

— HISTORY —

City Beautiful Movement inspired by the Chicago fair

“The White City,” constructed for Chicago’s 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, was a planned layout of large, classically inspired, white-painted buildings designed in the European Beaux Arts style. It inspired the city beautiful movement and launched an influential nationwide civic program of urban beautification in architecture, landscaping and city planning.

The movement led American city planners to design and build civic centers, expansive boulevards and parks in a quest for urban beauty.

It was primarily an aesthetic venture, but its promoters felt that attractively designed cities and towns would also uplift the poor, and destroy the many urban ills dogging the nation at the outset of the 20th century. The city beautiful movement tentatively arrived in the Thread City in 1910, courtesy of the Willimantic Congregational Church.

The Rev. William Spencer Beard, who was appointed pastor of the Willimantic Congregational Church in 1904, and remained in

the post until 1916, was a passionate proponent of the City Beautiful Movement, and on Windham Founder’s Day in May, 1910 he addressed a special meeting to which he invited

the Willimantic city councilmen. Beard stressed that the church should not exist in isolation from the community, and that Willimantic should use the city of heaven as inspiration for urban beautification.

While reflecting on the city beautiful movement’s uplifting aspects, he stressed that civic beauty was intimately connected with spiritual and moral beauty, and noted that a beautiful city was a paying financial investment because places with good sidewalks, tidy streets and gardens would attract wealthy people from large cities to establish their summer homes at Willimantic. Moreover, asserted Beard, “if you



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can get a man to clean up his backyard, you will get him to thinking about cleaning up, if not his soul, then his body.”

Beard recognized Willimantic’s great potential, and urged the city fathers, the schools, the women’s clubs, and the local board of trade to lay down a systematic plan for planting trees along the streets. He also suggested that refuse centers be established around Willimantic, and that the city should introduce a regular refuse collection service. Beard believed that Willimantic’s Whittemore Park (now Caisse Park) was an ideal place to launch a beautification program.

He suggested that an arboretum be established there, and also that the city should build a playground and park on the riverbank at the south side of the Willimantic River.

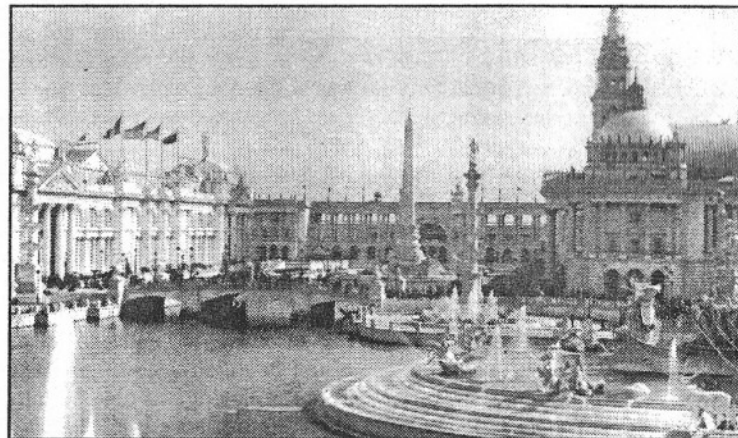
These parks would provide gardens for the children and the poor to grow fruit and vegetables. Furthermore, the city should award prizes to those local homeowners who made the most marked improvement to their exterior surroundings within a

stated period. Beard urged the city’s civic organizations to launch a local city beautiful movement on the upcoming July 4 — and counteract Willimantic’s “Noiseless Fourth” rules.

Because of riotous behavior during past celebrations, Willimantic had banned fireworks and parades.

The city beautiful movement failed to take off in Willimantic, and the civic authorities resisted the temptation of providing a

town park. The American Thread Co. established Recreation Park in 1915, and the Soldiers and Sailors Field (Memorial Park) was built in the early 1920s. Nevertheless, Willimantic is blessed with some beautiful architecture, and the next two columns will explore some of the history behind the magnificent houses on the hill in anticipation of the fifth Willimantic Victorian Home Tour on May 31 and June 1.



The White City at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair

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