

April 7, 2005

Park debates were center of attention in 1800s

Part one of two

Instigated by wealthy merchants and landowners, who admired the grand public parks in London and Paris, New York's Central Park became America's first landscaped public park. Gotham's urban elite argued that such a park would afford an attractive setting for carriage rides and offer working-class New Yorkers with a healthy alternative to the saloon.

After much debate over the site and cost, the city of New York acquired 840 acres of land in the center of Manhattan. In 1857, the newly formed park commission appointed architect Frederick Law Olmsted and landscape gardener Calvert Vaux to design the nation's first urban public park

and landscaping. Construction commenced the following year.

This vast undertaking greatly impressed visitors to New York and after the Civil War, industrial cities of all sizes across the nation began to build their own urban parks. However, Willimantic's taxpayers and borough officials repeatedly resisted the temptation. In 1867 a letter in the Willimantic Journal complained that the only place to walk in the borough was along treeless streets

without sidewalks. The writer suggested that the borough should provide a park or a common that would not only afford a "nice place for a quiet stroll" for the wives and children of local mechanics, but also greatly add to the village's appearance.

The Willimantic borough burghesses remained silent on the subject and no one broached it again until 1872 when the late Thomas W. Cunningham's will proposed that if the borough agreed to develop 10 acres of his land as a public park, located north of Meadow Street, he would reduce its \$10,000 asking price by \$1,000. Shortly afterwards, local farmer Charles Young, offered 8 acres of his farmland, located across the river, for a park free on the condition that the borough agreed to build streets and a bridge to connect it to Willimantic's commercial center. The borough authorities welcomed both offers, and formed a parks committee to prepare a report.

The "park question" sparked off a keen local debate regarding

whether the borough should acquire both lots, just one, or reject them both. The local newspaper saw no necessity in making a great outlay for a park when "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." Nevertheless, because of rising land and property prices fired by the imminent arrival of the New York-Boston Air Line railroad, the Willimantic Journal urged the borough to acquire both lots and to develop Cunningham's more centrally located parcel as a public square.

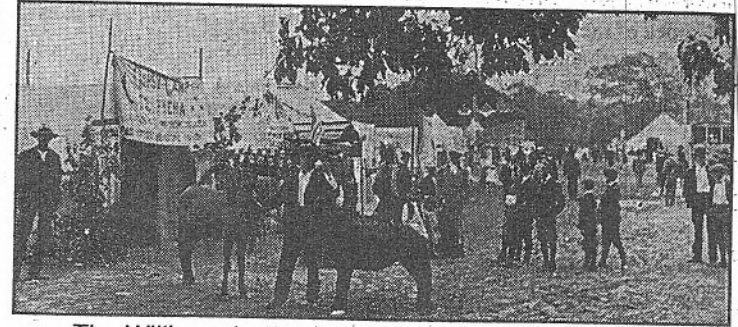
However, the proposals had many opponents. One correspondent to the paper wrote: "In this place we need no park. Who is going to benefit by it, or occupy it? Our population is not large enough to demand it, nor is country air inaccessible. We need other things much more for the prosperity of our village. What! Lay out money for a park when the town does not have a building to call its own, but the poorhouse, and where the town and borough meetings are held in the vestry of a church. If we are going to put on city airs, let us begin at the rudiments."

The parks committee reported its findings at a specially convened borough meeting and suggested that Willimantic should accept both proposals. However, local taxpayers firmly rejected its recommendations.

Shortly after, Willimantic's lack of "decent sidewalks, public squares, parks, fountains, shade trees and pure water" was not blamed on the burghesses or conservative taxpayers, but on the fact that the borough's manufacturers were absentee owners.

A local citizen wrote that, "It is a curse to our borough that so very few of our heavy manufacturers live among us. If they did we would have all these public improvements and many more." His wishes came to fruition a decade later.

Private action filled the gap left by the inability of local government to provide an urban park and in 1883 William Barrows, the Willimantic Linen Co.'s superintendent, built a park and fairgrounds on 200 acres of company



The Willimantic Fairgrounds Park, pictured in 1896

land on the borough's outskirts, replete with a baseball diamond, grandstand and trotting track. Barrows provided it free to the Willimantic Agricultural Association to hold an annual country fair in order to build better relationships with local farmers who supplied produce to the company store.

Nevertheless, Barrows' efforts were not fully appreciated in Willimantic: "The general opinion about here is that Barrows has spent more money for beauty than for practicability ... and we think

the Linen company needs a manager less revolutionary in his ideas."

Barrows' expenditure on the company public park, which later became known as the "Willimantic Fairgrounds" and then "Recreation Park," led to his downfall, and after his dismissal, he left for Chicago to supervise George Pullman's experiments in his workers' community of Pullman. Back in Willimantic, the public park debate continued.



Tom Beardsley

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