

History

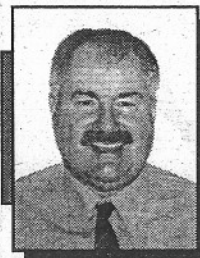
The early days of Windham High

Part One of Five

In 1862, David P. Corbin came to the expanding borough of Willimantic and opened a private high school, the "Willimantic Institute," on the third floor of the old Franklin Hall. It was a resounding success and attracted a large number of students from surrounding towns.

In 1866, Corbin was hired as principal of Willimantic's second district school, the Natchaug. He set down a grade system, and organized high school classes on the top floor of the building, employing the methods used in his own academy. Corbin stepped down in 1869, due to ill health, and his high school closed. Only a handful of private students continued to take high school courses as part of the two school districts' grammar schools.

In 1876, the borough burgesses voted to separate the grammar and high schools, and to estab-



Tom Beardsley

lish one high school. Progress was slow as the age-old fear of high taxes struck terror into the hearts of the voters. By the mid-1880s, two separate high schools were formed, one for each school district, as taxpayers did not want to pay for a high school in a different district. Common sense eventually emerged, and the two high schools merged to form the "union" Willimantic High School in 1888 in rooms in the Natchaug building. The school's first principal was Frank H. Beede, an 1883 graduate of Yale. He increased the number of pupils, particularly those from out-of-town, who

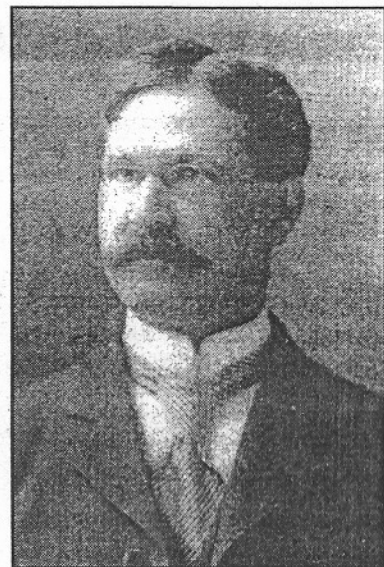
paid "considerable sums in tuition." Beede also engaged more teachers and added music, drawing and elocution to the curriculum.

The rooms in the Natchaug were becoming crowded, and Beede appealed to the town fathers for a new building. On Nov. 28, 1891, a committee was appointed to investigate the necessity and cost of a new building. The committee's report stressed the urgency of larger premises. The opposition to the plan was overwhelming, and surpassed the controversies that met those who proposed the building of the town hall in 1896 and the footbridge in 1906. From 1891 until 1894, the opposition defeated all attempts to build a new school.

On Oct. 8, 1894, the pro-school forces organized a new committee consisting of Thomas J. Kelley, Frank Larrabee and Edwin

Buck. On Dec. 7, 1894, it submitted plans for a new building and recommended a site at the corner of Prospect and Windham streets, above the Willimantic Normal School. The school committee realized that it must attract financial support to defeat the anti-school forces. Beede had fought hard for a new school, but he became discouraged by the virulent opposition and moved on in 1895 to become superintendent of schools in New Haven.

Buck's legislature connections paid off, and the state donated a tract of land fronting 283 feet on Prospect Street and 175 feet on Windham Street. The committee also suggested that the selectmen should not borrow the money at a greater interest of 4 percent, and asked prospective builders not to exceed \$30,000 in their bids. Builders must follow the plans of architect Charles T. Beardsley, who had designed the



Frank H. Beede, the headmaster of Willimantic's first public high school, pictured in 1894.

new town hall. He had put together something special for the new Windham High School.

Next Week: Details of the 1897 Windham High School, considered to be one of the finest public buildings in the state.

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