

— HISTORY —

Methodism gains stronghold in Willimantic

Part two of two

Despite vigorous opposition from Baptists and Congregationalists, Methodism eventually became established in Windham at the small mill villages built along the Willimantic River in the 1820s. A wooden church was built in Willimantic in 1827, and Methodism grew rapidly in the ensuing years. By 1850, the church association was in a healthy financial position, and able to finance the building of a stone meetinghouse just south of Main Street, a church that gave Church Street its name.

The Willimantic Methodist church made great advances under the pastorate of George W. Brewster, who served a three-year term, 1864-66, during which time Warren Atwood built a Methodist parsonage, once located at 109 Prospect St., but now demolished. Prospect Street had yet to be built in 1866, and the parsonage was considered to be in the wilderness.

Brewster also reshingled, repainted, recarpeted and refrescoed the church during his tenure. Twenty-one-year-old George Edward Reed (1846-1930), freshly graduated from Wesleyan University, replaced Brewster in 1867. After leaving Willimantic, he took up several pastorates in New York and Massachusetts

before being appointed in 1889 as the 15th president of Dickinson College at Carlisle, Pa. In 1869, the Rev. Edgar Clark remodeled the auditorium, which was paneled and frescoed, and the Ten Commandments were painted into the panels.



Tom Beardsley

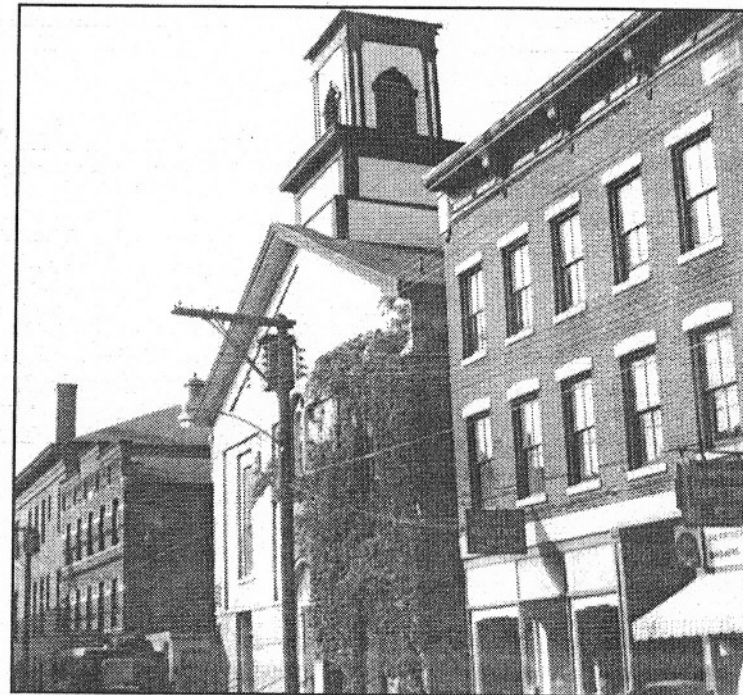
The church became known for his keen temperance work under the Rev. J. Carroll, who served in Willimantic from 1875-71, but the Rev. S. McBurney, probably the most charismatic pastor to arrive in the borough, served in the post from 1881-83. He was known as an "eloquent pulpiteer and champion hypnotizer of pocketbooks." He raised over \$6,800, and the church was completely remodeled. The auditorium was lengthened by 13 feet, and frescoed, cushioned, lighted and carpeted. New pulpit furniture was also installed.

A formal rededication took place in February 1883. It was a dull day, and the packed auditorium gasped when the new gaslights were turned on to light the interior. The effect was highly dramatic, as a large reflector

backed each gaslight. The reverends George Brewster and George Reed returned to Willimantic from their parishes in Danielson and Brooklyn, N.Y., respectively, to read the rededicationary services.

The church's prosperity increased during the 1880s, and in 1888 it built a boarding house on the Methodist campground for \$500, and all profits were reinvested into the upkeep of the Church Street church. By 1889, the church had the highest Sunday school enrollment in the region. The Rev. O. W. Scott arrived in 1893, and his wife invigorated the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society and Home Missionary Society.

By the time the Rev. Charles Sumner Johnson arrived in Willimantic to take up the pastorate in 1936, the Willimantic Methodist Association was 109 years old, and in a thriving condition. Sumner and his family moved into the Prospect Street parsonage, and his son Charlie Johnson would eventually become the assistant manager at the American Thread Co.'s Willimantic plant. Charlie recalled his youth in Willimantic, particularly sneaking off to the sunset rock at the Willimantic Methodist campground, where the boys traditionally met the girls.



The Willimantic Methodist Church, 1951.

He also recalled that these were tough times in the city. Charlie managed to get a job as a delivery boy at Spellman's butchers, just across from his dad's place on Church.

These brief reviews hardly due justice to the rich history of Methodism in Windham. The curtain finally fell upon 120 years of this history when the Willimantic

Methodist Church was unceremoniously bulldozed in 1974, as part of redevelopment.

The church members relocated to Mansfield, building a new meetinghouse on Puddin' Lane. Well, there's at least extra parking in the town, at a place where thousands were converted.

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.