

He built a 'city of cottages' to improve the lives of city mill workers

(Continued from Page 5)

new house he called it the most tasteful but also one of the oddest houses he had ever seen.

Barrows gave Pidgeon a tour, and told him that it was designed to demonstrate to "his people" that beauty was available to all classes for very little money, and that all could afford a house of their own.

Barrows made the entire house accessible to all his millworkers, and invited them to peruse his wife's fine decorations. Pidgeon

noted that the decor and refinements of Mrs. Barrows' rooms were suitable goals for the "granddaughters of Irish peasants to reach." Barrows further explained to Pidgeon that he situated his home in the Oaks in order to be a "father figure" to his workers.

On leaving the Thread City, the English visitor commented that Barrows' charming home crowned a little eminence at the very center of the workers' Oaks settlement.

The house's foundations were built of moss-covered stone, and its walnut and chestnut woodwork was unmodeled and unpainted. The walls were built of burned and misshapen bricks of various colors, originally produced to build Mill No. 4.

Barrows rescued these rejected bricks, which would have normally been thrown into the Willimantic River. He impressed upon his workers that these castoffs were good enough to build his new house.

Shortly after Barrows had shown off his new house to Daniel Pidgeon, he took up an offer of employment at the Pullman locomotive carriage works at Chicago and left Willimantic. Barrows disposed of the title of his house to the Linen Co. for "one dollar and other valuable considerations."

How-ever, the company allowed Barrows to use the house over- looking the Oaks as a summer home until 1886. At the end of that year, Barrows

landed a lucrative position as the general manager of a railroad locomotive repair shop in Boston, and informed the Linen Co. that he had no further use for the house on the hill he had built at the Oaks.

By the summer of 1887, thanks to a realtor's skilled use of adjectives, Barrows' controversial "Elizabethan cottage" had evolved from "grotesque" into an "ingeniously planned, thoroughly built, and in all respects first class and desirable property."

Barrows' house was destined to serve several purposes. It was a hospital and home for the Elks club, but the expensive upkeep of this vast property as a private residence was prohibitive, and it was demolished in the 1970s.

The house's fine walls, gateway, and drive can still be detected, and a climb to the top of the hill will reveal some exotic shrubbery, and the building's foundations.

He built a 'city of cottages'

Part five of five

In 1880 the Willimantic Linen Co.'s manager William Barrows built a "city of cottages" in Willimantic. Known as the Oaks, this community of upscale worker housing was designed to attract skilled workers to the cotton thread manufacturing organization, which in 1898 was purchased by the American Thread Co. The following year Barrows built a park at the Oaks and in 1883 developed the Willimantic Fairgrounds at Sodom, which in 1915 became Recreation Park.

Barrows was hired by the Willimantic Linen Co. in 1874 and embarked on a nine-year career that transformed the borough of Willimantic. He applied ideas that he'd developed while training at the Lowell Machine Shops, and from a tour of milltowns in Great Britain. In 1877, Barrows built and designed a company store, today occupied by the Windham Textile and History Museum and in 1879 he put into plan his ideas to improve the living conditions of his workers.

Barrows lived at Hartford and had commuted to the Thread City. But shortly after his Oaks housing project was completed, Barrows began work on a home of his own

on a bluff overlooking his city of cottages. Construction commenced in November 1880 and his fine new house was completed by July 1881. The editor of a local newspaper, the Tolland County Leader, suggested that Barrows had decided to build his house in that location because he was jealous of his workers' attractive new cottages.



Tom Beardsley

The design of Barrows' house was based upon the blueprints of the Linen Co.'s vast new Mill No. 4. His single story abode was considered to be of a "unique design," and was also described as a "picturesque, straggling Elizabethan cottage." But others were not so kind, and referred to it as "grotesque," and a "monument to the extravagance of a whimsical man." Barrows himself referred to the new house as his "bungalow."

Daniel Pidgeon, a visitor from England, toured Willimantic in

(He built, Page 10)



Barrows' Fairview Avenue home, pictured in 1882