

Baptist Church unwittingly drawn into controversy

Part five of seven

Despite the controversy surrounding the Rev. Hazelwood's remarks about the Roman Catholic Church, the Connecticut Baptist conferences in Willimantic in 1892 were considered a great success. The local businessmen were particularly pleased with the increased income generated by over 2,000 visitors to the town for the duration of the conferences. Just before the official closing of the convention, the Woman's Baptist Foreign Missionary Society of Connecticut held their 21st annual meeting in the Willimantic Baptist Church. The highlight was an eloquent address from Baptist missionary Dr. Emma J. Cummings of Ramapatam, India.

The closing ceremonies took place on the evening of Oct. 19, 1892, during a banquet at Washburn Hall on Valley Street. It was organized by the Baptist Social Union, who hired a Mr. Habenstein, a caterer from Hartford. The hall was tastefully decorated. The tables were trimmed with flowers and lighted

candelabras.

The sumptuous supper consisted of cold roast turkey with currant jelly, Saratoga chips, cold roast ham, cold tongue, chicken salad, oyster platter, celery and pickles. For dessert, the 200 conventioners attending had a choice of fancy creams, assorted cakes, chocolate and whipped cream, confectionary and fruits. After the supper was completed, the evening ended with speeches and the singing of hymns.

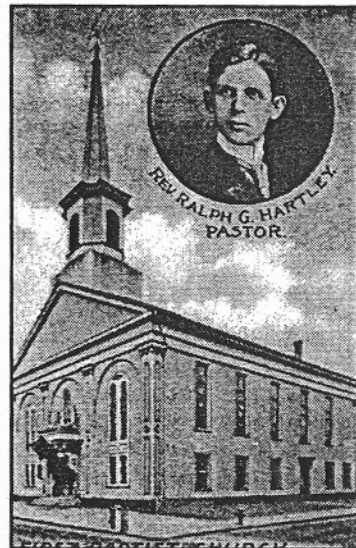
In 1896, some four years after the First Baptist Church's 75th anniversary celebrations, the church was unwittingly drawn into more controversy. The Baptist church's magnificent pipe organ provided music for the congregation, choirs and solo singers. Lily Walden was one of the most popular and accomplished solo and choir singers at the Willimantic Baptist Church dur-



Tom
Beardsley

ing the early 1890s. She certainly helped fill the pews. The Boston Herald reported that, "She was so attractive that the men of Willimantic all fell in love with her and paid her more than ordinary attention. Walden's voice was like a nightingale."

The prettiest girl in Willimantic had attracted the son of one of the wealthiest men in the city. John L. Walden was the treasurer of the Dime Savings Bank, a bank in



The Willimantic Baptist Church was featured in this 1907 postcard when the Rev. Ralph G. Hartley was pastor.

which his father James W. Walden was the president, and he married Lily, much to the chagrin of many young men in town. John L. Walden had become the youngest bank treasurer in Connecticut in 1880, aged 20.

Walden's looks and voice attracted the attention of a tenor in the Willimantic Baptist Church Choir named Dr. D. Everett Taylor, "a young dude dentist with an office at 326 Main Street." After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in 1892, 22-year-old Dr. Taylor came to Willimantic and set up a practice in the city. He became so friendly with Lily Walden that her husband, John L. Walden, barred Taylor from the family home.

The Boston newspaper gave more details of the focus of the dentist's affections. "Mrs. Walden is called one of the handsomest women in Windham County. She is twenty-eight years of age and thoroughly accomplished, but those who know her say she is not as brilliantly intellectually as she might be and knows that she is good looking and likes to be admired by the male sex."

John L. Walden returned home unexpectedly from a business trip late one night in April 1896, and found the dentist with his wife. Taylor claimed that he and Mrs. Walden were practicing a new

tune for the following Sunday's performance at Willimantic's First Baptist Church. Shortly afterwards, Walden disappeared with the funds of the Dime Savings Bank, causing the bank to go into receivership.

The bank was already under investigation because of its less-than-professional dealings. Shortly afterwards Lily Walden then began to sing for the Willimantic's Universalist Church choir, and Dr. Taylor left to set up practice in New York City. So Willimantic's First Baptist Church choir lost a soprano and a tenor.

The Willimantic Baptist Church continued to grow during the 1890s, despite the antics of guest speakers and choir members. These antics do not alter the fact that some of Willimantic's leading citizens, men who helped build the Thread City, in the 19th century were devout Baptists and highly active in civic, political, business and religious circles. They included Mansfield-born Albert Barrows (1825-1902) who operated a slaughterhouse and meat store in the city; industrialist Edwin Bugbee (1825-1913), one of the wealthiest men in eastern Connecticut who built and lived in the fine mansion at 97 Prospect St.; Allen Burleson (1816-88), a

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cotton thread pioneer who helped launch the company that became American Thread; Charles E. Carpenter (1833-1911), a grocer and local politician who was instrumental in getting the Normal School built in Willimantic; Origen Hall (1806-88), a member of the Willington Halls who introduced the cotton thread industry to Willimantic;

Merrick Johnson (1807-95), a Willington-born grocer and a leading member of the First Baptist Church; Fred Rogers (1835-1917), Willimantic's well-known physician and druggist who was chairman of the church board, and Elliot B. Sumner (1834-1900), one of Willimantic's first lawyers who came to the borough from Tolland in 1860.

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