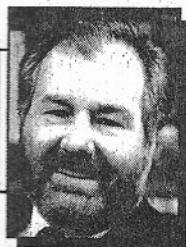


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The Windham town hall takes shape



Tom Beardsley

Third of four parts

Willimantic's well-known, Irish-born building contractor, Jeremiah O'Sullivan, was hired to build the Windham town hall after he submitted a bid of \$59,396.

Negotiations with O'Sullivan led to the copper work being re-included and extra money was secured to allow the re-introduction of the stone work in the basement and first story, instead of brick.

Work began with the digging of the foundations on June 12, 1895, and by July 11, 50 local men were at work tearing down the stone wall around the Chase lot, and using the stone to line the basement walls.

Accusations were flying around that O'Sullivan was part of a building committee plot to wring more money out of the state and town coffers for the building to line their own pockets — but such is local politics. The building was going up, making it impossible to break contracts and stop construction. The same tactics would be used a decade later for the building of the foot-bridge. The final cost to the state and town for the new town hall was \$73,000.

On July 20, 1895, O'Sullivan

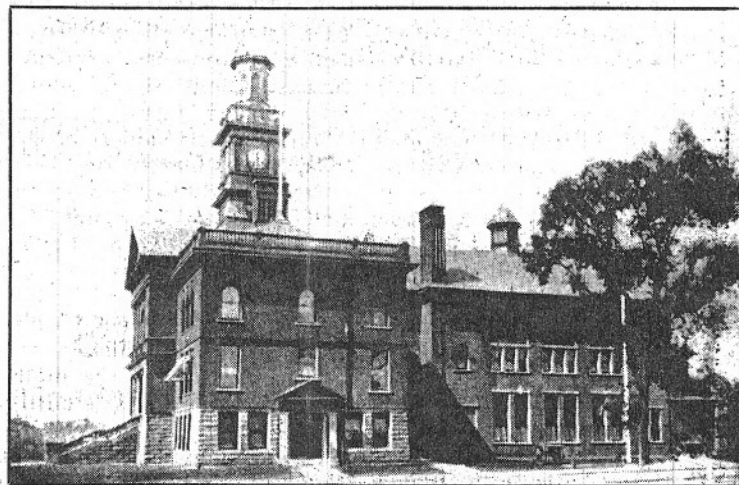
had 32 men digging the foundations, but they hit a ledge of hard rock and blasting had to take place. The following week, the four structures on the Chase lot were put up for auction. Two were dismantled by their new owners, but Nelson W. French rebuilt the best of the houses on "Upper Main Street."

The anti-town-hallers had a victory on Oct. 3, 1895, when the judge of the Windham County Court in Putnam declared that special building meetings on June 15 were illegal and had to be struck from the records. But it meant nothing as the walls were now half-built.

O'Sullivan pressed ahead and on Oct. 9 he hired extra stone masons from Waterbury to get the walls completed before the winter set in. A couple of weeks later, the building committee decided to drop the word "County" from the lettering proposed by architect Briggs. The front of the new town hall would now be lettered, "Windham Court House," in gold lettering.

The brickwork was completed by Nov. 20, and a team of ironworkers arrived from New Haven to build the roof. The roof frame and slating were quickly fitted. By Dec. 5, the roof was in place and outside construction stopped for the winter. But internal work continued. The walls were plastered and the plumbing, gas lines, telephone lines and electric wiring were installed.

Outside work resumed in April. Local resident Samuel



This rare High Street view of the town hall, circa 1910, shows Civil War cannons outside the Grand Army of the Republic hall, and a roof-line balustrade on the main building.

Adams took down an old wooden building on the site, rebuilt it on High Street, and added another story. He rented the structure as tenements for mill workers. In the fall of 1895 the idea was put forward to place two large bullfrogs to guard the entrance of the new town hall.

Briggs was not keen on the idea, and the committee voted to see a model of the frog before a decision was made. On April 7, building committee Secretary George W. Melony received a plaster model of a bullfrog, molded by Dan C. French, a famous New York City sculptor.

The following evening the building committee met in the Hooker House and voted to modify the town hall's gas lighting. They all loved the giant frog, but decided they

could not afford to have two giant bullfrogs cast in bronze and placed at the entrance. The matter was "postponed indefinitely."

On April 11 the bell for the town hall clock arrived in the city, and the tower was constructed. Several residents were shocked at the appearance of the tower, but Victorian sensibilities dictated that the subject was not discussed further. And why complain after the longtime enemy of the town council, James Hayden, had paid for the bell?

Next week: Building completed

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