

— HISTORY —

# The state Normal School for teachers comes to the city

Willimantic's state Normal School was officially opened on May 19, 1895. Its bright electric lights lit up the city, and a celebratory concert was held in the school's main assembly hall, with music provided by the Beeman and Hatch orchestra. Connecticut's Lt. Gov. Lorrin Cooke, and the school's principal, George Phenix, made introductory speeches. Cooke congratulated Willimantic, "a young, enterprising manufacturing city" for becoming the home of Connecticut's second Normal School, the first being built in New Britain in 1883.

Willimantic's Normal School was originally slated for Norwich, until the Windham Manufacturing Co. stepped in and offered four acres of land, free of charge, to the state authorities if they chose to locate the school in Willimantic. The state accepted this generous offer, and appropriated \$75,000 for construction. Classes were instituted in 1889, and held in the Willimantic Savings Institute block. Building work commenced the following year.

New Britain's J. D. Roberts designed the new school edifice, Danielsonville's J. W. Buck was contracted to construct it, and Willimantic's Vanderman Co. fitted the building's heating and ventilation system. Because of severe winters, building work took more than four years to complete, but the new Normal School was almost ready for occupation by early 1895, at a total cost of \$118,809.25. Its first floor was 11 feet high, and constructed from gneiss granite obtained from blasting the ridges to open up Windham Street in 1891. The school's remaining floors consisted of palate brick laid in mortar, and its roof was covered with black slate tiles. The main entrance was through the tower on the side next to Windham Street, and the tower's second story contained a meeting room for



Tom  
Beardsley

Windham's board of education.

Students entered on the ground floor, to the left of the main entrance into a cloakroom with lockers, where "wraps could be left with perfect security." A stairway from the cloakroom led to the main study room, which was fitted with adjustable chairs and desks, designed to avoid the problem of round shoulders — an ailment then considered common among college students. A door from this study room led to the library, which was stocked with 3,000 volumes. The English room was located across from the library, where students studied English government and literature. It was furnished with chairs with tablet arms for taking notes. The building's north wing contained a 30-by 52-foot gymnasium, which had a gallery, suspended from roof trusses, that extended around the room. This was used to seat spectators, and also as a walking track in inclement weather. "Bathing wardrobes" and dressing rooms were located in an adjacent room.

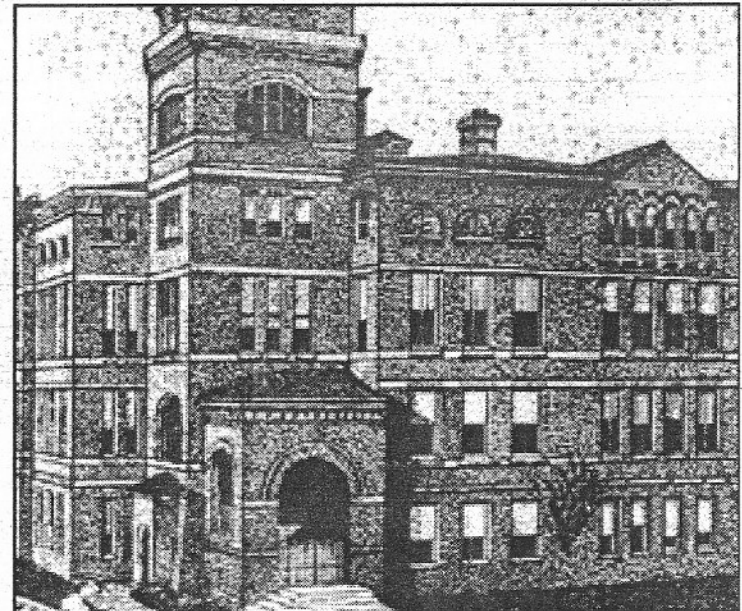
The school's hallways were finished in oak, and all the rooms with ash. The blackboards were of slate, and the building was lit throughout by electricity. However, the building's most unique feature was William Vanderman's system of heating and ventilation. Fresh air was drawn into the building by means of a large fan over coils of steam pipes, and forced into the rooms, and the foul air was drawn into flues, and out of the school by a

large fan in the roof. Good ventilation was considered vital for students' mental capacities, so the chemical laboratory was placed on the third floor so that fumes would not affect the the building.

The course of study in teacher training schools lasted two years, and consisted of 18 months of academic training and six months studying in common schools. Windham had fourteen schools and a kindergarten in 1895, where the Normal School's students could gain valuable teaching experience. The state offered free tuition, books and supplies for all those wishing to train as teachers. The Normal School became a Willimantic institution, but this

fine structure tragically burned to the ground on Aug. 29, 1943. All that remains today is its ornate wall, facing Valley Street.

Last Week's Article: Brian recalled that Antonio Bergeron had moved his grocery store from Cardinal Square to the IGA location on Route 32. In fact Bergeron, Willimantic mayor Florimond Bergeron's brother, died in 1947 and Al Labranche took over the Sodom grocery store, and then moved it to Chaplin. Also, during the 1938 flood, Loretta Laclaire went to work at the Rabinowitz grocery store in a row boat. Thanks go to Mrs. Socorro Bergeron and Mrs. Teresa Connell.



The Willimantic Normal School in 1895.