



Westerly's Witness

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WELCOME TO SUMMER!

**On behalf of the
Executive Board
of the
Westerly Historical
Society**

**We Wish You A Safe
Summer Season!**

While we normally do not publish a July or August edition of the Newsletter, we wanted to share a special digital edition with our digital subscribers who receive the newsletter via email each month!

Your willingness to forgo the black and white mailed hard copy and enjoy the colorful digital version is appreciated!

Your decision saves us a great deal in postage and printing costs while also reducing paper usage and helping to be environmentally friendly.

PLEASE ENJOY THESE TWO FASCINATING STORIES ON MILK CAP COLLECTING AND THE GREAT WESTERLY FIRE OF 1888 WRITTEN BY DAVID SMITH.

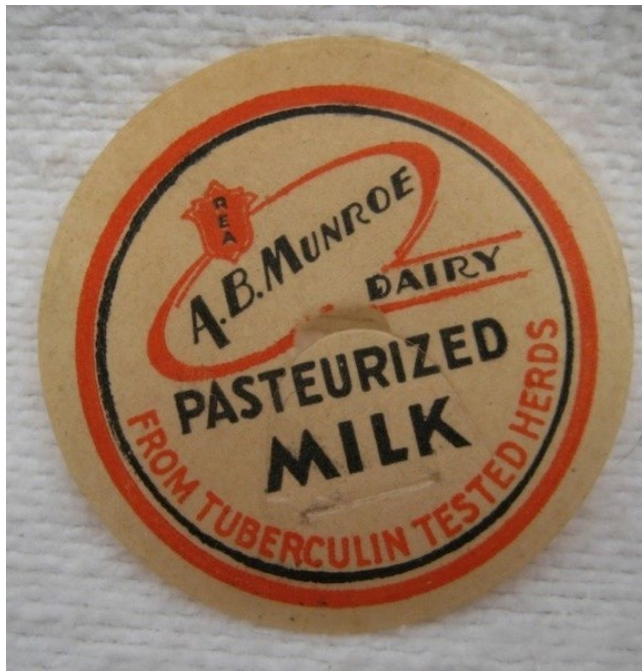
LOCAL MILK CAP COLLECTING

By David Smith

Most people would not consider a milk bottle cap a collectible, but among collectors, they are highly sought after.

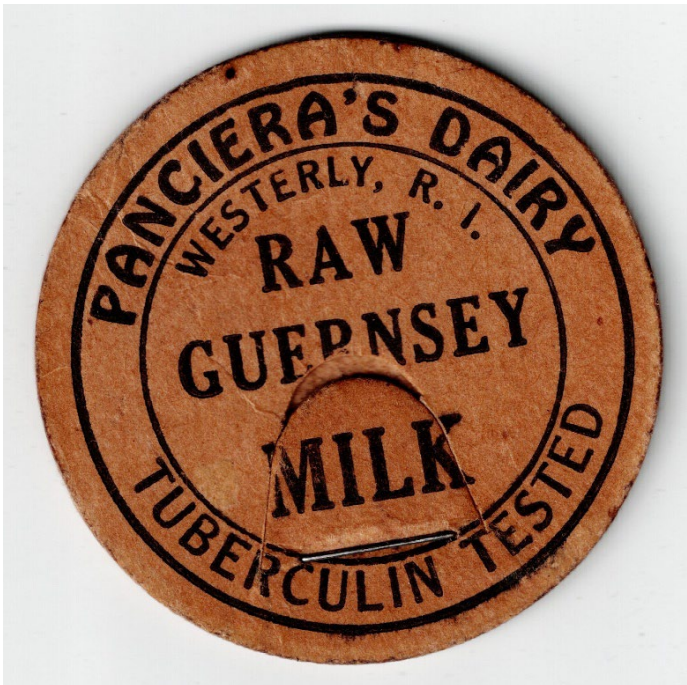
And a recent find of a milk cap advertising Vars Drug Co. is an intriguing rarity among the thousands of caps most commonly printed with just the name of a dairy.

