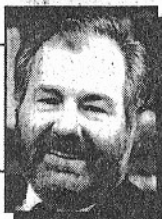


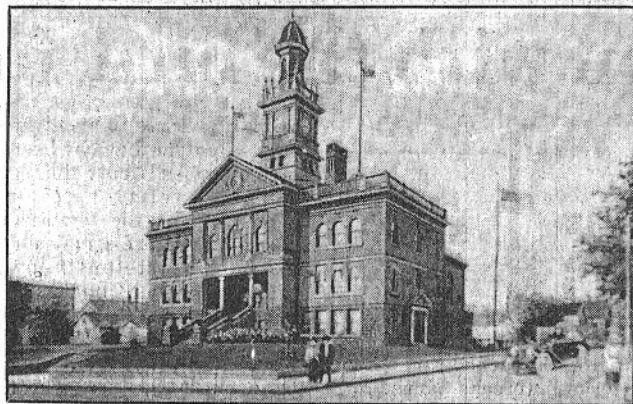
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# Battle to build town hall heats up



Tom Beardsley

Second of four parts



F. Gamache

Post card view of Windham town hall is from 1912.

The Windham town hall building committee were determined to go ahead with its plan to build a majestically designed town hall "uptown" on the Chase lot. In January 1895, the state provided \$15,000 in bonding to pay the Chase family of Stamford for their property and land on the west junction of Main and High streets.

But the "downtowners" were plotting and questioned the legality of every decision made by the town's building committee — as were the anti-townhalls. Many were suffering from Oliver Risley's embezzlement of the First National Bank. They were furious when the building committee announced that more than \$60,000 was required to build.

A grand entrance porch, pillars, a pediment, a tower, a mixture of window styles, a roof balustrade, a library, a GAR hall, a courthouse, police department, archives and offices, were specified. The plans drew upon many different architectural fashions from classical to colonial to renaissance. The committeemen used archi-

tectural pattern books and integrated styles used at the White City in the Columbian Exposition at Chicago.

The committee called for plans from architects. By March 11, 1895 they had received designs from J.A. Schweinfith of Boston, F.A. Moon of New York, C.H. Preston of Norwich, Loring and Phipps of Boston, Warren R. Briggs of Bridgeport, J.A. Hiscox of Norwich, Joseph A. Jackson of Waterbury and two from L.B. Valk of Brooklyn, N.Y. The contract was eventually awarded to Warren Richard Briggs of Bridgeport, the subject of last week's biography.

The designs and specifications were viewed by various builders and on May 10, 1895, the committee announced the estimates to build from interested parties: E.P. Cummings of Ware, Mass., \$69,975. J.O.

Sullivan of Willimantic, \$73,000. The H. Wales Lines Company of Meriden, \$76,800, Horace R. Butler of Middletown, \$65,978, A.W. Bennett of Bridgeport, \$79,969, Tracy Brothers of Waterbury, \$78,476. Warren Briggs wanted copper instead of galvanized iron in the designs and a sandstone first story.

The building committee knew that the estimates would be too high, so it was voted to reject them. Some on the building committee hoped that this would be the end of it, and the town hall would not be built, but it was a ploy to ask the State Bond Commission for more funds.

A town meeting was called for June 15, 1895. The downtowners were convinced that the Willimantic Linen Co. was responsible for convincing the building committee to build

"out-of-town." Linen company officers had been quoted as saying that they paid one third of the town's taxes and had a right to demand where the new town hall would be built. It was rumored that if the town hall had been built "downtown" the Linen company would have abandoned Willimantic.

The anti-townhalls cited the local financial disasters, and the national downturn in trade as an excuse not to build, but the pro-townhalls cited the low price of building materials, and the need to put local men to work. It was now or never. Initial attempts to make the June 15 meeting illegal, which had agreed upon appropriations and the commencement of building, failed and work began.

A dramatic turn of events almost led to the burning down of the Willimantic Linen Co. Mill No. 2 and its spool shop at the end of June 1895. Two attempts at incendiary were made. Lumber was stacked against the mill walls, and doused with oil and petroleum soaked skeins of thread.

A large fire ensued, but the alertness of the night watchman and the efficiency of the works and town's fire companies meant that the fire was detected early and extinguished. An officer of the Willimantic Linen Co. informed The Hartford Courant that he believed the thwarted downtown faction were guilty, but no one was ever charged with the arson.

**Next week:** Construction, but no frogs.

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

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## Volunteers needed

### CENTER FOR PARENT & CHILD RESEARCH

Volunteers are needed to participate in a program run by the Center for Parent & Child Research at the University of Con-

necticut. The project is currently recruiting volunteers for its Friendly Visitors Program. Volunteers must be interested in mutually satisfying relationship with a senior citizen with similar interests. The project will be held Thursday evenings in late November and early December. Volun-

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### MANSFIELD CENTER FOR NURSING

A variety of opportunities exist for interested individuals who want to work directly with residents or assist with support functions at the Mansfield Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation in