

# A series of local

As Willimantic entered the year 1893, the major topic of conversation was whether the borough should go ahead and seek city status. The burgesses discussed the subject in a three-hour-long meeting in town hall, but they could not reach agreement on the form of the proposed city charter. However, events during the first three months of the new year took away attention from this bid for city status. The community would be rocked by a series of local scandals, which were blamed upon a convention that came to Willimantic the following month.

Beyond the shaping of a city charter, the board of burgesses discussed mundane matters in its first meeting of 1893. It decided on the placement of new sewers, and accepted a report from the chief of police that in December 1892, the police force had made 30 arrests, consisting of 13 for public drunkenness, 12 for drunkenness and breach of the peace, three for trespassing, one for assault and one for theft.

The police force expected to be busier in February because Willimantic was hosting the 26th

annual convention of Connecticut's Grand Army of the Republic, the association for Civil War veterans. However, the local constabulary greatly underestimated the problems that lay ahead.

On Feb. 15, 1893, more than 400 delegates from around the state came to Willimantic for the GAR's 26th annual encampment. A reporter noted that they were gathering in hotels, "relating tales and incidents of the late war, and having a hearty handshake with a comrade whom they fought side by side with."

The convention got underway at 2 p.m. in the Loomer Opera House, which was decorated with flags, shields, banners, and streamers of bunting extending from the galleries to the stage. The encampment was formally opened by an address from the state commander.

He spoke on the necessity of remembering their fallen comrades and noted that Connecticut had 69 GAR posts with a membership of 6,785. However, this number was diminishing each year, and 149 GAR members had died in 1892.

More veterans arrived that evening, but all the hotels were full and many lodged at the houses of fellow members. The local saloons did an excellent trade the following day and in the evening a reception and campfire was held at the opera house by Willimantic's Francis S. Long. Post No. 30.



Tom Beardsley

Professor B.F. Koons of the Storrs Agricultural School acted as master of ceremonies and he welcomed Connecticut's veterans to the youngest city in the world. The program opened with a selection by the opera house orchestra, followed by prayers.

Law enforcement officers were very busy during the two-day long convention and made many arrests in the city's numerous saloons. Moreover, on the convention's first night Windham County Sheriff Pomeroy, chief of police Hillhouse and two officers raided the notorious "Jennie Whipple place" on Windham Road and arrested a large group of GAR men and two women.

The men were charged with frequenting a house of ill-fame, found guilty and charged \$5 each. The two women were imprisoned, but someone arrived from Norwich and paid their bonds.

These events horrified Willimantic's upstanding citizens, who demanded that the city authorities should immediately close all such establishments. The following week the sheriff and city police raided a house of ill repute on the

North Windham Road known as the infamous "Ida Thomas Dive," which had been the scene of a grizzly murder two months earlier.

At that time, the local authorities imprisoned Ida Thomas for 30 days, and released her on the promise that she should close down her establishment. Ida complied, and was ready to move to New Britain, but she could not resist opening up her business just one more time.

The raid netted three Swedes who were "well known to the police." They had given false names, but under interrogation, they admitted their identities. The local judge, Huber Clark, adjourned the cases against Ida Thomas and her women until Feb. 27 on condition that they leave town with all their "paraphernalia," in which case they would only receive a fine, but if at that time, they remained in town he would commit them to jail.

The police raids continued, as the new city tried to clean up its image. Local officers patrolled

the saloons looking for violations of liquor laws, and in March they closed down a third "disreputable house" located at the rear of 94 1/2 Main St. and operated by a widow who went by the name of Sarah Wilcox.

A local reporter noted that it was "a great source of annoyance to people residing in that immediate neighborhood, having men of all classes prowling about the house at all hours of the night."

The raids proved successful and the local newspapers reported no more incidences of drunkenness and poor moral behaviour. However, in the summer of 1893, the Houston Narcotics Institution purchased the old Smith and Winchester Hotel, located on the peak of Mount Obweebetuck in South Windham. The Houston company was held in high regard for its programs to help opium addicts and alcoholics break their addictions.