

— HISTORY —

The Willimantic Campground: an architectural gem

Part one of two

The Willimantic Campground is one of New England's architectural gems. Many local residents unkindly refer to this unique and historic community as Munchkin Land because of its small, Victorian, "gingerbread" style cottages.

However, this reference to "Over the Rainbow" masks the community's rich history. The Willimantic Methodist Campground Association was organized in 1860 by local Methodists led by Lyman Jordan, as a secluded spot for evangelical revival meetings and conversions.

It was an ideal position for a campground, on a cool hill fanned with winds, supplied with natural springs, and conveniently placed next to the New England railroad network.

Within 20 short years of its founding, it became one of New England's most popular camp-

grounds, and was the center of the Methodist Conference District. It provided a summer escape and resort for worshippers from across the north-eastern United States.

By 1881, the association owned 24 acres, and the buildings upon the campground were valued at a total of \$10,000. Many of the original tents had been replaced with more permanent buildings, consisting of fine Victorian designs.

The seating capacity was 2,500 and the dining hall could accommodate 300 at a sitting. Just before the commencement of the 1881 meeting, a local reporter counted 275 cottages and tents upon the campground. He described why it was so popular:



Tom Beardsley

"Its high location, commanding a clear view of the lively borough of Willimantic and the surrounding hills, the cool breezes from the winding river below, its perfect quiet and freedom from all disturbance, and, more than all, the comfortable, tasty cottages so cozily sheltered by the broad branches of the large chestnut grove."

Visitors came all the way from New London, Colchester, Danielsonville, Putnam, Killingly, New York and Pennsylvania, and some 30 or 40 families were on the grounds for a month before the meeting, and in the week before 70 families arrived.

The Rev. James Tregaskis of Staffordville organized prayer and class-meetings. It was estimated that between 700 and 800 would occupy the cottages and society buildings during the week.

The meeting was a resounding success, and the combination of Willimantic police and specially

required constables kept good order, particularly in ensuring that the demon drink did not get into the meeting, and that card tricksters and shell gamers did not fleece the innocent guests.

The ensuing year witnessed a great deal of building at the campground. James H. Picknell built a fashionable cottage surpassing

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The Willimantic Campground store and post office, circa 1905.

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