

March 08, 1997

### Thomas Morton Hills, MD. (1839-1909)

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In October, 1883, the burgesses of the borough of Willimantic deemed that all future structures built in the central business district, "shall be composed of brick, stone, iron, slate or tile." So in 1889, people were concerned that Dr. T. Morton Hills' new surgery and hospital on North street was being built of wood. The Chronicle voiced its disapproval: "The structure which Dr. Hills is erecting on North Street looms up like an Egyptian pyramid. It promises to be an attractive building, but what in the world the court of burgesses were thinking of when they granted permission to construct such a mammoth wooden pile right in the center of the business portion of the village is beyond comprehension. It should have been of brick or some other incombustible material." But this was the respected Dr. Hills building, his hospital,

surgery and homes, so a blind eye was turned towards this breaking of downtown building codes.

Thomas Morton Hills was born in Lovell, Maine, May 12, 1839, a true, blue Yankee, a descendent of William Hills, a founder of Hartford. Hills' father, Israel Hills (1801-1874), was a fire and brimstone preacher and clergyman in Maine and Connecticut. Hills ensured that his son would gain a fine education, so Thomas attended the East Windsor Hill Academy, and was subsequently trained in medicine and surgery at Yale. In October, 1862, Dr. Hills was appointed first assistant surgeon of the 27th Connecticut Volunteer Infantry, and was soon engaged in removing limbs at the battle of Fredericksburg. Later in the war, the young Dr. Hills was appointed chief surgeon to the government embalmers at Richmond, Virginia.

Hills opened a surgery in Richmond after the war, but he disliked the carpetbagging, reconstruction atmosphere there, and in March, 1866 he returned north and began a medical practice in Willimantic. His reputation as a swift, painless wielder of the scalpel soon grew, and in 1870 he was appointed local surgeon for all the railroad companies operating out of Willimantic. Railroadmen and pedestrians in those days suffered horrendous injuries at the numerous grade crossings and in the rail yards. Hills was elected president of the Connecticut Medical Association in 1887. His experience of rapid removal of limbs during the Civil War stood him in good stead. His practice blossomed, and in 1889 he built a hospital in downtown Willimantic, a "mammoth, wooden pile," "an Egyptian pyramid."

Hills built up one of the largest general practices in eastern Connecticut, and was

renown for his skills at amputation, surgery, fractures and dislocations. He was also a leading gynecologist. Dr. Hills hospital at 17 North Street was architecturally unique. He designed it. Fortunately, few architects perform medical surgery. But the interior was well designed and laid out. It consisted of operating rooms, and private bedrooms linked to an highly efficient ventilation system, which Hills designed himself. Bad air was considered to be the root of all evil by the 19th century medical profession.

Hills was also passionate about the purity of drinking water, and was responsible for the maintenance and development of the spring water well at Whittemore Park (Alex Caisse Park) in Willimantic. He was also a keen local historian, and grower of exotic fruits, flowers and vegetables in his gardens, north of Bolivia Street.

Hills death on January 23, 1909, was considered to be a tremendous loss to the city. Hills' youngest daughter, Dr. Laura Hills, took over her father's practice. Unfortunately Hills hospital was demolished in the 1974 redevelopment, along with Dr. Hills' unique barn and carriage house. But that's progress.