

'Welcome to Willimantic,' 1953-style

In 1953, James D. Currier, a local reporter and chairman of the Willimantic Chamber of Commerce's



Tom Beardsley

publicity bureau, produced a 16-page pamphlet entitled "Welcome to Willimantic: The Heart of Eastern Connecticut." This informative booklet provides an interesting window of life in the community a half a century ago.

The brochure's opening section deals with the city's early history, noting that the first major settlement occurred around 1810, when a small village developed adjacent to a sawmill located on the banks of the Willimantic River. This tributary, flowing west to east, fell 91 feet in one mile's length before it met the Natchaug and Shetucket rivers.

A Rhode Islander, Perez Richmond, built the first cotton mill in this location in 1822 and within 11 years, Willimantic had grown to the extent that it petitioned for independent borough government in 1833. It became a city in 1893 and by 1953, Willimantic had 15,000 inhabitants. Administered by a mayor and common council, it then had a tax rate of 17.5 mills based upon a grand list for tax assessment of \$24 million.

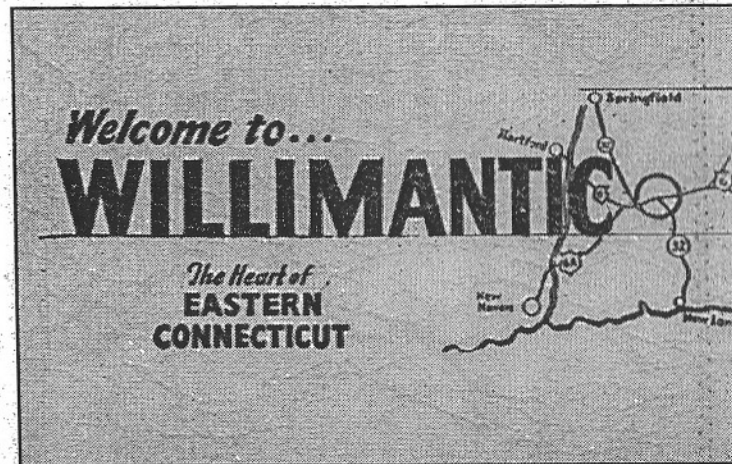
In the pamphlet's next section, Currier outlined the city's attractions and he stressed that Willimantic was ideally located on the crossroads of Routes 6 and 32 between New York, 130 miles away, and Boston, 86 miles away.

modern highways were kept in excellent condition the year round." The Greyhound Bus Co., which had a scheduled stop at the Shell Chateau Restaurant, and the New England and Blue Line bus companies, which stopped at the Travel Bureau at 872 Main St., provided transportation services across New England.

Willimantic's modern highways brought visitors to a city surrounded by "a picturesque, rambling countryside, a panorama of color and pageantry, colonial in many respects, modern in most." Downtown Willimantic boasted numerous industries, schools, churches, a well-equipped YMCA, three banks, a Savings and Loan Association, a public library with more than 18,000 volumes, a first-class post office on Main Street, with a substation on Meadow Street.

The Capitol Theatre offered continuous performances daily after 2 p.m., while the Gem and Strand theaters provided evening programs and continuous shows on weekends and holidays. Cultural yearnings could be satisfied at the Shafer Auditorium in the State Teacher's College, where orchestras, glee clubs and touring troupes performed. Moreover, a country-club was located within a mile of the city center.

In the city center, parking was available at parking meters at one cent for 12 minutes and five cents for an hour. Moreover, the downtown area was home to a number of industries, including American Thread, the American Screw Co., the William Brand Co., the New England Pants Co., the Roselin Manufacturing Co., the Leiss Velvet Manufacturing Co. and the



The front cover of the Chamber of Commerce's 1953 'Welcome to Willimantic' brochure.

Co.

However, Currier mentioned the city's poultry industry, pointing out a little-known fact that Willimantic was at the heart of the second largest poultry-producing region in the United States.

The brochure also gave a brief sketch of the city's modern hospital. The Windham Community Memorial Hospital had a patient capacity of 139, with treatment possible for 92 adults, 16 children and 31 infants. Ground was originally broken in 1933, but an addition had been built on three years earlier, in 1950.

No historic pamphlet on Willimantic was complete without the frog pond story. Currier also included detail about local history in surrounding towns.

He gave an outline history of Nathan Hale's birthplace in Coventry, a summary of Lebanon's rich colonial and early American history and he noted that Scotland had been home to Samuel Huntington, a signer of the Declaration of Independence

first president. The current owners of the Huntington House invited tourists to see the house's interior.

Currier wrote a description of what he believed to be the area's most interesting tourist destination, the recently completed Mansfield Hollow Dam.

He noted that the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers had completed construction during the previous year and that it was New England's largest flood control project. Visitors could visit the dam, less than three miles from the city, and enjoy a panoramic view of rolling hills and a vast man made lake.

The 1953 "Welcome to Willimantic" booklet concluded with a reminder of the years before shopping malls dominated the country, noting that Willimantic was the shopping center for the region and that its "modern stores" offered the best in vegetables, fruits, dairy produce, meats, and clothing.

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