

# William Barrows and his vision for Linen Co. workers

## Part one of five

In 1880, the Willimantic Linen Co. built a vast new mill, which at the time was the largest industrial building in the world. Once Mill No. 4 was completed, it was confidently predicted that Willimantic's population would increase by 1,500.

The Linen Co. erected new tenement houses on Jackson and Milk streets to accommodate the expected influx of new workers and their families. Moreover, William Eliot Barrows (1842-1901), the Willimantic Linen Co.'s manager, put into operation a plan he had been nurturing for many years — to build top-class worker accommodations.

When Barrows left the army at the end of the Civil War he undertook training at an industrial school at Lowell, Mass. He soon became aware of the dreadful living conditions endured by the local mill workers. They lived in crude and unsanitary corporate boarding houses. Not considered as home, they were just a basic shelter during the term of employment at a particular mill.

Barrows witnessed attempts at company paternalism as a means of keeping workers at a mill, and for diffusing industrial action and strikes. Workers were offered improved living conditions, but had to endure a regime of strict controls imposed in all aspects of their every day lives.

In 1874, the ambitious Willimantic Linen Co. hired Barrows as company treasurer, and he employed the company's vast resources to improve the millworkers' living conditions. By organizing his employees living and working conditions, Barrows believed he could not only instill discipline, but also develop com-

pany loyalty, and increase productivity. He was inspired by the work of Titus Salt, a Bradford, Yorkshire woolen manufacturer.

Yorkshire mill workers endured awful, unsanitary living conditions during the early years of the industrial revolution, and their life expectancy was greatly reduced. In the early 1850s Titus Salt built sanitary homes of "brick and stone" along "well paved streets" for his workers, realizing that healthy and content workers would be more productive. However, Salt imposed strict discipline upon on his workers, who were forced to live in an overtly religious, alcohol and fun free environment.

The Willimantic Linen Co. had furnished homes for many of its workers, before the arrival of the ambitious young Barrows in



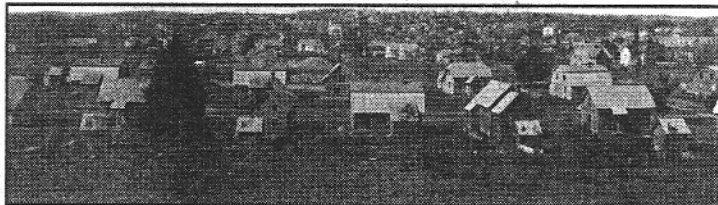
Tom  
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1874. Boarding houses, like the Elms situated on Willimantic's Main Street directly opposite the Linen Company's Mill No. 2, were occupied by single, unmarried female workers. Iverton, also opposite Mill No. 2 was considered to be a model worker village. Barrows was impressed, but believed that the company could offer its millworkers more, particularly if it needed to attract a reliable workforce.

The simple repetitive tasks required by the textile machinery needed little skill, but the Willimantic Linen Co. could not survive on just unskilled labor. Textile machines needed expert maintenance, and in order to

attract skilled workers, Barrows sponsored the construction of a revolutionary new village of workers' single family houses situated close to the Linen Company mills. Construction began in late June 1880 in an area south of Willimantic historically known as the oak grove. Most of the cottage frames were completed by the fall, and in October 1880 Barrows named his developing new village "Oakgrove," or the "Oaks." He named the main thoroughfare "Quercus Avenue," Quercus being a Latin term meaning "appertaining to oaks."

*Continued next week*



*The cottages on Quercus Avenue in 1881*

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