

August 29, 1998

1899 City Report Shows Little Crime in Willimantic (Part One of Two)

Oscar Tanner, Willimantic's Mayor in 1898/99.



Willimantic's growing late 19th century importance was reflected in the state granting a city charter in 1893. In 1833 Willimantic had become a borough, as textile mills, a growing population and increased housing separated this section of Windham from the rest of the mainly rural town. In the United States, this particular form of municipality is peculiar to Connecticut. A borough has an elected Warden and an advisory Board of Burgesses who have more authority and responsibilities than town selectmen, but less power than a city mayor and councilmen. A borough Warden had specific powers, but Willimantic's rapid urbanization called for the more concentrated power of a mayor and city council and officers.

A glance at the 1899 city report, the sixth, reveals the increasing problems posed by Willimantic's rapid growth after the Civil War. Willimantic's mayor in 1899 was a colorful Boston-born Irish-American named Oscar O. Tanner (1858-1933), who served a second term in 1904/05. He was a close friend of world champion boxer, John L. Sullivan, and had become locally notorious for his city saloons on Main and Union Streets, and for his managership of Willimantic's professional baseball outfit, the Colts, in 1894. He was also the promoter of boxing shows. In the 1898 city election, the "Demmykrat" Tanner carried every one of the city's four wards. Tanner produced his first annual city report in November, 1899. The city streets were a hot topic of conversation and controversy. Two heavy snowfalls the previous winter had caused many problems on Main Street, so Tanners' administration macadamized Main Street from North Street to Bridge Street -- 5,315 square yards at 52 cents per square yard. The year also saw the addition of a number of sidewalks, and the graveling and cobblestoning of a number of side streets, considered important for efficient travel.

Tanner then turned his attention to the conditions of the police, water, electric, fire and sewer departments. Willimantic experienced an "entire absence of disorder and crime," and Tanner boasted that the Willimantic police force had an enviable reputation for "discipline, faithfulness and efficiency." But a closer look at the report reveals that crime and disorder were totally absent in Willimantic in 1899.

The Willimantic Police Department consisted of an acting Captain and nine patrolmen. Five officers worked the nightbeat from 7 pm until 5 am. One officer walked up and down Main Street from 6 pm until 6 am, two officers were given duty as needed, and one officer was stationed at the Willimantic railroad station throughout the day. The

Consolidated Railroad Company paid his wages.

Willimantic's police officers had made 311 arrests during the year. Drunkenness made up for 167 arrests, 25 were for "breach of the peace," 20 for assault, 19 for violation of bicycle law, and 14 for larceny. Among the other arrests, some of the more interesting and curious from an historical perspective were five "incorrigible minors," four "runaway boys," two for "bastardy," one for bigamy and two for "fornication." One hundred and six of those arrested were committed to the city jail on Church Street-- and two escaped. In those days, unemployed workers tramped across the country, from town to town, looking for work -- thus the expression "tramp." The Willimantic police lodged 1,310 tramps at the Church Street police station in 1898/99.

The city treasurer, Fred Sanderson, reported an annual expenditure \$73, 938. More than \$15,000 was spent on upgrading and lighting the streets, and almost \$11,000 was spent on the police and fire departments. The hard work of the city's most popular individual, John H. Morrison, the tax collector, helped to pay for the city's services. A break down of the police department's expenditures reveals that Acting-Captain E. H. Richmond was receiving \$75 a month salary, and the regular officers were receiving around \$68 a month. The full time Captain, William Hillhouse, who had resigned in May to become the Deputy Sheriff of Windham County, had received an annual salary of \$1,000.

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK