

Dec. 29, 2005

# Census results provide history

of local women in 1880

Part one of six

The hot summer of 1880 witnessed much activity in the expanding Willimantic borough. Residents observed the building of the grand Loomer Opera House on the corner of North and Main, the Willimantic Linen Co. was building its gigantic Mill No. 4 and carpenters and builders were applying the final additions to mill agent E.S. Boss' new residence on Windham Road.



Tom Beardsley

Work was also in progress on employee housing at the Oaks opposite Mill No. 2. Moreover, the fact that the linen company could now talk directly to company head offices in New York City by a contraption known as a telephone impressed the town's mainly immigrant Irish and French-Canadian mill workers.

The vast majority of these mill workers were women and they could get away from the dusty streets and building work by purchasing a combined rail and steamboat ticket for \$2. This paid for roundtrip railroad travel to New Haven

from Willimantic on the "Air Line" and a cruise to New York, Long Island and Rockaway Beach aboard the Steamship Grand Republic. They could also travel down to New London and sail to New Haven along the Long Island Sound to witness the upcoming Yale-Harvard boat race for \$1.25. Local "millgirls" were also busy buying tickets for a July 4 excursion to Block Island that included a picnic, a clambake and a "substantial dinner."

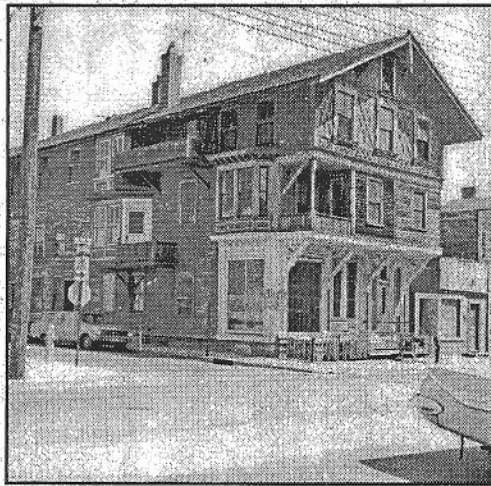
Other than the hot summer, Willimantic's female workers had to contend with the prying questions of the federal census takers. After the inquisitions were over, the *Chronicle* proudly announced that the population of Windham County had grown by 5,295 since 1870, a 65 percent increase that was due "entirely to Willimantic, and not exceeded by any town in New England."

The census figures provide an intriguing social history of Willimantic women 125 years ago. For example, a focus on two streets close to the Willimantic Linen Co. mills, Temple Street and Jackson Street, reveals stark social contrasts between these two areas. Temple Street, which connected Main Street and Valley Street east of the Willimantic Baptist

Church, consisted of 27 dwelling houses that sheltered 100 people, including 63 females. Eighty-eight percent were Connecticut born, 6 percent were British born, 2 percent German born and 2 percent were Irish born.

Jackson Street consisted of 104 dwellings, wherein lived 525 people, 265 females and 260

males. This street's ethnicity reveals why this part of town was known as "County Cork in miniature." The Irish accounted for 423 (80.5 percent) of the occupants. Fifty occupants (9.6 percent) were American; 41 were Canadians, Anglo and French (7.8 percent); eight were German (1.5 percent); and three were British-born (0.6 percent). These census figures reveal that the Yankee women of Temple Street lived in better circumstances than Jackson Street's Irish wo-



One of the early boarding houses in Willimantic.

men.

Temple Street's female population consisted of four female heads of household — Lonora Allen, a 54-year-old widow; Mrs. Herrick, a 66-year-old widow; Anna Webster, 44; and Hannah Baker, 42. All four women relied upon lodging as an income, and Webster and Baker actually ran boarding

houses on Temple Street.

Allen had four working children, three sons and a daughter. The eldest son, Albert, worked as a teamster. The middle son was a cutlery polisher, the youngest son worked in the Holland silk mill and the daughter was a dressmaker.

Herrick was experiencing harder times. She was looking after her 27-year-old unemployed daughter, Ella, who was bedridden with a paralyzed arm. Her-

rick's other daughter, Eliza, 46, was a divorcee who worked in the Holland silk mill. So Herrick took in a boarder, Calvin Parish, a 25-year-old teamster, to make ends meet.

Webster lived with her son, Charles, an 18-year-old printer. She boarded seven "millgirls," all Connecticut Yankees, except for 29-year-old Rebecca Dickinson and her 21-year-old sister Matilda, who were Anglo-Canadian.

Baker, Webster's neighbor, was a widow who looked after her son George, 16, and her insane sister-in-law, Emma Beckwith, 50. Baker's lodgers were 22-year-old Edward Owen, a draftsman at the Willimantic Linen Co.; a 19-year-old seamstress, Dora Tucker; a 31-year-old divorced dressmaker, Rose Storrs; a 26-year-old divorced cotton mill worker, Mary Drury; and 19-year-old Nellie Ward, a single seamstress. Baker must have received a fair income from her boarders as she employed a 26-year-old single live-in domestic named Carrie Buck.

However, conditions were more difficult for the Irish women who lived a few hundred yards away on Jackson Street.

Continued next week