

— HISTORY —

The Armory: a building of history, tradition

Part one of two

One of Willimantic's finest buildings is located on Pleasant Street. The Willimantic Armory was built in 1912, to provide a new home for Windham's Company L, First Infantry of the Connecticut National Guard.

The program published for the dedication of the building on January 31, 1913, provides details of the building's structure, biographies of local men who served as officers in the company, and a brief history of Willimantic's National Guard.

Windham's National Guard Company was organized on Sept. 6, 1871, as Company E, Third Regiment of the Connecticut National Guard. The part-time soldiers had to attend weekly evening drills in a rented hall on Main Street. Each member had to purchase his own uniform at a cost of \$35 from a New London firm, and those absent from the weekly drills were fined a dollar.

In the early days, the company provided escort for Willimantic's Civil War veterans, as they

marched along Main street every Memorial Day. The company's first encampment was held at New London in August 1874. This fine building, demolished in 1974, served as a silk mill, a venue for town meetings, the home of the Windham Athletic Club, and for many years it was the headquarters of the Franco-American club. The Center Street Armory Hall was always a favorite venue for dances. Locals recall its spring floor, designed for drilling.

On Friday, Nov. 25, 1883, Willimantic's Company E left for New York City to take place in the centennial celebration of the evacuation of the city by the British in 1783. The Willimantic soldiers marched from Central Park to the Battery, but due to a misunderstanding, most of them missed the Long Island Sound ferry from Manhattan to New London, but



Tom Beardsley

unfortunately only 15 of 60 weekend soldiers made it back to the Thread City for work on the following Monday.

In August 1897, Company E moved from Center Street to a new armory located on Valley street. At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898, the company had a full quota of 68 men and officers. President McKinley subsequently called for more National Guard volunteers from across the nation, and Windham responded by doubling the size of its company. The soldiers left Willimantic in August 1898, and were based at Camp Haven, Niantic. They were later posted to camps in Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Georgia, but never saw action in Cuba. Company E was mustered out of United States service on March 20, 1899. Three members had died of typhoid fever, which was blamed on the unsanitary conditions of the camps.

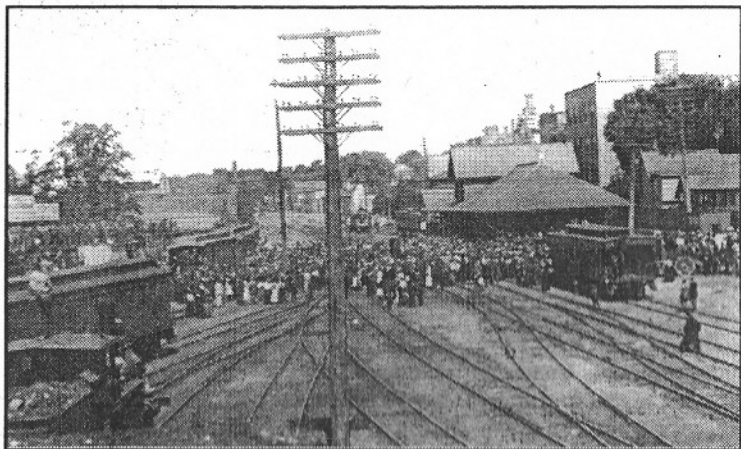
On Oct. 5, 1903, Windham's company was transferred from Company E Third Infantry to Company L, First Infantry.

Membership of the local National Guard provided many social occasions for the soldiers.

Military encampments and exercises were held across the Northeast, and provided welcome breaks. For example, in 1906, Company L had a weekend encampment at nearby Coventry Lake. The troops traveled on the Vermont line from the

Willimantic depot to the Eagleville depot, and then marched to the lake. They danced at the pavilion on the Saturday evening, fished on Sunday morning, and marched back to Willimantic on the Sunday evening.

Continued next week



A large crowd bids farewell to Company E as it departs the Willimantic Depot in August 1898 to prepare for the Spanish-American War.

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