

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The **Willimantic Public Library**. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "**The Chronicle**" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

18 ALBUM, the Chronicle, Saturday, September 30, 2000

## History

# When a convent treated the sick

Hospital and medical facilities for Willimantic's sick were provided in St. Joseph's convent from the 1870s, but by the beginning of the 20th century, larger facilities were sorely needed to tend to the city's growing population. Willimantic's St. Joseph's Hospital was founded in 1907 and staffed by the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's Parish. It was incorporated the following year, and included on the boards of incorporators and directors were leading citizens such as Guilford Smith of South Windham's Smith and Winchester Co., and Eugene Boss of the American Thread Co.

St. Joseph's original convent building was remodeled at a cost of \$7,000 and a new convent was built adjacent to it at a cost of \$20,000. Also included in this 1907 building project, which totally transformed the corner of Valley and Jackson streets, was the construction of St. Joseph's School at a further cost of \$30,000.

Several local organizations



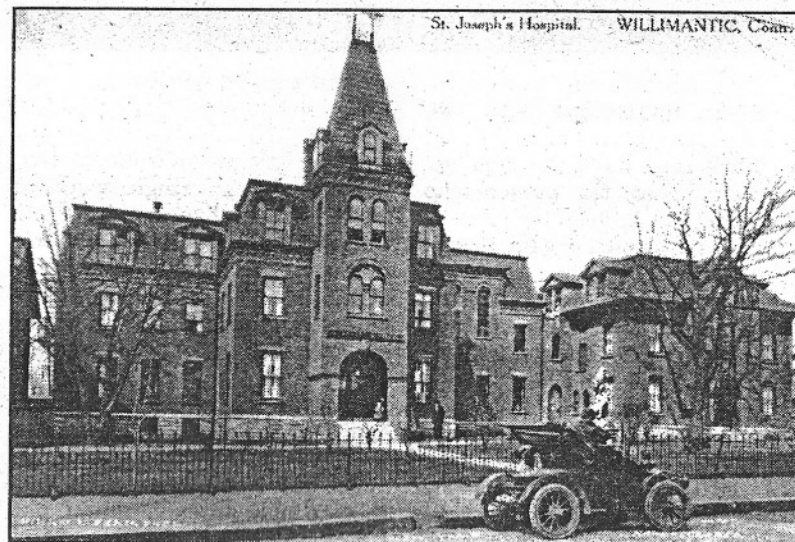
Tom  
Beardsley

raised funds to build rooms in the new hospital. The city's leading Protestant ladies were members of the Willimantic branch of the Needlework Guild of America, and donated the funds to equip a surgical ward. The Catholic Benevolent Association furnished further rooms and wards, along with the Knights of Columbus and members of the Hebrew Association. The ladies of the Congregational Church financed the children's ward. The Willimantic Liquor Association donated \$150 in gold and American Thread donated \$700, the proceeds of a ball that dedicated the opening of its Mill No. 6. The hospital opened for business on Jan. 1, 1908.

The hospital's Dutch-born nuns, led by Sister Thersilla, had spent several weeks in Hartford to observe the day-to-day organization of St. Francis Hospital. They returned to Willimantic with experience in how to make bandages. This, combined with their European nursing experiences, meant that the patients at the new hospital would be in capable hands.

The hospital's directors were proud of the new operating room located in the west end of the building. Additional light was provided by the insertion of a skylight, and patients could recuperate from surgery in two large sun parlors where they would enjoy sunlight from 10:30 a.m. until sundown. Furthermore, the new hospital had a new X-ray machine, powered by a galvanic battery.

By 1920, it was estimated that almost 8,000 patients had been treated. The hospital provided a training school that graduated 75 new nurses every year. The course was two years and three



St. Joseph's Hospital and Convent, shortly after it opened in 1908.

months in duration.

The resources of St. Joseph's Hospital were stretched to the limit during the 1917 influenza epidemic.

By 1926, it was obvious that the 40-bed hospital needed expanding and modernizing, but the Sisters of Charity, based in the Netherlands, were finding it difficult to raise funds and provide nursing staff, so the St. Joseph parish suggested a com-

munity effort to build a new hospital. The Windham Community Memorial Hospital was opened just seven years later and St. Joseph's stopped admitting patients in April 1933, after serving the community for 25 years.

*Come and join me on a bus tour and discover the rich history and industrial heritage of the Quinebaug Valley on Oct. 22. Contact the Windham Recreation Department at 465-3046.*