There is a generation of people who might not even know how a milk cap was used. Back in the day, milk was sold mainly in bottles. Plastic cartons are a rather new invention. At the top of the bottle a round cardboard cap, about 1 ¾ inches wide, was pushed into place to seal it and most often had a day of the week printed on it, sort of like a “best use” date of today. The cap usually had the name of the dairy on it, but generic caps were sometimes used.



Unless there was a tab in the cap, customers used a cap pick to poke a hole in it to dislodge it from the top. And because the caps were abused, they were tossed out once the bottle was empty, leading to rarity.

A few local dairies used plain bottles and they were identified only by the cap, but most of them had bottles that were either embossed with the farm's name or had the name painted on, called pyroglazing.



The extremely rare cap that just came to light is marked “Bottled Especially for Vars Drug Co.” The cap also notes the milk was “Bottled By A. B. Munroe Dairy” of East Providence, which distributed milk across the state.

Longtime collectors have never seen this cap, and dating it is difficult. In 1936, the dairy was purchased from the Munroe heirs by Robert E. Armstrong. The Vars cap probably dates prior to the sale to Armstrong. After that time Armstrong's name appears on bottles and caps, sometimes with the initials REA in a shield.

Vars drugstore initially started in what is now known as Bradford in the mid-1800s but it would grow in the 1900s to include four drugstores. And that fact is probably what gave Vars the leverage to have its name printed on a cap.

Around 1919, Raymond C. Vars and Clarence A. Vars, whose family ran the store in Bradford, would take over the O. Stillman Book and Stationary Store at 8 High St., Westerly. Stillman opened his business in 1852, survived the great fire of 1888 and after a 67-year-run, the storefront was taken over by the Vars brothers.

Ray and Clarence's father was Enoch Vars (1851-1911) who ran, and by all accounts, took over the store from his father in what was Niantic and made it a thriving business. The two sons had a sister Mary C. Vars Nichols (1891) and two half-siblings, Arthur E. Vars (1877-1904) and Effie H. Vars (1879-1971).



Advertisements for the first years of the Vars business in downtown Westerly, noted it was a druggist and stationer's store. In later years it would add a soda fountain.

Vars would remain in that location until 1969 but expanded the store over the years to include 4-10 High St. It was a good run of 50 years. And at the same time, early on, Vars had a store in Watch Hill, probably opening only for the summer season.

Vars also opened a drug and stationers store in Wakefield, R.I., on July 18, 1930, in the new Townsend Block at 154 Main St. According to an advertisement in the Narragansett Times, "At the same time they (the brothers) would also invite you, when in Westerly, to call at the mother store, recently remodeled and entirely re-equipped, and witness the innovation that has given Washington County the distinction of having the premiere drug store of Southern New England."

According to newspaper ads, the Wakefield store also had a soda fountain and sold a variety of goods such as candy, ice cream, Kodak cameras, make-up and perfume.

Vars Brothers sold the store to Fred Wolf in the spring of 1946 after a 16-year run. Wolf had been the manager of the store for many years and he renamed the store Wolf's Rexall Drugs. In 1950 he remodeled the store to include "streamlined displays, fluorescent lighting and modern fountain."

Munroe Dairy was no stranger to changing the looks of their caps from the norm. There is a Munroe cap with Hebrew writing that denotes it is kosher for Passover.

There are a lot of milk caps that are worth around \$1, especially when they are found in sleeves of a hundred or so. Some of the more common local caps include Consumers Dairy, Stewart Farms, Church Hill Dairy and Birchwood Dairy. These are available in large quantities.

But there are some caps worth more than \$200. You just have to find the right one and know the market.

For example, caps from South Carolina, North Carolina and Hawaii are extremely sought after. Caps from these areas regularly fetch more than \$200, and there have been some that fetched \$2,000 when two collectors battled at an auction.

Yes, that's right, that's a lot of money for a round 1 3/4-inch cardboard cap. Not every rare cap is worth \$200 or even \$20. It takes collectors chasing that cap to push the price higher.

