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# Civic pride spurred push for new town hall



Tom Beardsley

In the years that Willimantic existed as a borough (1833-1893) its political representatives held meetings in a variety of venues, including dance halls, churches, silk mill, an armory, a bank and offices above a commercial block. Willimantic had grown at a tremendous rate in the years after the Civil War, and funds had to be found for policing, fire, the town farm, education, and an urban infrastructure of schools, roads, sidewalks, transport, sewers and piped drinking water — the need for a new town or city hall was overlooked.

But in 1893 Willimantic became a city — and began getting big city ideas. Suitable quarters for courts, lawyers, police, politicians and a library became a priority. The city fathers were then meeting in the Hayden Block. Annoyed that their rent was constantly being hiked, they applied for bonding to build a town hall and courts to serve Windham county, the Windhams and Willimantic. Amid much local jubilation, \$60,000 was approved to build, plus a negotiable bond to purchase property for a suitable site.

A building committee was formed. Several of the members visited the Colombian Exposition in Chicago during 1893-94. World Fairs reflect and instigate certain cultural trends and Chicago's launched a monumental architectural



This post card view of Windham town hall, circa 1909, shows trolley tracks running up Main Street. Note how small the tree on the front lawn is.

style characteristic of contemporary movements in city planning and civic improvement known as the City Beautiful Movement. Little Willimantic had grandiose plans for its new town building. It would be something special, something for future generations to be proud of. The Colombian Exposition provided numerous models to inspire Windham's build-

ing committee. They noted that the picturesque Connecticut building at the Chicago fair was designed by a Connecticut architect by the name of Briggs.

Civic pride ran high as the building committee set about choosing a suitable site. They needed an architect to build in a colonial style with a touch of classical and renaissance. Pillars, domes, arches and towers were dreamed of. But the town conservatives were becoming nervous. What would this extravagant, unnecessary building cost the local taxpayers? Two factions came into being. The "pro-town hallers" and the "anti-town hallers." Two more

factions were formed. The "downtowners," opposed the "uptowners," who wanted to purchase a site, the "Chase lot" on the west corner of Main and High streets, then considered to be at the boundary of the borough. The "downtowners" were not concerned with the cost. They wanted to build the new town hall at the junction of Union and Main streets, in the central business area of the city. But the "downtowners" had powerful opponents. The directors of the Willimantic Linen Co. believed that the town hall would be too near to its mills and prevent expansion.

The early optimism of the town building committee began to fade. The country was experiencing an economic downturn. An expensive new town hall was considered to be an extravagance by many. Things got worse in April 1895. A highly respected Willimantic banker, 45-year-old Oliver Risley, was found dead in bed. He was the chief cashier of Willimantic's First National Bank, and a heavy investor in the boom days of Willimantic during the 1880s. But Risley had overstretched the mark. He embezzled vast amounts to shore-up his crashing investments. It became too much of a burden and he poisoned himself. The financial structure of Willimantic was in ruins. Numerous investors lost their life savings. The prosperous Natchaug silk company on North Street crashed, and was taken over by receivers. The scandal also closed down Willimantic's Dime Savings Bank. This was hardly the time to be planning a grand new town hall, but the committee, undeterred, plowed ahead, and alienated large factions.

**Next week:** Factions conspire and a suspicious fire.

Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, is a former scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum.

## Meetings Next Week

### ASHFORD

Monday: board of selectmen, 7 p.m., Sabo-Baker house; housing authority, 7:30 p.m., Pompey Hollow.

Wednesday: conservation/inland wetlands commission, 7 p.m., town hall; water pollution control authority, 8 p.m., Sabo-Baker house.

### HEBRON

Monday: economic development commission, 7:30 p.m., Horton House.

Tuesday: Democratic town committee, 7:30 p.m., town hall.

Thursday: board of selectmen, 7:30 p.m., town hall.

### LEBANON