

History: Chair City Steam Bath 286 West St. Gardner Ma 01440

A common household necessity helped to bring about the end of many of the steam baths within the city of Gardner, as by the 1940s most family homes included facilities for an indoor shower. Prior to that, indoor plumbing was a luxury for some and many folks would visit the Greenwood Memorial bath house for their weekly shower.

However, those citizens of Scandinavian heritage (Finnish and Swedish) would enjoy the experience of their own “sauna.” In time, many other citizens of the city would visit commercial steam baths that cropped up in Gardner starting in the 1920s.

Steam baths first originated in the Roman Empire, but later in America they would become an invigorating experience, a healthful, relaxing and stimulating way of life. For many of the more hardy Finns in the city, a cold shower, dip in the lake or — in the winter time — a roll in the snowbank — completed their time in the steamy sauna.

The steam bath, particularly those owned by private citizens, was what the name implied. It was primarily housed in a small building which included a dressing room, a steam room and a shower. A fire in an oven heated the stones, which provided the steam.

In the commercial steam baths of Gardner, the steam was produced from hot radiators instead of from hot stones. Water was poured over the hot radiators and the amount of steam was controlled by a valve. Temperatures in the bath would ascend to 100 degrees or much higher providing a complete cleansing experience.

The Scandinavian people were among the original settlers of this country and in Gardner they would fall into three distinct categories: the Swedes, the Finns and the Swede-Finns (Swedish-speaking Finns). In this community many from Sweden settled in the area of Washington Hill, establishing the First Lutheran Church on Cross St., not far from Unity Hall of Maple and Cross streets. In addition, the Hillside Methodist Church, on the corner of Jay and Peabody streets, was built in the 1890s.

The Swede-Finns settled in the vicinity of Leamy Street where the Immanuel Lutheran Church was eventually located in 1902 at the corner of Leamy and Church streets. Gardner's Finnish population primarily settled around the Ash and West street area when they first arrived in Gardner in 1886. As a result, several of Gardner's steam baths opened in these sections of the city where resident of Swedish and Finnish heritage were more prominent.

The first steam baths of Gardner opened virtually next door to one another on Pine Street, while another soon opened on Monadnock Street and the one which lasted the longest — the Chair City Steam Bath — was located on West Street.

Here is a brief history of some of the Gardner steam baths, beginning when they first opened in the city: Pine Street Steam Bath 275 Pine St. was first opened by William Seppa in a structure behind his home on Pine Street beginning in 1923. It was the first commercial steam bath in the city and Seppa operated it until 1936. Finland-born Elias E. Kautto later took it over and operated the steam bath until his death in 1939. His wife Matilda then ran it until 1943 when it came under the direction of Matti Pasanen for another couple of years. George Jennerson then ran the business from 1946-53 until the final owner, Robert Girouard, owned the steam bath from 1954-62. It closed after that and the building was renovated into a single-family home which it continues to be today. Sakari Hamalainen 247 Pine St.

A short distance up the road from the Pine Street Steam Bath, Sakari Hamalainen ran a steam bath behind his home beginning in 1924. Hamalainen would run the business there until his death in 1948, at which time his wife Hilda took it over until it closed in 1954. Monadnock Street Steam Bath 59 Monadnock St. John K. Kangas opened his steam bath in the West End in 1930 and ran it through 1943.

This was an appropriate place for a steam bath as it was a short distance from the former Ash Street Hall, where Gardner's Finnish Athletic Club and the Into Athletic Club were both headquartered for many decades. Athletic events would conclude with many of the athletes visiting the nearby steam bath for a relaxing sauna to soothe their aching muscles.

Over the next few years the steam bath was owned by Lena Storm (1944), Armas Hill (1945-47), and then Harold Hackett in 1948, where it was renamed Gardner Massage Parlor until 1954. It was later run by Gordon J. Kelley (1954-55) and finally Earl M. Phelps (1956) before it closed in 1957 and the building was razed.

Julius Ahtio 366 rear Pleasant St. According to the street directory, Mr. Ahtio operated a steam bath in the rear of his Pleasant Street home in 1935.

Chair City Steam Bath 284 West St. Gardner's best known steam bath was built in 1922 by Otto Laitinen. It was later owned by Kusti Tamminen from 1936-42. He sold it to Martha and John Haines who ran it from 1943-50 until their retirement.

In 1950, Ernest Nivala opened the longtime Gardner institution and in 1954 the baths changed over to a boiler which used oil to generate steam, ending the previous method of relying on coal. Nivala later sold the business to his son Donald and daughter-in-law Karin who operated it until Donald's passing in 1988.

The steam bath eventually closed its doors in 1997, but was reopened by Kevin Knight beginning around 2002. Knight has continued the operation of the steam bath up until 2020.

<https://www.thegardnernews.com/article/15/243513>

Mr. & Mrs. Valera took ownership of the Chair City Steam Bath located at 286 West St. Gardner, MA 01440 and reopened September 2020 and created the EZ Steam Club.

W/Th/F 5pm-10pm & Sat/Sun 10am-10pm

Book now at ezsteam.club or call 781-742-5271