According to milk bottle collector and dealer Bob Lanpher of North Attleboro, Mass., collecting caps is nothing new. He recalls being at a National Association of Milk Bottle Collectors convention in the 1980s where "they would have a huge container that members would dump caps that they would donate. And collectors would rummage through them the whole convention looking for caps of interest."

Lanpher also notes that there have always been collectors that specialized in collecting only caps but do not collect bottles. "The willingness of some to pay higher prices for certain caps has also fluctuated over the years as some of the major collectors have aged out of collecting," he said. "They dispersed their collections, and there was one less competitor for purchasing rarer caps. The person willing to pay more than a few dollars for a cap is quite rare. Most bottle collectors wouldn't be willing to pay more than a few dollars to buy a cap, especially if they already owned a bottle from the same operation."

Regardless of the price, milk caps are a small bit of history worth saving.

All Photos Are Courtesy Of David Smith.

THE GREAT WESTERLY FIRE OF 1888

By David Smith

It was 3 a.m. on Friday, Nov. 17, 1888, when the heart of downtown Westerly was gutted and changed forever. When the sun came up and shed light on the horrific scene the lives of many people were changed forever.

It was a fire. A conflagration the likes of which the town had not seen in 10 years, since the great fire of 1877. All told, the value of the buildings lost was \$39,500 and the stock, \$63,300. Combined it is a staggering \$102,800 in 1888 dollars, which in today's dollars would equal millions. There were other estimates that put losses at \$128,000. Either way, it was horrendous.

