and was reportedly employed in the home of a family on Cambridge Street, perhaps as late as the year before her death. She took a job in Boston, moved there, became engaged – twice – and reportedly found herself in trouble. After her body was discovered, it was reported that the medical examiner was satisfied that the girl had died as the result of an illegal operation, and a doctor was, indeed, later arrested.

In 1908, a man named Edmund Guttman was boarding at the Hotel Winchester while employed in the extermination of gypsy moths in the Middlesex Fells. Murray and his wife told the press that Guttman was inclined to say little, kept himself aloof from the other boarders, and was sober and industrious. “They say the man never appeared to have any interest except in his work.”⁶

How wrong they were. In fact, Guttman, a Latvian, allegedly fled his homeland during the 1905-1907 revolution in the Russian province, where he was rumored to have killed a man. And he had not left his violent past behind. On July 22, 1908, the *Boston Globe* carried the first report of a sensational armed robbery in a Boston saloon, involving a running gun battle with police, the wild shooting of officers and civilians during the flight through Jamaica Plain (leaving two killed and about 20 wounded), a massive police cordon around the Forest Hills Cemetery, and the eventual discovery in the cemetery of one of the robbers, shot dead. It was Guttman.

Though such stories should not reflect ill upon the hotel, it so happens that the few mentions of the hotel which may be found do involve the police and sensational events.

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug. 2, 2016. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² *The Winchester Star*, March 28, 1941.

³ *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 28, 1944.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, March 28, 1941

⁵ Bruce Winchester Stone, *History of Winchester*, Vol. II, p. 11

⁶ *Boston Globe*, July 25, 1908.