

APRIL 21, 1988

Tracing the historic Wilson Block hotel

Wilson Block, Central House, Hotel Block, Vlahos Block are all names used at various times to describe the same building: the large, imposing edifice that overlooks Central Square. Part residential and part commercial, it has had a varied history in its 103 years of existence.

The local newspaper reported on August 9, 1884, "The building now in process of erection in the centre of the village is about 70 by 64 feet, three stories high, with french roof, and for a country place is certainly quite an imposing structure. The three rooms in the basement, which is of brick, are to be occupied by a shoe store, meat market and general store. The upper stories are to be suitably divided into tenements."

Even before construction had advanced far, the upper floors had been rented for use as a boarding house. A news item dated January, 1884 announced, "New Boarding House — the large tenement in Wilson's new block has been hired by Ben S. Adams of this village, who, about the middle of next January, will figure in the role of the jolly landlord. Mr. Adams will not only keep a boarding house but will be prepared to accommodate the travelling public. A livery stable is attached to the establishment which is in close proximity to the railroad

station. Mr. Adams intends to maintain a good house and hopes that the house will maintain him."

The first store opened in October when "Mr. E.S. Hosmer opened a meat and provision store in the basement of Wilson's new

The way It was

By George A. Parkhurst



block. Mr. Hosmer is a veteran knight of the cleaver, having been in the employ of Rice Brothers of Lowell some twenty odd years. His shop is equipped with all the appointments of a first class city establishment, and with everything spic and span, new and fresh, a judicious selection of meat, fruits and vegetables and reasonable prices, there is no reason why he should not command the trade of this village and the region roundabout.

"With Ervin Sweetser as assistant he will run an order and delivery wagon, which he claims is more desirable for buyers than to purchase from the cart. A careful inspection of Mr. Hosmer's stock convinced the writer that his long continued efforts — usually

unsuccessful — to obtain a tender and juicy beefsteak from the butcher's wagon are now likely to be realized."

The first report of a structural change to the building was the addition of a "plazza along its entire easter front — a much needed improvement."

Walter Simons, owner of the Summit House on Robin's Hill, took over management of the hotel in 1887, renaming it the "Central House," and converted one room into an ice cream parlor.

The spring of 1890 saw the arrival of Chelmsford's first drug store when Arthur Brown rented one of the basement stores.

That Chelmsford was a vacation spot is shown by the fact that several families came to the Central House. A typical news item in 1890 stated, "At the Central House are Dr. and Mrs. Campbell of Lowell, and Mr. and Mrs. George H. Wilson of Boston, who will spend the summer here."

The upper floors have been divided into apartments in recent years and the basement has been occupied by, among other businesses, a Chinese laundry, a Chevrolet agency, and a record shop within memory of the present writer.

There is little likelihood that it will ever again be a resort hotel, but that's the way it was.

George Adams Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.