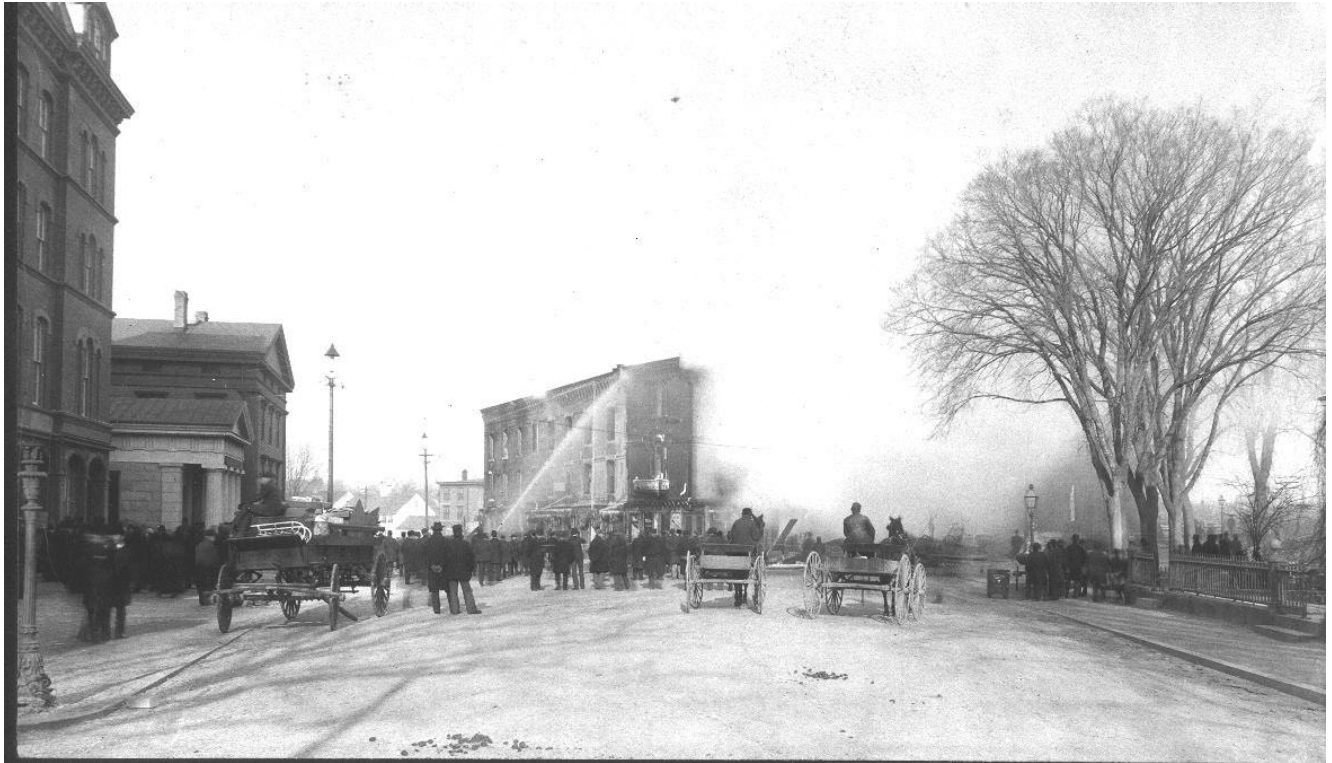


*This a view looking east on Broad Street, toward Westerly.
There is a sign on a first-floor entrance for S. G. Babcock.*



*A view of the corner of High and Broad streets from the balcony of the Dixon House, which
would later become the Rhode Island Hotel.*

By the time the flames were reduced to smoking ash around 10 a.m., and the air was heavy with acrid smoke, 14 stores, three barbershops, one tailor shop, one insurance office, one lawyer's office, the telephone exchange, the Knights of Labor Hall, the T. B. Club's room, a dentist office, and the Niantic National Bank were gone.



A view from Broad Street, Westerly, looking west toward Pawcatuck.

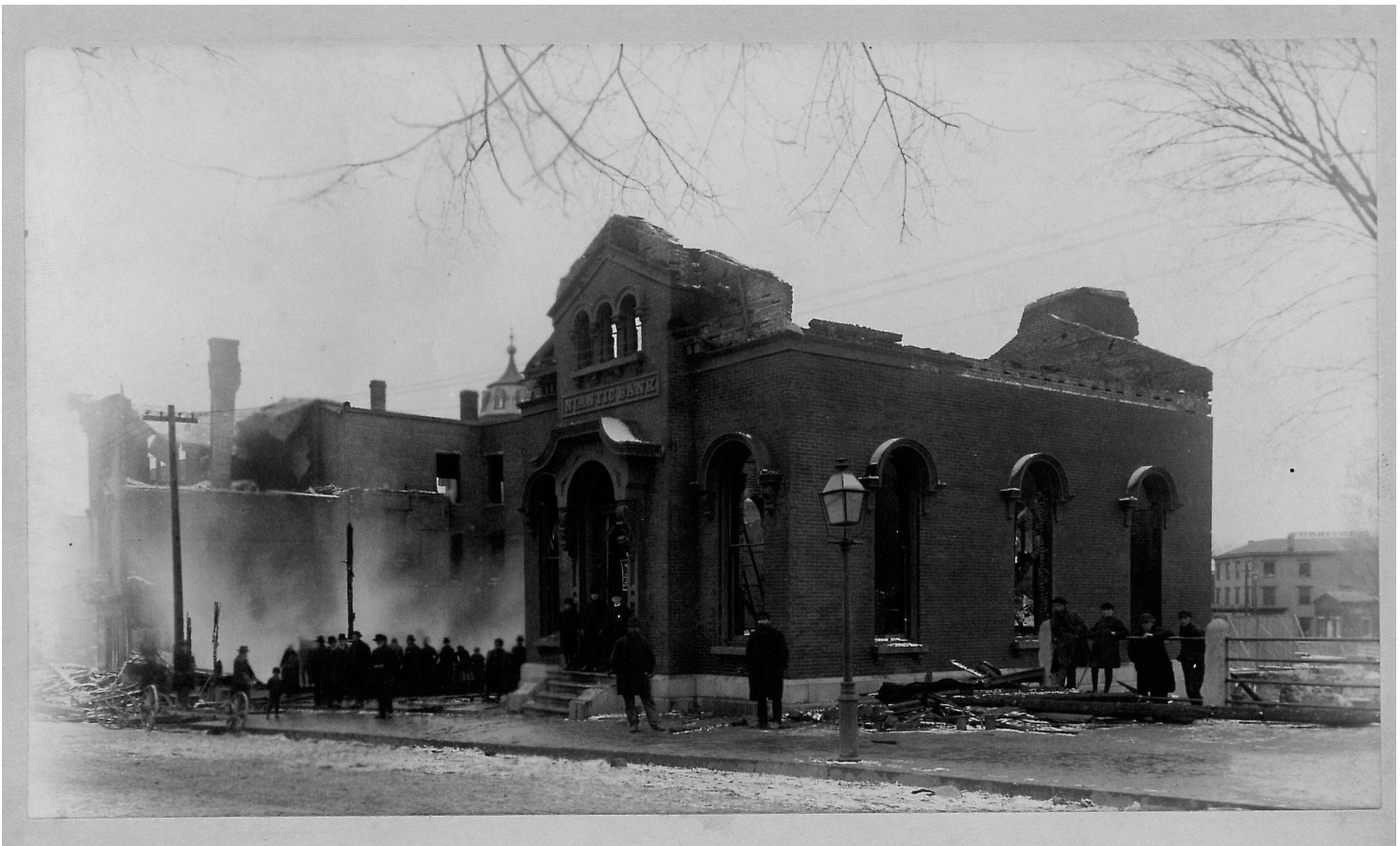
The story was big. The Westerly Narragansett Weekly printed a "Fire Extra" edition dated Feb. 17, 1888. It was smaller than the regular edition and only focused on the fire. The headlines read, FIRE!, Five Business Blocks Swept! National Bank Guttled. GREAT LOSSES. Noble Work by the Firemen. Efficient Help Comes from Stonington.

