

The long, happy life of Shop Row

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ONE hundred twenty-five years ago, the two-story, Italianate brick building at 65 Main St., now the home of the Fickert, Howard and Wragg Insurance Agency Inc., was constructed for the First National Bank of Easthampton. This building was the last of seven structures erected during a 22-year span. The adjoining buildings line the western — or odd-numbered — side of Main Street. They are still referred to as Shop Row.

The First National Bank was erected on the general site of an 18th-century cemetery. This cemetery was situated there in order to be near the First Congregational Church. This church was on the site of the present Memorial Building parking lot.

In 1841, Williston Academy opened across the street from the cemetery. In 1847, the Williston-Knight Button Co. began manufacturing operations in Easthampton, and other 19th-century industrial enterprises followed.

What an agrarian society wanted was not what a growing industrial economy needed, so



Shop Row on Main Street was built to serve new consumers created by the Industrial Age.

the cemetery plots were moved to make room for commercial buildings. They were relocated to a site between the town's business district and the Town Hall.

In 1849 the first building on Shop Row was erected. The next five buildings were constructed between 1861 and 1868 to serve the new market of customers created by industrialism. The first six buildings of Shop Row even predate Town Hall, which wasn't completed until 1869. Because of the new construction,

the site of the former cemetery had become a desirable piece of real estate.

Luckily, a buffer between Shop Row and Town Hall was created: In 1866, a Methodist church was constructed on part of the now-vacant cemetery. The church caught fire in 1892 and was rebuilt. Today this building houses the Young World Child Care Center.

Eventually, the remaining cemetery land was sold to the First National Bank. The bank was founded in 1864, and was

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initially housed in Town Hall. Close relations between town officials and the bank's founders, as well as a small Easthampton population, allowed this arrangement to take place. The bank's first offices were in the Preston Building at 83-87 Main St.

The bank eventually became financially secure enough to build its own building. The new bank building was finished for \$20,000 in 1871. One First National Bank official marveled in a promotional booklet published by the bank that the building was a "model structure for a country bank."

With the construction of the First National Bank building, Shop Row was complete and stayed virtually intact for just over 100 years.

In 1873, a fire destroyed the building at 75-81½ Main St., where Jones News is now located. This building was promptly rebuilt.

A century later another fire destroyed the building at 98 Main St. This building was not

rebuilt and is now used as parking space for Main Street Florists. Shop Row is part of the Main Street Historic District and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

When the First National Bank opened its new office in 1871, the Easthampton Savings Bank leased the second floor, where it stayed until 1899. Later, dentists George Pomeroy and James Dunphy occupied the space. Plumbers Charles Mack and William Halford had a shop in the basement for many years. By 1927, the building was renovated and the First National Bank became the sole resident.

In 1952, a new building for the First National Bank was constructed at the former site of Williston Academy's Middle Hall. The bank is still in this building, although it is now a branch of Baybank/Bank of Boston. The old building was sold. Greco's Restaurant was located there from 1953 until the late 1960s. The building then became the first site for the Easthampton Community Center during the early 1970s. In 1975 insurance agency Fickert, Howard, Wragg moved in.

Edward Dwyer is chairman of the Easthampton Historical Commission. His column appears monthly.