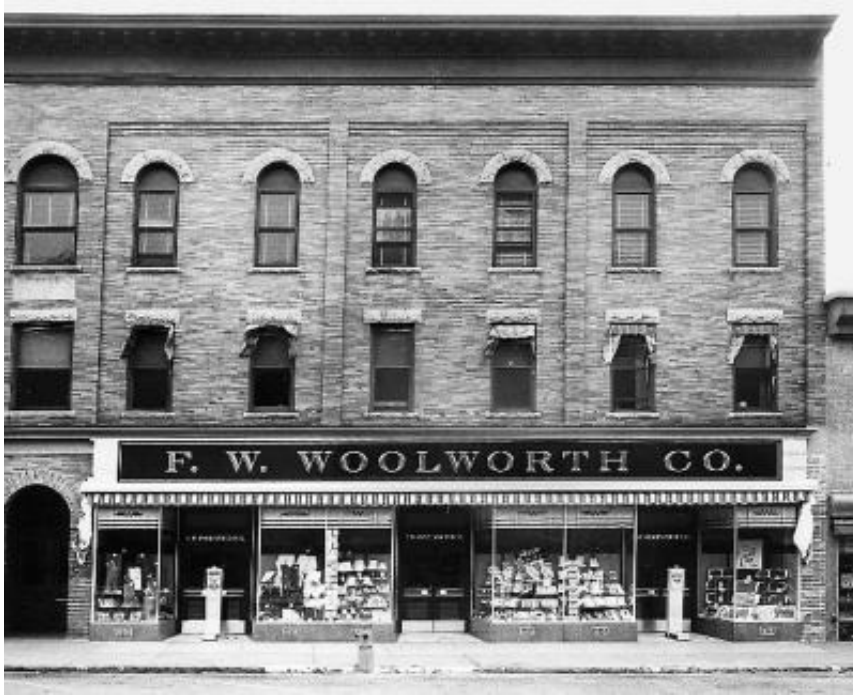


WOOLWORTH'S GAVE BLOCK ICONIC STATUS, LONGEVITY

By Phil Demers, North Adams Transcript North Adams Transcript

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Editor's note: In this second of a three-part series on the history of the Mausert Block in Adams, the Transcript examines the building's mainstays during the 20th century, bringing readers up to 1980. On Saturday, March 16, the final installment in the series will appear in print and online at www.thetranscript.com.

ADAMS -- In owner Walter J. Donovan and chain variety store F.W. Woolworth's, the Mausert Block saw what remains its longest running arrangement.

Woolworth's leased its iconic storefront space in 1925, and Donovan, having moved his law practice there in 1914, bought the building from A.C. Houghton's heirs in 1926.

Both businesses prospered, and would remain for 68 and 45 years, respectively.

Jack Curtin joined Donovan & O'Connor LLP in 1961, and stayed with the firm until his retirement in 1994. Donovan had partnered with Norman O'Connor in 1954.

Curtin remembers it as an exciting time in town.

"Back in those days, we had very good business," he said. "Everything, I think, was going well, particularly after World War II. ... The businesses on the ground floor did very well and the dentist and hairdressers upstairs kept busy, too."

Woolworth's, a chain five-and-dime that originated in New York City, helped broker modern retail, some say. Adams' branch quickly became a town fixture.

"There was a time when [F.W. Woolworth's] was the only chain store in Adams," Eugene Michalenko of the town's Historical Commission said. "... They were the first to have that bigger feel. You could buy toys, sneakers, cosmetics, candy, jewelry and they even had a pet selection. You could walk out with a goldfish or parakeet. ... Like your regular Walmart on a smaller level."

The store wouldn't close until 1993.

Donovan leased space to many interests over the years, but the principal change to the structure during his ownership was the establishment of 18 modern apartments in the building's upper floors. These were "equipped with Electrolux refrigerator, gas stove and innerdoor beds," reported the Transcript in 1939. So much for secret societies and dance halls of the preceding years.

"When we went into the building last year, those apartments were basically the same as they were in 1939," Stephen Stenson, of REDPM, the building's current developer, said.

A Cheshire native who graduated Cornell in 1912, Donovan was described by the Transcript over the years as a "rare man" whose "vision transcended his occupation."

He taught the ropes to hundreds of young attorneys, guided town meetings for 16 years as moderator, was "a philosopher," a "philanthropist," a "lawyer's lawyer," "active in countless Northern Berkshire County organizations" and Chairman of the Berkshire Bar Association.

Curtin added, "He was a brilliant lawyer. Beside that, he was a very, very good businessman. And you won't find many who can balance the two. ... There were a lot of law offices in Adams during those years. But there was no question that Mr. Donovan was the best in town."

He wasn't the only one who seemed omnipresent in the building during this span.

For 40 years of Donovan's stretch, Frank and Nellie Pytko served as the building's custodians. They lived on the fourth floor -- their apartment's windows are still there today.

In 1970, Project Pleasant Park was pitched, a "dramatic and dynamic" urban renewal scheme to add parks and parking and link up buildings for a sort of "enclosed mall" atmosphere. Donovan was against it, and so was the town. They voted the proposal down 77 to 66 in 1971.

Had the vote gone differently, residents would see a very different downtown today.

In the end, Donovan held onto the building until 1975, the year before his death, for a total of 45 years. Donovan & O'Connor had relocated its offices to elsewhere on Park Street in 1970.

"Mr. Donovan was a lawyer and a good one," the Transcript wrote of him after his death. "He envisioned law not as a tool that could be fashioned and forged for selfish ends, but as a means toward quality in life and as a protection for the less fortunate whose causes he so ably defended during his lifetime."

Donovan was 87 and never retired.

Harvey and Laura Daniels were the new owners of Donovan's beloved building, which they purchased for \$45,000. It would change hands one more time before the next longtime owner, Thomas Hawke, stepped in.

Hawke bought the building for \$67,500 in 1980.

A mere two months later, the building's aged condition drew public notice for the first time. A depressed economy, both locally and nationally, would then doom the Mausert Block to a protracted period of decline.

James Leitch, the town's building inspector in 1980, was to condemn the upper floor apartments, fearing the roof could collapse. And so it began.

To reach Phil Demers,
email pdemers@thetranscript.com.