According to that report, when the alarm rang, startled people clamored from their warm beds and started to look for flames but could see nothing. On hand was the Westerly Fire Company and the Hook and Ladder crew and the Peleg S. Barber Hose Company of Pawcatuck.

"The fire was found to be somewhere (sic) in the O. D. Wells Block, but just where no one could tell," according to the report. "Every cellar in that vicinity was full of smoke, and even from the tops of the chimneys smoke was pouring fourth."

"The greatest amount of smoke seemed to come from under the store occupied by Louis Cella, and accordingly the streams of water were turned into that cellar," the report said. "Occupants of the neighboring stores began to make preparations to move, if necessary, yet all hoping, and some expecting, that the fire would be confined to the cellar in which it seemed to have started."

The townspeople and shop owners were wrong.



A view of the ruins of the Niantic National on High Street, Westerly.

Ice in the river delayed firefighters from dropping a suction hose. Belatedly, some said the Town Council should make a point of keeping the river open to allow for such emergencies.

According to reports, the fire broke out of the Wells Block in the rear of I.B. Crandall's clothing store on High Street and as that building was constructed of wood it quickly caught.

"It seemed as though the entire corner, bounded by High and Broad streets, from the Niantic Bank, was one mass of flames, except the corner building and the Segar brick block adjoining," the report said. "This exception was of short duration, for within an hour from the outbreak of the flames the entire corner was seething and roaring."

Oliver D. Wells opened his house at 19 High St., and allowed goods to be stored there. His rear piazza and back yard were used by Mr. Crandall.

As the fire was being fought, one businessowner made an unfortunate observation. "Yes," says Dicky, "I pity the clerks in that store (Thorpes.) They will have to fish their goods out of the water tomorrow morning."

Fifteen minutes later Dicky was seen staggering under a load of books, with no store to sweep out in the morning.

"The weather was so cold that when Engine One stopped, the water within the hose froze so rapidly that it was impossible to make any further use of them," the newspaper reported.



A view of the back of the Niantic National Bank in Westerly, looking southeast.

