

Public Medium was Willimantic's first newspaper

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Connecticut's Free Soil Party held its convention in Willimantic in October 1848. Over 300 heard E. Perkins of Norwich talk non-stop for three hours about antislavery and the party's candidate, Martin Van Buren. The Free Soilers, a third party competing with the Democrats (Lewis Cass) and Whigs (Zachary Taylor), were antislavery proponents, but accepted the existence of slavery in the south. They campaigned on a ticket to prevent slavery expanding to the west.

There were no street numbers in Willimantic in 1848, so advertisers gave geographical locations of their businesses. William Weaver, a dealer in stationery, was in the Franklin book, "a few rods east of the congregational church."

Traveling photographer Mr. W.R. Small, located on the building's third floor, was preparing daguerreotypes for Christmas. Small's "perfect likenesses" were produced in Willimantic from \$1 to \$6, with portrait lockets costing from \$3 to \$15.

Dr. G. C. Vaughn's "Vegetable Lithontriptic Mixture" cured dropsy (retention of fluid), gravel (a urinary dysfunction), fever, piles, and purified the blood. Vaughn's magic medication was manufactured in Buffalo, N.Y., and cost \$2 for a 30-ounce bottle, and \$1 for a 12-ounce bottle. It was stocked locally by pharmacists George Lathrop in Willimantic, D.M. Buel's at south Coventry, R. Button in Andover, and A.H. Hawkins in Tolland.

Vaughn recommended that one should stay away from "Old Dr. Jacob Townsend's Sarsaparillas" as they were "good for nothing." Dr. Townsend's ads claimed that his sarsaparillas cured dyspep-



Above: The June 16, 1849, issue of the Willimantic Public Medium. At right: The woodcut of Publisher John Evans that appeared in early issues.

sia, rheumatism, pimples and all female complaints. Vaughn denounced Townsend: "This Townsend is no doctor and never was; but was formerly a worker on railroads and canals. Such willful, wicked misrepresentation."

Health matters were to the fore in 1849 because of a cholera outbreak in New York City. Between May 29 and June 5, the city reported 129 cases and 50 deaths. A Dr. Bird of Chicago claimed that cholera could be prevented by his magic formula, which consisted of four parts powder charcoal and one part sulfur. It supposedly neutralized the ozone, a chemical in the atmosphere, which it was thought caused cholera when breathed in.

In November 1849, the railroad arrived in Willimantic. The first service was to New London and back. Several cosmopolitan New Londoners, visiting Willimantic for the first time, were rather rude about rustic Willimantic. They laughed at the town's tiny fire engine which "doused miniature fires," and complained

about the lack of sidewalks. Publisher Evans agreed about the fire engine. Regarding the sidewalks he added that the New Londoners, "may thank their stars they came in dry weather."

By 1855, the fancy woodcuts at the head of the leading page had gone, and beneath the title it stated "An Independent, local, family newspaper." This issue's editorial noted the increasing prosperity of Willimantic since the railroad had come to town six years earlier. The local mills were fed by cotton arriving directly by train from the southern states, and local consumers had the benefit of sugar, molasses and salt shipped to New London from the West Indies and quickly brought to Willimantic by rail.

The paper also announced the formation of the Bolton Reservoir and Water Power Co. The leading shareholders were the Windham and Smithville Manufacturing Companies on Bridge Street, the Hop River Warp Co. in Columbia and the recently formed Willimantic Linen Co. All aimed to



improve the water power on the Willimantic and Hop rivers, to drive their mills more efficiently.

The Public Medium changed its name to the Willimantic Journal the following year when William Weaver, purchased it. He died in 1866, and W.J. Barber published the Journal until 1871. Henry Hall then took the reigns until 1886. The Hall & Bill Publishing Co. had taken over in 1884, and continued publication until 1911, when the weekly Journal was no longer able to compete with the expanding, daily Willimantic Chronicle.

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