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## History

# A look at Willimantic's first baseball team

This is a photograph of the 1866 Willimantic Baseball Club. A closer look at its members reveals an interesting social history of 19th century Willimantic. The players are back row, left to right, George Cunningham, Edwin Hall Jr., Albert Turner, Edward Dewing, William Swift. Front row, left to right, Eugene Boss, Dave Gillian, Clitus Witter and Dan O'Neill.



Tom  
Beardsley

George Cunningham was a gentleman of leisure, the son of Thomas W. Cunningham, a founder of the borough of Willimantic. T.W. Cunningham was Willimantic's first tax collector and a state representative. In 1867, he donated the land to build Willimantic's new Congregational Church at Valley and Walnut streets. The latter thoroughfare was once called Cunningham's Lane. On his death in 1872, he left a parcel of land across from the new church to develop a park, but the town fathers declined the offer and encouraged the build-

ing of a silk mill on the site to generate taxes. Cunningham built his fortune by supplying Willimantic's millworkers with beer and whiskey. His first saloon stood on the site of the Victorian Lady. His son, George, and widow inherited an equal share of Thomas' \$50,348 will, a fortune in 1872.

Edwin H. Hall Jr. was born in 1848. His father Edwin H. Hall Sr., and uncles Gardiner Hall and Origen Hall, were founders of the cotton industry in Willington. In 1857, Gardiner Hall built the Willimantic mill later known as American Thread's Mill No. 1. Edwin H. Hall Sr. was a county commissioner, the son of Nathan Hall, a wealthy landowner from Mansfield who arrived in Willimantic in 1825 as a shareholder in the Windham Manufacturing Co. on Bridge Street. Edwin H. Hall Jr. and his father owned and operated a cotton yarn mill in North Windham, previously owned by Justin Swift.

Albert Turner was born in 1842. His father Thomas Turner (1819-82) was born in England and became a dry goods dealer and major landowner in Willimantic prior to the Civil War. He was a founder of the Willimantic Methodist Church and the Willimantic Methodist Campground. Thomas Turner laid out Maple Street, and built the hotel and commercial block



that stood on the site of Liberty Bank. Turner Street is named for him. Albert inherited his father's fortune, and continued the dry goods business. Grandson Fred Turner was a well-known photographer and was the proprietor of a popular Willimantic drug store.

Clitus Witter became a famous New York City lawyer. His widowed mother, Maria Witter, was Thomas Turner's second wife. His father was a local physician, and the family lived in a large Colonial-style house, demolished in 1910 to make way for the new Willimantic post office. Edward Dewing was Clitus' college friend and came from a long-established Mansfield family. William Swift (1848-1919) was the son of Justin Swift who owned and operated a cotton mill in North Windham, later operated by the Halls. He became a rear admiral in the U.S. Navy and was a Governor of Guam.

In 1884, Eugene Stowell Boss (1842-1920) was appointed the

agent and manager of the Willimantic Linen, and held the position until his retirement in 1916. He was responsible for the building of American Thread's dyehouse and mills 5 and 6, recently demolished by Windham Mills. The thread mills employed Boss for 50 years.

Dan O'Neill was a tailor in town, and Dave Gillian just wandered into Thomas Turner's hotel from the railroad station looking for a meal, and boasted of his pitching abilities. Little else is known of him. The team scorer, unpictured, was Thomas S. Weaver, a future publisher of the Willimantic Journal and later the superintendent of Hartford schools. Weaver High School is named for him.

A generation later, Willimantic's famed professional baseball teams featured no old money Yankees, being dominated by Irish Americans. We'll look at two of the most well known during the next two weeks.