

— HISTORY —

Methodists and their struggle to gain foothold in area

Part one of two

Methodism first arrived in northeastern Connecticut in the wake of the Second Great Awakening at the end of the 18th century. In 1795 a Welsh-born circuit rider, George Roberts, rode into the region from Pennsylvania and preached the Calvinist doctrine.

Connecticut's first Methodist Association was formed at Jonathan Nichols' house in Thompson, and the Nichols family subsequently organized a team of circuit riders, who sought converts in the mill villages that sprang up in the Quinebaug River valley after 1807.

Windham was a Congregational stronghold, and the Methodists were unable to make any headway in the town. Nevertheless, they did get a foothold in the Gurleyville section of Mansfield in 1797, and built a small church there. Methodism eventually broke into Windham in the 1820s in Willimantic. The first services were organized in 1824 by

Jonathan Fuller in a stone schoolhouse that stood on the current Windham Mills site. Fuller invited Ella Dunham, an elder of the Mansfield church, to conduct the first service.

This breakthrough encouraged Horace Moulton, a junior preacher on the Manchester circuit, to convert workers in the growing manufacturing villages in eastern Connecticut. Moulton's memoirs recalled the sectarian strife, and the bitter struggles between Methodists, Baptists and Congregationalists as they fought to recruit members from among the cotton mill workforces. The Baptists drove Moulton from Coventry, and the Congregationalists chased him from Willimantic, so he was forced to preach secretly in a



Tom
Beardsley

room in a Willimantic cotton mill.

Moulton was not discouraged, and went around the Willimantic mill villages to raise subscriptions to build a Methodist meeting house. The land was purchased for \$150, on a site opposite where Railroad Street would be later laid, and thanks to voluntary labor, construction got under way in 1827.

The 53-foot by 35-foot church, a "plain, squatty, schoolhouse structure," was completed in September 1829 at a cost of \$600, and served the congregation until 1850. Wilbur Fiske, the president of the Wilbraham Academy, preached the dedication sermon.

The church struggled in its early years and nearly collapsed. Moulton recalled that the congregation consisted of poor, working-class women. It struggled along, and in an attempt to help pay for expenses, the building was raised by one story, and storeowners rented space on the ground level. It was joked that the Methodists "have a shoemaker's shop, a

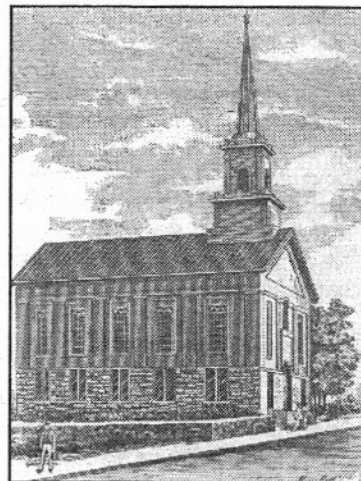
dressmaker's shop, a harness shop, and a tailor shop downstairs, and a gospel shop upstairs!"

The church had a flourishing Sunday school, with Thomas Turner as its superintendent. He was the English-born dry goods merchant for whom Turner Street was named and was a successful businessman who "gave the church the benefit of his shrewdness." The Methodists also had two skilled builders in their ranks, Warren Atwood and Lyman Jordan, the latter being one of the prime movers in the development of the Willimantic Primitive Methodist Campground.

In 1850, four of the church's wealthiest trustees bought a piece of land "on a road to be laid out and named Church Street," and gave it to the church. Warren Atwood built the new Methodist church, which was completed in March 1851 at a cost of \$7,000. It was dedicated later that month by a powerful and eloquent address given by Stephen Olin, the presi-

dent of Wesleyan University. Warren Atwood purchased the church's old lot on Main Street, and shortly afterwards built Willimantic's first brick block, the Atwood Block (713-717 Main St.).

(Continued next week)



The 1861 Willimantic Methodist Church, pictured in 1894.

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.