

The founding of a congregation

Part two of two

St. Paul's Episcopal Church has graced the corner of Valley Street and Walnut Street since 1912. Before that date, Anglican worshippers had congregated in a wooden structure brought from Plainfield in 1883 and prior to that, they met in a number of halls and rooms in the borough, including the Willimantic Linen Co.'s Dunham Hall Library.

Eunice Heap (1801-87), a wealthy Willimantic widow, ended the church's nomadic existence in 1883 when she donated the Valley Street plot to the church's pastor, the Rev. Lemuel Wells. The following year the church purchased a small frame church building in Central Village in Plainfield, cut it into three sections, loaded it onto flatcars and transported it by rail for re-erection on the Valley-Walnut site.

Under the guidance of Rector Henry B. Jefferson, the Willimantic Episcopalians erected a rectory circa 1887 next to the church.

The church's membership grew during the 1890s and early 1900s, thanks in part to the arrival of management and workers from England brought to Willimantic by the British-owned American Thread Co.

Between 1894 and 1897, under the Rev. Edgar Stanton, the church built a parish house and greatly modified the old Central Village church structure.

The improvements included the addition of choir stalls on both sides of the chancel, the gilding and decorating of the altar panels by a local artist, Mrs. Van Der Voort of Windham, and the addition of gas lighting and steam heating. The dedication services for the newly renovated church took place on Sept. 10, 1896.

The church's next rector had a Shakespearian name. The Rev. Henry Macbeth worked in Willimantic between 1897 and 1903 and he was instrumental in getting a pipe organ installed in the Valley Street edifice.

The Rev. Richard Hatch followed Macbeth and between 1903 and 1910, Hatch worked assiduously to raise funds for a new church structure. He also worked closely with the immigrant population and persuaded a large number of Syrians to become church members.

Under the auspices of Episcopalian Archdeacon J. Eldred Brown of Norwich, the church laid the cornerstone for a new edifice in August 1912. Members of the congregation assembled the contents for a time capsule and placed them in a small crypt next to the stone. It included the church's early records, photographs of the church and parish house and a copy of the *Willimantic Daily Chronicle*.

On Sept. 24, 1913, Hartford's Bishop Brewster consecrated the new church building and changed the church's status from mission to a parish church. The edifice cost \$22,000, funded by \$10,000

from the estate of Lucy Boardman of New Haven, \$9,500 from the diocese's Missionary Society and from small gifts from parish members.



Tom Beardsley

A contemporary newspaper article described the new building as a Gothic edifice of cut gray granite, with a massive belltower and slate roof designed in the English village church style. Unfortunately, the building's construction was of a shoddy standard and five years

later, the rector Walter Borchert had to raise \$10,000 from the parish to finance repairs and reconstruction.

Work began in 1919 and took about a year to complete. The original contractor had cut many corners, so the new building contractors had to strengthen the walls, put a new roof in place, waterproof the entire structure and re-plaster the interior. The renovated church was re-dedicated on Easter Sunday, 1920.

On Sept. 1, 1931, the diocese appointed Benjamin B. Styring as rector of both St. Paul's of Windham and St. Paul's of

Willimantic. Styring resigned the Windham post in 1946 and focused his energies on the Willimantic parish.

By the end of World War II, the Willimantic church had more than 650 baptized members and over 400 communicants.

Styring subsequently began a building fund for a new Parish House. Sufficient funds were raised by 1949 and construction began on the new Parish House the following year, at a cost of \$30,000.

Styring remained in the post until 1956, when his retirement ended a quarter of a century service not only to Windham's Episcopalians, but also to the entire community.

When the church's more recent history is compiled, it will reveal how the local Episcopalians provided rent-free headquarters for the Red Cross, provided a meeting place for Alcoholics Anonymous and provided accommodation for the members of the St. Barnabas Guild, an association for Anglican nurses and healthcare workers founded in England in 1876. St. Paul's also provides important services through Isaiah 58 Covenant Soup Kitchen and it has close historical links with the Willimantic Food Co-op.

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

March 24, 2015