

John Letter



There is an old photograph taken in 1913 of a store front on King Street South at Christmas time. The J. Letter & Son furniture store had two beautiful display windows divided by a door that welcomed its customers.

If you peer through the window on your right, you can see a Christmas tree, full-sized Santa and reindeer. The display window on the left holds elegant furniture, lamps and paintings.

Customers entered the furniture store through a glass door, painted with the words:
Funeral Directors and Embalmers.

Furniture and funerals? It seems an odd pairing but it was not uncommon in small communities, and worked for John Letter, a successful entrepreneur. Letter, who was born in 1860, was the son of Christian Letter, a mason and builder. John Letter initially followed in his father's footsteps and together they helped build homes and factories in late nineteenth century Waterloo.

The J. Letter and Son furniture store began business in November, 1907 in the building whose address became 38 King Street South. Shortly after, the funeral parlour opened on July 1, 1908 with more than 250 people in attendance. The building still stands just north of the railway tracks in Waterloo, and currently houses the Alpine Café and the Paper Tree.

A 1908 souvenir edition of *The News Record* reported that:

“In the modern home, the skill of the designer and manufacturer is constantly in demand and the interior is made beautiful and attractive, not only by artistic furniture, but by draperies and handsome pictures. In Waterloo, the leader in this particular line is the sterling firm of J. Letter & Son It was originally established by Mr. J. K. Shinn, whom the present firm bought out in 1907 In connection with the furniture store this firm conducts a growing undertaking business the members . . . of whom are prominent and influential business men, active members of the Board.”

When John Letter died in 1925 his obituary noted that he was “one of Waterloo’s best known and highly respected citizens.” In addition to his business, Letter was a member of Waterloo’s town council in 1902 and 1904-05. The “staunch conservative” was also a director of the Globe Furniture Company and an active member of St. John’s Lutheran Church.

A few months after Letter’s death, his son Norman took over the firm and named it N.H. Letter, Funeral Directors and Home Furnishers.

In 1927, when Norman Letter had a new commercial block built on King Street North the *Waterloo Chronicle* reported: “The building will house Waterloo’s only furniture store

which has been enjoying a gratifying growth indicating the favor with which it is regarded by the public.”

The newspaper article goes on to report that the new store has a “well-appointed funeral parlor . . . at the disposal of the public for holding services where the home is too small.”

Norman’s son Howard joined the business and in 1932, at a time when funerals cost \$200 to \$300, it became Norman Letter and Son Furniture Dealers and Funeral Directors.

The businesses prospered and in 1937 the funeral service was moved a few blocks north to a large house at 116 King Street North at Spring Street. At this time, the undertaking business became publicly affiliated with Christian Dreisinger, who had a similar enterprise in Elmira.

When Norman Letter and Christian Dreisinger retired, Howard did not wish to continue as a funeral director and so the last funeral was recorded on February 24, 1943. Howard and his wife Florence operated the furniture store until about 1948, and then joined the Stedman chain as The Waterloo 5¢ to \$1 Store – remembered by many Waterloo citizens – until their retirement in 1960.

Information for this biography was taken largely from the *Waterloo Historical Society* volume 92 - 2004, “Furniture, Funeral and 5¢ to \$1.00: Over Seventy Years of Letter Family Businesses in Waterloo” by Marion Roes.

Photo courtesy of David and Margaret Letter