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Public park supporters fight on

Part two of three

The construction and landscaping of New York City's Central Park in the 1860s inspired a trend towards publicly financed urban parks in virtually every city across the nation — except Willimantic. After the Civil War the borough's taxpayers and town officials resisted all plans to provide the Thread City with a public park, arguing that residents had only to take a short walk out of town to enjoy bucolic beauties.

Even donations of free land from wealthy benefactors failed to convince local taxpayers to cough up enough funds to maintain a park. Moreover, unscrupulous local landowners, holding local positions of power, often

exploited the situation caused by those clamoring for urban pastoral scenes by trying to sell wasteland plots for a park

George Chase had been a wealthy manufacturer in antebellum Willimantic, famous for donating the wrought iron fence that encloses the Willimantic Cemetery. In 1888, his daughter gave the borough a 10-acre "grove of chestnut trees" opposite the entrance to Bridge Street on condition that the town fathers develop it into a public park.



Tom
Beardsley

The borough organized a park committee to investigate the costs of developing the Chase lot into a park. The committee decided costs were too high and turned down the Chase family's generous offer. The *Chronicle* agreed with the committee's decision: "The borough is in no condition to go into the park buying business. We will have taxes enough to pay in the next few years and they are for necessities for which we are contracted without going into the luxuries."

Ironically, five years after turning down the Chase family's gift, Willimantic's town fathers paid them \$15,000 for the same plot of

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land on which to build Windham's new town hall.

In June 1907, the city aldermen set up a meeting to discuss two proposals for a city-funded public green. The first was located on West Main Street and the second on the south side of the Willimantic River.

Those who desired a public park pushed on, despite constant setbacks.

The aldermen planned the meeting to determine "whether the legal voters, electors and freemen of the city will vote to purchase the land necessary for a public park, and to appropriate \$7,000 for the aforesaid purpose." However, it concerned many local

citizens that two members of the park committee, Aldermen Willard Hayden and Charles Holbrook, owned the two proposed plots of parkland. Hayden owned the parcel adjacent to the Willimantic Cotton Co.'s mills, and Holbrook owned the piece of land on West Main Street, which was adjacent to his farm.

By 1907, Willimantic's wealthier citizens had moved away from the city's industrial heart and from its increasingly diverse population of immigrants, which now included Syrians, Poles, Russian-Jews and Italians. Consequently, Willimantic's more prosperous and longer-established Anglo, French-Canadian and Irish citizens were working assiduously behind the scenes to ensure that

any park would be located well away from the predominantly working-class areas of the city.

Among those campaigning for a downtown park for mill workers was Hayden, who claimed that his lot would be convenient for mill workers at the recently formed Willimantic Cotton Co., an amalgamation of the mills then located east and west of Bridge Street. This statement enraged many at the park meeting, as they believed Hayden was only interested in lining his own pockets. Tempers were lost and temperatures were raised as the meeting progressed. The fiery 1907 park meeting will be explored in more detail next week.

Continued next week