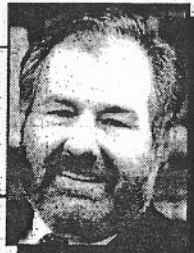


'Judge' Robinson played a role during Willimantic's most robust time



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Willimantic's "Judge" Robinson had a long and eventful life and was a player on the stage of the Thread City during its most prosperous era.

Otto B. Robinson was born July 25, 1872, at Morristown, N.J. His father, Remus, a native of Hampton, had a distinguished military career in the Civil War, serving as an officer in the 11th Regiment of Connecticut Volunteers.

After the war, Remus Robinson taught high school and qualified as a doctor of medicine. He was principal of a school in Morristown, N.J., when Otto was born. The family moved to the expanding borough of Willimantic in 1876, and Otto was educated in Willimantic's public schools.

He graduated from Natchaug High School with the Class of 1891.

Otto's maternal uncle, Rienzi Robinson, was a practicing physician in Danielson and his mother, Jennie Clark Robinson, was a prominent member of Willimantic society. She was an organizer and long-time president of the Willimantic Women's Club.

The Robinsons lived at 116 Union St. for many years, until the death of Otto's father in October 1900. He had been in poor health since the Civil War although he practiced medicine in Norwich and Hampton and was running a surgery in North Windham at the time of his death. Otto, his wife, Lena, and his mother subsequently rented rooms at 181 and then 198 Lewiston Ave. The Robinsons must have liked it up on the hill for they built a house there a decade later.

The Willimantic of Otto's youth was a bustling textile and railroad center, an important hub in New England's



Judge Otto B. Robinson

transport network. Otto worked as a postal clerk in the Willimantic post office for two years, and in 1894 he became a clerk in the mail office in Willimantic's railroad depot. He married Lena Fuller of Columbia in 1898, and began taking courses at Yale Law School,

paying his way with his clerk's salary.

He graduated with the Class of 1914, and at the age of 42 embarked on a new career as a lawyer.

In 1918, Otto Robinson was elected judge of the Windham-Scotland probate district, a job he held until 1929. In 1919, on the 200th anniversary of the Windham probate district, he published a book on the local history of probate distribution.

In 1911, Robinson began to build a house near the intersection of Lewiston and Chestnut Street. It's architectural style raised eyebrows. He built 207 Lewiston Ave. in the new Prairie fashion pioneered by Frank Lloyd Wright.

The Prairie School of architects, based in Chicago, produced an adventurous style with wide, overhanging eaves, contrasting wall materials, elaborate porches and an emphasis on horizontal lines — and thanks to Otto Robinson — Willimantic possesses a fine example.

Prairie houses were short-lived, beginning around 1900, and ending in the early 1920s. Most were built between 1905 and 1915, but the mode disappeared after World War I, and Willimantic has only a handful of these houses. The Prairie style was superseded by the art modern and art deco style.

After he retired as a judge, Robinson became secretary of the Masonic Charity and Education Association, which had offices at 58 North St. "Judge" Robinson retired from that position in 1950.

He had also been an enumerator for the federal census of 1930, and worked as the supervisor of the state commissioner of welfare until 1941. Lena Robinson died in 1953, and after a long illness, Otto B. Robinson died in Windham Hospital in 1955, at the age of 83.

Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, was the scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum from 1990 to 1995.

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