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A visit to the Dunham Hall Library is well worth it

Willimantic's Victorian façade is pleasing to the eye, from the old city's Main Street commercial buildings to the Hill district's architectural grandeur. However, not regularly seen by the residents or visitors, the Thread City boasts some wonderful interior spaces.

These include the 1877 Franklin Hall Theater above Curtiss Coins at 794 Main St. and the 1880 Windham Courthouse above the Savings Institute's marble front building. The upper floors of the 1896 Murray Block, or Hurley Building provides a sense of 19th century retailing space. But the most charming and historical is the 1877 Dunham Hall Library located on the Windham Textile and History Museum's top floor.

The Willimantic Linen Co.'s president between 1874 and 1883, William Barrows designed and built the gas-lit company library and reading rooms and it opened for business in March 1878 on the upper floor of the company's new provisions store. Barrows had recently visited Saltaire, a woolen manufacturing company near Bradford, Yorkshire and Sir Titus Salt's educational and cultural provisions for his workers greatly impressed Barrows, particularly Saltaire's company library.

William Barrows instituted a number of programs in the new library, named for Austin Dunham, the Willimantic Linen Co.'s founder. These included drawing classes, lectures on temperance,

musical performances, English lessons for immigrant millworkers and Episcopalian Church services. The Willimantic Journal noted that the young and old, boys and girls could assemble in the Dunham Hall Library in their leisure hours and "read to their hearts content in a convenient warm room, well lighted and ventilated, and all the expense is borne by the Company."

The Willimantic Enterprise newspaper enthusiastically supported Barrows' new library. "There seems to be a disposition on the part of the Linen Company to be generous towards the town, not only to live, but to help others live. This is a free library emphatically, as they charge nothing for the loan of books, and any book except for reference, can be taken home by anybody, free of charge. All the daily and a large number of weekly papers are on file at the library, which is a great convenience to those who can not afford to take a daily."

In February 1879, Austin Dunham proudly demonstrated his new Edison electric arc lights in Mill No. 2's winding room to more than 100 guests. After the exhibition, where two Edison lights provided the light generated by 60 gas lamps, Dunham and



Tom
Beardsley

Barrows treated their visitors to a sumptuous lunch in the Dunham Hall library wherein "the governors, editors, scientists and other great men degenerated into ordinary mortals with good appetites."

Beyond banquets, church services and cultural pastimes, the library boasted an adjoining room for amusements, where the librarian arranged tables for games of chess, and checkers. The librarian was Jenny A. Ford, a lady whose icy glare struck fear into patrons' lives for a quarter of a century. Born in Norwichtown in 1840, Ford entered the Linen Co.'s employment as a 19-year-old clerk. The company transferred her to the library on its opening, and she administrated it until her death in 1904.

Miss Ford never married and after the death of her mother in 1880, she moved in with her friend Maria S. Elliot, at 147 Valley St. She died in this house and Ford's probate papers provide clues to the character and identity of a 19th century librarian. Ford distributed her \$3,000 estate among family, friends and the church.

She left her brother \$600 and bequeathed a gold watch and \$300 cash to her housemate Mar-



The Dunham Hall Library, pictured in 1880

ia Elliott. She left Fanny Session, "a blind woman," \$100. However, the Willimantic Congregational Church benefited the most with a \$700 bequest. She left its Sunday school \$300, its Home Missionary society, which gave charitable aid to immigrant mill workers, \$300 and gave the church poor \$100.

After Ford's death, the company hired Hattie Gates to run its library, an equally strict custodi-

an. It continued to play an important role in Thread City life for a further generation, but it closed in 1941 and American Thread donated the books to the United States armed forces. Until 1985, the old library served as office space for the company. Three years later the newly formed Windham Textile and History Museum saved and renovated this unique space. If you have not been, the old Dunham Hall Library is well worth a visit.

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