

## Trade School Has a Lot of History (Part 1 of 7)

**Willimantic Trade School, pictured on Bank Street in the 1940s, was originally an old silk mill.**



For people driving or walking down Valley Street today, the area on the western junction with Bank Street is an insignificant parking lot -- but this downtown area of Willimantic has witnessed a great deal of history. Older residents will recall that it was, from 1928 until 1956, the site of the Willimantic Trade School. Prior to 1928, the large brick building which housed the trade school was built as the Turner silk mill, and operated as such between 1888 until 1917. Between 1918 until 1926, the old silk mill housed several diverse industries and companies.

The land in question was originally owned by Thomas W. Cunningham, who made his fortune in 19th century Willimantic as the proprietor of a number of saloons and bars which slaked the thirsts of mill workers. He opened Willimantic's first grog shop on Main Street in 1825, selling rum, gin, brandy, cider, Albany ale, Madeira wine and metheglen at three and five cents a drink. Cunningham died in 1886, and in his will he bequeathed the meadow behind Main Street -- thus Meadow Street -- to the borough of Willimantic if they would develop it into a public park. The borough declined the offer, as the borough fathers realized much more could be made from Cunningham's prime location through city taxes. The land was sold privately to silk manufacturer Arthur Turner in 1887. Two years later a large four story brick-built silk mill, 130 foot x 100 foot, was completed and ready to weave silk cloth. Turner was the son of Arthur W. Turner, who had built a silk manufacturing community at Turnerville in Hebron on the North Pond, which is known today as Amston Lake. Arthur Turner's silk mill prospered on Cunningham's old meadow for a generation. It survived the financial panic of 1894, and continued production until 1915. The company went into receivership, and the mills extensive silk weaving machinery was purchased by a Canadian silk manufacturer and shipped to

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Montreal in 1917. The extensive mill building housed several companies during the subsequent decade, including an electric cable manufacturer. But in 1927, the Windham Selectman appropriated \$10,000 to convert the old silk mill into the Willimantic Trade School to provide vocational training to students 14 years of age and upwards. Connecticut's first trade school was instituted in Putnam in 1913, and the Willimantic school was the eighth to be established in the state. However, its funding was no easy task. Windham has a long record of conservatism regarding fiscal matters as the battles of the building of the town hall (1896), footbridge (1906), trade school (1927), and the new middle school (1994) have proven.

Bill Zenko, the current Assistant Director of the Windham Vocational Technical College, prepared a detailed history of the Willimantic Trade School from 1928 until 1978. Zenko's research reveals that the final cost of alterations to the old Turner Silk Mill came to almost \$20,000 -- double the estimated cost. Some financial wizardry was performed with the budgets and the town subsequently claimed that the costs came to \$17,000 -- but the defenders of the school reminded its many critics of its long term benefits to the city in increased trade. Also the school's supporters argued that a pool of skilled workers may attract new industry to the city.

END OF PART ONE: TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK