

History

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Windham Tech gets a brand-new home



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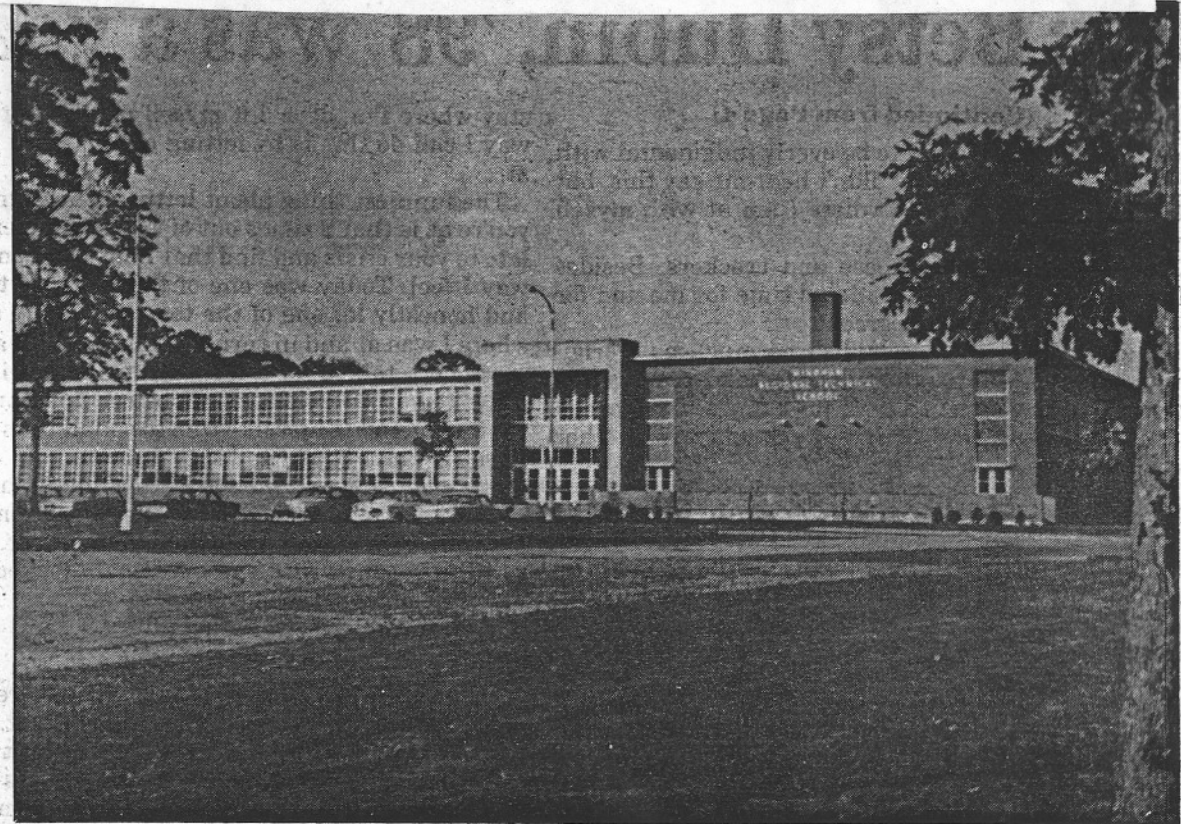
Part Five

In 1950, Windham Tech's director John Clark organized a committee to secure public and political support to build a new facility in Willimantic. The 1888 Turner Silk Mill was far too small for the school's growing enrollments and expanding programs. Many will recognize the names in Clark's committee — Jim Currier, Arthur Roy, Florimond Bergeron, Ralph Crosthwaite, Roger Paulhus, George Champlin, Ted Swol, Harry Chambers, Willis Ridgeway, William Sweeney, The Rev. Robert Armstrong and John Roy.

This was a powerful and influential group, and in the spring of 1951, the General Assembly appropriated \$1.5 million for the new Willimantic school. Ground for the new school was broken in a ceremony that took place in front of 200 people in a field at the north end of Birch Street on

Oct. 21, 1954. Gov. John Lodge and University of Connecticut President Albert Jorgensen were invited to witness the ground-breaking, but had to decline. Robert Macey, the State Commissioner of Public Works, turned over the first shovel of dirt. The Rev. Ben Styring of St. Paul's Episcopal Church gave invocation, and the Rev. Roland Guilmette of St. Mary's blessed the grounds.

Emmett O'Brien, the director of special services for the State Department of Education, addressed the group and announced the new school would accommodate 400 students, double the number currently enrolled in the Bank Street school. Windham First Selectman Ralph Crosthwaite praised the roles of state Sen. Andre Desrosier; and state Representatives Walter King and Lester Shea in securing the new school for Willimantic. Mayor Florimond Bergeron spoke and stressed that it was important that the new school be built in Willimantic, the educational center of eastern Connecticut. Ruth Russ, the school's secretary since 1928, was presented with a bouquet of flowers by carpentry instructor George Jay, as ground-breaking day was her birth-



The new Windham Regional-Vocational Technical School pictured shortly after its opening in 1956.

day. The group then retired to the Nathan Hale Hotel to partake in a celebratory dinner.

The new facility was designed by architect Joseph Della Valla of New Haven, and its construction was completed by the Felix Buzzi Co. of Torrington. Building work commenced in early 1955, and by May 1956, Windham Tech students were transferring equipment from the old Bank Street facility into the new Birch Street School. The new school's

gym hosted graduation exercises on June 20. The school officially opened in September 1956 and dedicated in a ceremony on Oct. 14, 1956.

The new building consisted of two large wings. The main building was two stories high and contained offices and classrooms where students practiced engineering drawing. There were also classes for Licensed Practical Nurses, for which courses commenced in the 1957-58 academic year.

One wing housed radio and television repair rooms, electrical, machine, carpentry and automotive repair shops. The student enrollment was 280, of which 125 were freshmen. Practical and academic education was equally distributed. Off-the-job classroom education included English, social studies, driver education, math, science and blueprint reading. The school year was 200 days long, and students attended between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m.