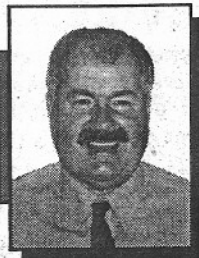


## History

# WHS goes up in flames



Tom  
Beardsley

### Part Four of Five

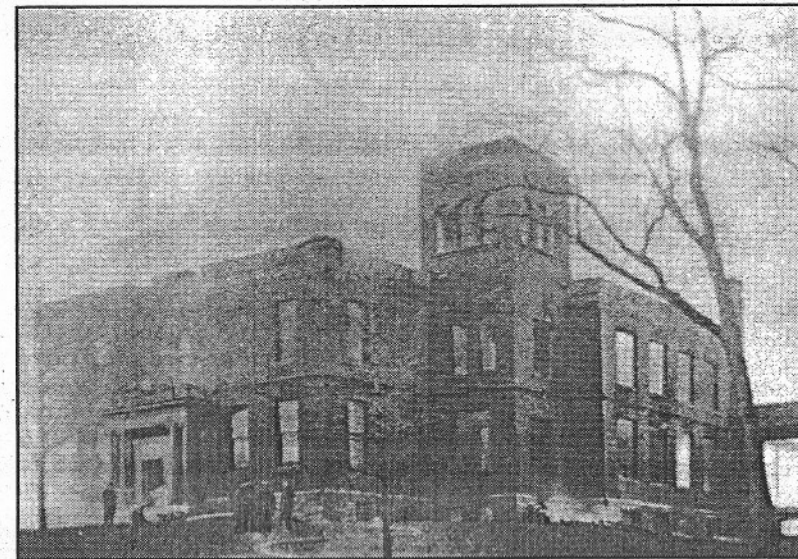
For 16 years, from 1897 until 1913, Willimantic boasted one of the finest public buildings in the state. Renowned architect Charles T. Beardsley, who had also designed the 1896 Windham Town Hall, was responsible for the Windham High School building. It was picturesquely located on Prospect Street between High and Windham streets, above the Willimantic Normal School. The new high school attracted some of the best principals from around the country, and Yale's "Windham Club," graduates of Windham High School and Yale, organized numerous cultural and educational programs between the college and the school.

At 2:30 on Sunday morning, April 28, 1913, Willimantic patrolman Thomas Grady was conducting his beat on Main Street when he noted a glow in the north sky. He rushed up High Street and was horrified to see that the Windham High School was engulfed in flames. Grady set the fire alarm, and hundreds of people rushed on to the streets to see the conflagration. When the fire companies arrived at the school, the new 1910 section was a mass of flames. The fireman pointed their hoses at the flames, but there was no pressure. The pumps at the Willimantic pumping station in Mansfield were turned off, so the superintendent of the water department borrowed an automobile and speeded to the water works. In those precious minutes, the flames totally engulfed the 1897 building. It may have been saved if pressure had been sufficient.

The fire was so hot that fireman hosed down adjacent buildings, and the homeowners took out the valuables. There was

much alarm when the chemicals in the science laboratories began to explode, but no one was hurt. The fire burned all day Sunday as the fireman continued to pour water on the smoldering debris. People came from all around and stared in disbelief at the disaster before them. Many were weeping, distressed by the fact that this beautiful building was lost. Also lost were all the school's books and records. It was a disaster of the highest order.

The last person in the building was Principal Egbert Case. He had left at 8 p.m. on Saturday night. Rumors flashed around town that the fire had been set, but the police claimed that as yet, there was no evidence of this. Others believed it to be an electrical problem, but electrician Elmer Young, who had wired the school, claimed there were no wires in the section of the building where it was thought the fire had started. The town officials were criticized for not having a night watchman on duty, and rumors grew that the



The burning Windham High School, as pictured at daylight on April 28, 1913. The area is enshrouded by thick smoke.

fire was caused by a gas leak.

The town school committee was summoned to meet at the Normal School on Sunday morning. The Normal School's principal, Henry T. Burr, gave over the first floor of his school for the students. Several hundred seats were carted from the town hall to the Normal School, and the Congregational Church sent over a large number of long tables. The

Methodist Church on Church Street also offered its vestry for use as schoolrooms.

The school had been insured for \$76,000, and the contents for \$4,000. It was shared between nine local insurance agents. But it was estimated the loss was worth more than \$125,000, making it the largest fire in the city's history.

*Next Week: Rebuilding begins*

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