

## — HISTORY —

# 'Interesting exercises' for the church's 50th anniversary

*Part three of seven*

The growth of the First Baptist Church of Willimantic and the borough of Willimantic continued unabated after the Civil War. In 1869-70 the church edifice was enlarged, and its rededication took place on Feb. 15, 1870. Connecticut's leading Baptist preacher, Dr. C. B. Crane of Hartford, read the sermon.

In October 1877, the Willimantic Baptist Church's 50th anniversary was celebrated. A local newspaper wrote that, "The exercises were very interesting. Among the noticeable features was the historic poem by the Rev. P. S. Evans, two solos by Miss Bateman of Springfield. Also solos by Mr. H. L. Hall, Miss Anna Hall and Miss Emma Webster. The music was under the direction of the veteran Professor Amos Hall and gave great satisfaction."

Richard Bayles noted in 1889 that the Willimantic Baptists numbered 400, and that, "the church is a neat and commodious building, which, with the lot it stands upon, is valued at \$25,000.



Tom  
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Connected with the church is a vigorous Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor and a large and flourishing Sunday school."

The Willimantic Baptist Church continued to thrive. In May 1887 the *Willimantic Chronicle* reported that, "decided improvements are being made about the Baptist Church in the way of grading and turfing and some solid granite steps have been placed at the front entrance." The improvements continued and in 1889 the church was once again enlarged and decorated under the pastorate of the Rev. M. George Coker. Dedicatory services were held on Jan. 7, 1890.

The 1890s were an eventful decade for the Willimantic Baptists. For example in 1892 an impressive new organ was installed in the church, and in October the church hosted the

Connecticut Convention of Connecticut Baptist Churches — and was drawn into an inter-denominational row thanks to an overzealous guest speaker. In 1896, the church was unwittingly drawn into a local banking controversy, because of a steamy affair between a choir member and a dentist.

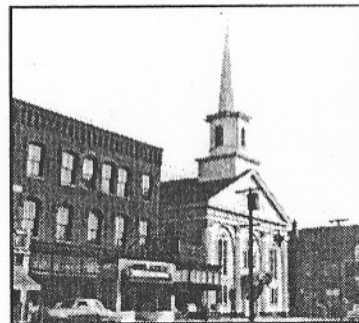
On Tuesday evening, July 19, 1892, the Willimantic Baptist Church organized a grand dedication concert to celebrate the installation of its new tracker pipe organ, purchased for \$2,000 by J. W. Steere & Sons, the renowned organ builders of Springfield, Mass. This rare 528 pipe organ was valued in 1994 for around \$350,000. Tracker organs have a wonderful tone. The Willimantic organ is of the original design wherein the keys make a mechanical connection to the pipes to open them. It is powered by electricity today, but at the time of the dedicatory concert it was powered by water. The organist on that day, 109 years ago, was Professor Henry Eyre Browne from Dr. Thomas DeWitt Talmage's famed

Central Presbyterian Tabernacle in Brooklyn, N.Y. His Willimantic program included pieces from Bach, Rossini's *William Tell* Overture, to Sir Herbert Parry's *Jerusalem*. Every seat in the church was taken, and extra chairs had to be called for.

In October 1892, on the 75th anniversary of the church, the Connecticut Baptist Churches held the "Baptist Anniversaries" in Willimantic for the first time since 1863.

The church's pastor, John Bunyan Lemon explained that the Baptist Anniversaries were a series of annual meetings that included the State Ministers Conference, Baptist Young People's Union, State Missionary Convention, Women's American Baptist Home Mission Society, Women's Baptist Foreign Mission Society, Connecticut Baptist Layman's Social Union, and the Connecticut Baptist Layman's Society.

Delegates came to the city from across the state, and every hotel bed was taken, and Lemon made an appeal for local families to



*The Willimantic Baptist Church, in 1951.*

board more than 100 visitors who could not find accommodation.

The delegates began to arrive by train from virtually every town across Connecticut on Monday, Oct. 17, 1892, to engage in one of the most significant events in Willimantic history.

However, the occasion would become tinged with controversy, and is a local reminder of the religious controversies that the United States endured during the period of mass immigration in the 19th century.

*Continued next week*

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