“Up to the time of going to press, only a few of the unfortunate business men had made any plans for the immediate continuance of their business,” the newspaper reported. “The fire had only been under way for a short time when Mr. Charles Redford, the barber, saw that his shop was doomed and quick as thought, he hastened to the residence of Mr. L. J. Frankenstein, who had a vacant store on Main Street and secured the room.”

Mr. Louis Tuch has the refusal of a store in the Pawcatuck Armory building on Coggsell Street in Pawcatuck.

The insurance office of Mr. James M. Pendleton will be reopened in the Dixon House.

Many of the businesses survived, but some did not. Here are a few examples.

William Carney was a merchant and tailor at 6 Broad Street. Following the fire he moved to Marlboro, Mass.

Louis Cella, sold fruit and confections. He moved a short distance across the Pawcatuck River into Stonington, to 7 Liberty St.

Jerry A. Wright, a boot and shoe maker at 58 High St., moved to Meridan, Conn.

Samuel G. Babcock was a dry goods dealer at 4 Broad St. It seems that after the fire he went to school and moved to Cambridge, Mass.

Attorney Albert B. Crafts at 10 Broad St., moved to 8 Main St.

Dr. Benjamin F. Arnold, a dentist, was at 10 Broad St. He moved to 16 Broad St.

John Leslie sold boots and shoes at 6 High St. He moved to 1 Potter Building.

Albert L. Barbour ran his pharmacy at 12 Broad St. The pharmacy was opened in 1876 and included a first-floor space of 20- by 50-feet and a basement. He would relocate to 18 Broad St.

Charles Redford, a barber, moved to Main Street after the fire but then settled at 14 Broad St.

Mrs. L. Rathbone Cone ran a millinery parlor and she moved to 5 Potter Building.

The Niantic National Bank survived the fire, but its building was destroyed. The bank was incorporated in 1870 and in 1892 boasted deposits of \$1.35 million. On Dec. 3, 1904 the bank was sold to the Industrial Trust Company of Providence. The old Industrial Bank building still stands in its place.

Ira B. Crandall was a dealer in ready-made clothing, hats and caps and was located at 12 High St. He had been associated with his trade since 1872. He moved to a new location and survived.

Orville Stillman was a bookseller and stationary store at 10 High St. He also sold cutlery, fancy crockery, pictures, frames, games, toy and leather goods. It was located opposite the post office. The business first opened in 1852. Its premises included a first floor 30 feet by 70 feet.



View of the back of the buildings along the Pawcatuck River, looking southeast from Pawcatuck.

A view of the back of the buildings.

The street to the right is Broad Street looking east.

To the right, not shown, is the bridge spanning the Pawcatuck River.



Taking stock of the losses

According to newspaper reports, the following are the “principal sufferers” from the fire:

On Buildings

Niantic Bank, building valued at \$11,000, insured for \$9,000
Ira B. Crandall & Co., building valued at \$2,500, insured for \$2,000
Orra Stillman, building valued at \$9,000, insured for \$7,000
T. W. Segar’s corner building valued at \$5,000, insured for \$2,500
T.W. Segar’s block, value about \$12,000, insured for \$8,000
O.D. Wells’ buildings, including stores on bridge, valued at \$20,000, insured for \$10,000

On Stock

Ira. B. Crandall, \$17,000, insurance, \$12,000
Orville Stillman, \$6,000, insurance, \$3,200
Dr. B.F. Arnold, \$1,000
John Leslie, \$4,000, insurance \$3,000
T. W. Lanphear, \$1,800, insurance, \$1,000
A.L Barbour & Co., \$6,000, insurance, \$4,500
J.H. Thorpe, \$1,500, insurance, \$14,000
S. G. Babcock, \$10,000, insurance, \$8,000
Louis Tuch, \$1,500, insurance, \$10,000
Geo. H. Babcock, \$6,000, insurance, \$2,500
Charles H. Stanton, \$8,500, insurance, \$6,000
T.B. Club, \$1,500, insurance, \$1,000
Charles Redford, \$600, insurance, \$400
Mrs. L. Rathbone Cone, \$1,500, insurance, \$1,000
Wm. Carney, \$300
Louis Cella, \$300
J. Beringer, \$500
J.A. Wright, \$2,500, insurance \$2,000
Attorney A.B. Crafts, \$2,000, insurance on library, \$1,200



The Niantic National Bank survived the fire as a business, but the roof and the interior of the building were destroyed by the fire.

