

— HISTORY —

Dwight E. Potter: a one-man beautification committee

One of Willimantic's grandest examples of 19th century domestic architecture is often overlooked, probably because it's not located in the Hill District. The building is now the home of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, and is located at 76 Windham St. The building's first owner and builder is also a forgotten figure, but he has left Willimantic with a tremendous architectural legacy.

Dwight E. Potter was born in

Eastford in 1841, the son of Alfred H. and Laura J. Potter. When he left school Potter was apprenticed as a carpenter to Mansfield's famous architect and

builder, Col. Edwin Fitch. Potter's reputation quickly spread as he



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worked across Tolland and Windham counties on Fitch's numerous church and mill buildings. Potter was then hired in 1863 as a carpenter by the Willimantic Linen Co. to build its showpiece Mill Number Two, now operated by Windham Mills.

The foreman carpenter left halfway through the job, and Potter was appointed head carpenter to complete the project. A tour of Windham Mills gives testimony to Potter's abilities.

After Mill No. 2 was completed, Potter built and designed the office block in front of the new mill. This fine Greek Revival structure contains outstanding examples of walnut and black cherry window sashes and paneling. Potter was then hired as the superintendent of all outside work and had charge of all transport, building and repairs.

In 1879 he was hired by Silas Loomer to help build his grand new opera house on Main Street. Soon after construction began, Potter was offered the gargantuan task of building the Willimantic Linen Co.'s Mill No. 4, then the

largest textile mill in the world. Mill No. 4, the Loomer Opera House, and the 40 worker's cottages in the Quercus Avenue area of the town known as the Oaks, were all fine testimonies to Potter's skills.

Dwight Potter planted elm and maple trees around the town in the 1880s, and also began a wood-working business with Herbert Chappell.

The pair manufactured many of the interior and exterior fittings of the fine Victorian houses sprouting up on Prospect and Summit streets. Potter and Chappell later sold this concern to Hillhouse and Taylor.

Potter had married Mary Ann Hazen of Mansfield Center in 1866, and in 1881 the couple moved into the fine house he designed and built at 76 Windham St. After his wife's death Potter married Camilla Jillson of Hartford in 1907, and moved to Hartford to live with his new wife at 67 Weathersfield Ave. In 1909 Potter's health began to decline, and he became despondent. Potter's son-in-law, John E. Brick,



Dwight Potter's house at 76 Windham St. as pictured in the 'Illustrated Review.'

paid him a visit from Willimantic on April 19, 1911. During lunch, Potter declared he was feeling unwell, and retired upstairs. Shortly afterwards, Brick and Mrs. Potter were startled by a pistol shot.

They rushed upstairs and found Potter in the bath, upright with a gunshot wound above his left ear.

Potter's funeral was held in his home in Hartford. The body was subsequently transported to Willimantic by rail where it was interred in the Willimantic cemetery for burial in the family plot, and thus returned to the city he had done so much to visually improve in the years following the Civil War.

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