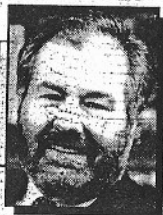


# How Willimantic finally got a new library



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In 1853, a group of public spirited Willimantic citizens organized the "Bee-Hive Circle" in Main Street's old wood-framed Franklin Hall, and assembled "fancy articles" to sell in aid of the newly-formed Willimantic Library Association.

The "new" Franklin Hall building (1869) stands at the same location and houses the Hall of Frames. The borough's first library was located in the rear of Henry W. Avery's shoe shop next to the old Franklin Hall. Avery was the first librarian, and he was succeeded in 1857 by Horatio N. Bill — the father of Arthur F. Bill, of the Hall and Bill printing company.

The Franklin Hall and the old shoe shop were destroyed by fire in March 1868. However, the library was not located in Avery's shoe shop at the time of the fire. Its location is unknown.

The library reappears in records in 1869, located in the second story of the new Union Block on Union Street, a commercial structure built by Allen Lincoln which, until

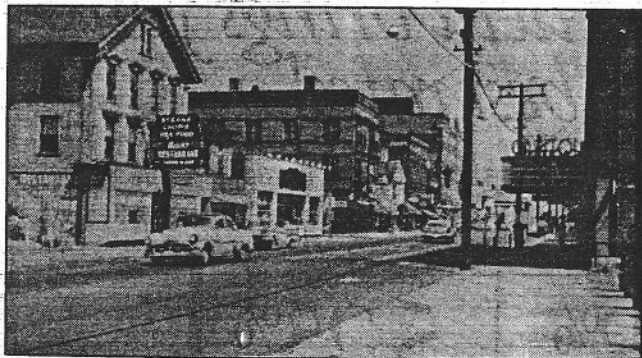
1974, stood opposite the entrance to Church street. Lincoln's son, Allen Bennett Lincoln, was appointed librarian. It opened only on Wednesday evenings and Saturdays.

In 1871, the borough purchased the library association for \$125, and the Willimantic public library was formed. Two hundred dollars year was appropriated for purchases and maintenance, and patrons were charged a small annual fee.

The next big change came in 1882, when the library left Union Street and relocated in offices of the Willimantic Savings Institute building. Mrs. Charles Capen, the librarian from 1872 until 1888, received a \$56.25 annual salary in 1882, and the library held 2,144 volumes. In 1883-84 her salary rose to \$100, and the 2,422 books were checked out on 11,673 occasions.

On May 3, 1895, an enabling act in the state Legislature led to space being allotted for the library in the proposed new town hall. Belle Riggleman was librarian from 1901 to 1923. She introduced a card cataloging system, installed at a cost of \$368.24.

On June 1, 1903, the city appropriated \$1,000 per annum for the library's upkeep, and increased the opening hours. In December 1913, the appropriation rose to \$1,500. The library was open from 2 to 9



*The site of Willimantic's new library, looking east down Main Street, probably about 1963. The restaurant at left was demolished to make way for the library, which was built in 1966-67.*

p.m., Monday thru Friday, and closed weekends. By 1919, it held over 10,000 volumes, with a circulation of 36,594.

The library in the town hall was constantly criticized for its cramped quarters. The issue became an annual political football, but nothing was done for over half a century. In 1954, the holdings were 20,471 books — almost triple the 1896 holdings and located in the same space.

In June 1954, Mayor Flornmond Bergeron formed a library advisory committee. It reported that a new building was badly needed. A New Haven architect, Henry Kelly, was engaged and he produced plans for a building to be located on Memorial Park, then known as the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Field. It

would house 55,000 volumes at a cost of \$275,000.

The Chronicle was an avid campaigner for the new library, and it published an artist's sketch of Kelly's plans on its front page of March 1, 1955. The "Memorial Public Library" would have been located on the site of the stone memorial building, erected in 1928. The memorial plaques were to be relocated in the porticoes. A tree-planted mall extended to the front entrance from the Main Street sidewalk.

A large center gable, which contained the entrance, was supported by fluted porticoes. Two large wings were located at either side. The east wing contained the adult library, a reference library and a display gallery. The west wing contained the children library,

and a terrace and patio facing Tingley Street, to be used in good weather for children's reading groups. This plan was abandoned, and 10 years would pass before the problem was tackled again.

Space restrictions in the town hall were eased somewhat in 1958 when the children's library was relocated to a house in the Hill district, donated in 1957 in the will of Mrs. Kate Hatheway Turner. A Willimantic public library report prepared in 1979 explained that, "the children's department left the crowded quarters' ... at the back section of the town hall, at 24 High Street, for the airy, castle-like home in the Taylor-Hatheway memorial library, at 191 Prospect Street."

In May 1964, mayor Leo Carey formed a library advisory committee. The current Main Street site was recommended and after much controversy regarding its location, construction for the long-awaited new library began in October 1966. It was open and dedicated on Dec. 3, 1967. The children's library was transferred there on Oct. 3, 1969.

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