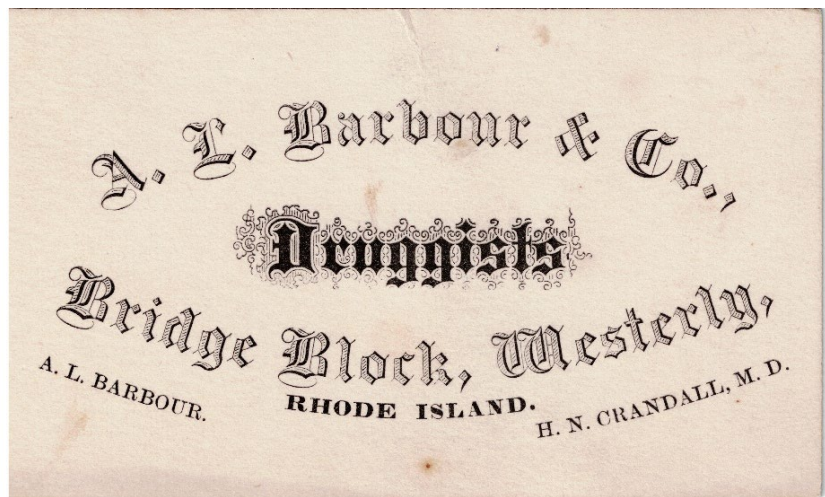
The building was valued at \$11,000 in 1888 and was insured for \$9,000.

The bank that was incorporated in 1870 and burned in 1888 rebounded and had deposits of \$1.35 million in 1892.



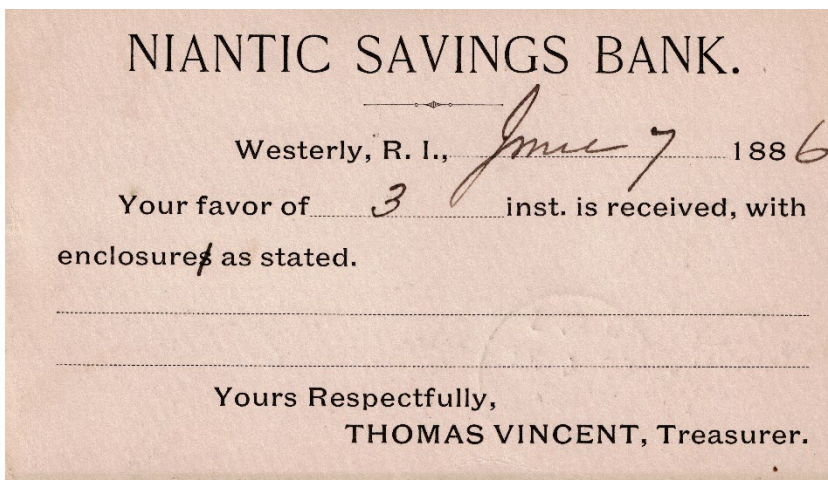
BUSINESS CARD
I. B. CRANDALL & CO.

Ira B. Crandall was a dealer in ready-made clothing, hats and caps and was located at 12 High St. He had been associated with his trade since 1872. After the fire, he moved to a new location and continued to operate.



BUSINESS CARD
A. L. BARBONE & CO.

Albert L. Barbour ran his pharmacy at 12 Broad St. The pharmacy was opened in 1876 and included a first-floor space of 20-by 50-feet and a basement. After the fire, he would relocate to 18 Broad St.



RECEIPT
NIANTIC SAVINGS BANK

The Niantic National Bank survived the fire as a business, but its building was destroyed by the fire.

In 1904, the bank was sold to the Industrial Trust Company of Providence. The former Industrial Bank building still stands in its place.

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