

At last, Willimantic gets a public park

Part three of five

William Eliot Barrows (1842-1901) was intrigued by technology and while serving as the treasurer, manager and president of the Willimantic Linen Co. between 1874 and 1883, he experimented with electric lighting in company housing, in the mills and at two company parks in the borough.

The Oaks' attractive worker cottages still survive and constitute one of Willimantic's most pleasant neighborhoods, but on entering Quercus Avenue nothing today remains of the Oaks Park, one of Willimantic's late 19th century social centers. The baseball park does not attract the crowds that milled around at the end of the 19th century.

A dispute had raged in Willimantic after the Civil War whether to develop a central location as a public recreation park. However, all efforts failed to provide a downtown park because land prices in central Willimantic were booming and silk factories were more profitable than parks. In 1872 at the height of the passionate public park debate, a Willimantic Journal editorial argued against a city park because "a five minute drive in any direction will take us out to as much rural scenery and simplicity as the most ardent lover of nature could desire." The editor of the Windham Transcript disagreed:

"Lands must be opened where citizens can stroll without trespass and where ladies and children can find a safe and pleasant retreat from the dangers and dust of the streets.

A place for the elevation and enjoyment of a man's family is of more consequence than what his income will be. A park is one of the inevitable necessities of the age and no place with more than 1,000 inhabitants can afford to be without one. Willimantic will never have a better opportunity or see a time when for so small an investment she could secure to herself such useful pieces of ground. In not purchasing the grounds, the borough has dealt Willimantic a blow it will not be able to eradicate."

A park was not forthcoming in Willimantic, until William Barrows provided one some 10 years later. Barrows realized that his workers had nowhere to go to relax after work other than to the saloons. He had very little control over their drinking habits, but he believed that a landscaped public park and a dancing pavilion would provide him with a certain amount of control. A sober workforce was a more industrious workforce.



William Eliot Barrows, 1890

When the Oaks cottages were completed in 1881, Barrows arranged a free band concert in the oak grove adjacent to the new houses, at the junction of Quercus



Tom Beardsley

Avenue and the highway to Franklin and Norwich. Generations of Willimantic residents had visited the pleasant grove of oak trees on the outskirts of town to enjoy the pastoral and agrarian delights, to picnic and escape the grind of the growing industrial city. Barrows concert in the oak grove took place on Sept. 4, 1881, and was a success. In May 1882, William Eliot Barrows became the Linen Co.'s president,

gaining further control of the company's purse strings and began plans for the Oaks Park on the site of the old oak grove.

In July 1882, the Willimantic Linen Co.'s carpenters labored long and hard to fit up the grove at the Oaks with seats, swivel swings and a large covered dancing pavilion, "for the benefit, use and pleasure of the working people of the company and such of their friends whom they may invite." On Aug. 5, 1882, Willimantic's new resort was officially opened. Free food was laid on for an organized "social hop." Fresh drinking water was piped from the source which supplied the cottages in the Oaks. A refreshment booth sold ice cream and soda. At last Willimantic had a public park.

Continued next week



Weather Report

FORECAST

Tonight: Partly cloudy. Low 18.
Friday: Snow, ice. High 34.

Saturday: Morning rain. High 41.
Sunday: Cloudy. High 24.

TOMORROW'S TIDES

New London: 9:24 a.m./9:48 p.m.
Noank: 9:02 a.m./9:26 p.m.
Stonington: 8:52 a.m./9:16 p.m.

LOW

3:15 a.m./3:54 p.m.
3:07 a.m./3:46 p.m.
2:34 a.m./3:13 p.m.

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