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## **Howard University, Willimantic Enjoy Special Link (Part One of Two)**

Along with Atlanta, Fisk and Morehouse, Howard University in Washington DC is one of the foremost Black colleges in the United States -- and it has an interesting local connection. Howard University, also known as the "Capstone," has a long list of renowned graduates, including famous political and literary figures such as Thurgood Marshall, Andrew Young, Stokely Carmichael and Toni Morrison.

Howard University was founded on March 2, 1867, shortly after the First Congregational Society of Washington DC had decided to establish a theological seminary to educate African-American clergymen. The seminary was named for the Civil War hero, General Oliver Howard, who was Commissioner of the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees and Abandoned Lands, which channeled federal aid to help and support African-Americans and poor whites dislocated by the Civil War. One of the founders of the First Congregational Church in Washington DC and an original incorporator of Howard University, was a well known Willimantic educator, borough treasurer and businessman Eleazer McCall Cushman was born in Mansfield, Connecticut on July 13, 1819, and was the oldest child of Demmon and Sophia McCall Cushman. He died on January 2, 1892, of pneumonia, at Dr. Thomas Morton Hills's hospital on North Street, Willimantic. Cushman was described as a man of "fine instincts, highly wrought nervous and emotional temperament and of excellent qualities of mind and heart." His father died when he was four years old, leaving his mother with the care of himself and younger brother, Joab Ellsworth Cushman. Eleazer was educated in the common schools of Mansfield, and in 1836 he began a career in teaching.

Cushman followed his profession in Connecticut, New York and Massachusetts. In 1851 he became principal of the First District School in Willimantic, where he was "well liked by both parents and pupils." In May 1853, Cushman was appointed superintendent of the Rhode Island Reform School at Providence, a position he held until the outbreak of the Civil War. In 1861 Cushman entered government service as a clerk in the Treasury Department in Washington DC. E. M. Cushman was the agent of the Hartford Soldier's Aid Association and also of the Connecticut Soldiers Relief Association. One of his major responsibilities was in the distribution of supplies for the troops at the front.

Eleazer Cushman was an organizer of Washington DC's First Congregational Church. The original church was built in 1868. But Cushman's greatest achievement was in founding and incorporating Howard University, which was described in 1892 as "an institution for the education of the colored youth of the District of Columbia."

Cushman's name followed that of Ulysses S. Grant on the roll of incorporators. During his years in the capital, Eleazer McCall Cushman was a close friend of General Oliver Howard, and "many other prominent men held him in great esteem."

Eleazer Cushman was Howard University's first Secretary and Treasurer, but he was in

the post only for a few months. On November 19, 1844 he married Melinda Barrows, daughter of Dan and Abigail Barrows of Mansfield. She died in 1862, and Cushman's 18-year-old daughter, Mary died eighteen months later, "and he never ceased to mourn these his loved ones gone, and often spoke of them to his friends." Cushman suffered an emotional and physical breakdown, and resigned his post at Howard. He returned to Willimantic in 1868, and went into partnership with his brother, J. E. Cushman, in the furniture and undertaking business. The Cushman brothers operated out of the building that stood at the old junction between Main Street and Union Street. J. C. Lincoln later purchased the business and building, and the area became known as Lincoln Square, before being demolished in 1974.

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