

The Barrows' spirit

William Barrows' spirit will mingle among the revelers at the town hall's Snow Ball Saturday evening, encouraging full community support for the



Tom Beardsley

Windham Textile and History Museum. This institution has been housed for the last 20 years in the beautiful Queen Anne style building Barrows designed and constructed at the junction of Union and Main streets in 1876 and 1877.

Col. William Barrows (1842-1901), although born in Ohio, had deep Connecticut roots. His Mansfield-born father was working as a professor of literature at Western Reserve College at the time of Barrows' birth. Barrows saw action at the Battle of Gettysburg, but deploring military life, he enrolled in an industrial management training school at the Lowell Machine Shops at the end of the Civil War.

During training, Barrows visited England and toured Sir Titus Salt's progressive woolen mill complex and community at Bradford in Yorkshire. Salt designed paternalistic and social programs there to avoid strikes and demands for higher wages from his workers. The Yorkshireman's schemes impressed Barrows and subsequently influenced his actions in Willimantic.

The Willimantic Linen Co. hired Barrows in 1874 as a general manager and put him in charge of its Willimantic mills. Impressed that Salt had provided affordable housing, inexpensive fuel and food and basic education for his workforce, Barrows established a reading room for employees in the company blacksmith's shop and purchased 700 tons of coal and several carloads of flour, which he sold at cost to his employees.

The popularity of the coal and flour experiments, coupled with the fact that in 1876 aggrieved local traders serving on the borough board had dramatically raised the Willimantic Linen Co.'s taxes by \$300,000 to \$1.15 million a year, convinced Barrows to

build a company store in retaliation. The prices for groceries, meat, dry goods, shoes and millinery in his store would undercut those charged by borough traders by between 10 and 20 percent.

On discovering Barrows' intention, the Willimantic Enterprise newspaper noted on Feb. 15, 1877, "if this should take place it will be a sad blow to our traders. For their sakes we hope this will not be the case as fully one fourth of our up town traders will start up Salt River."

The Willimantic Journal noted the following week that Barrows' store would sell everything from a ton of coal to an ostrich feather, and "so retain in the company's own hands the \$20,000 or more its operatives distributed among merchants monthly."

Workers broke ground for Barrows' store in March 1877 at the junction of Main and Union streets. Construction progressed rapidly and observers noted in May that the building would be an attractive ornament to that part of the borough.

Builders had put the roof in place by the end of June and all agreed what a handsome structure this was. The carpenters and plasterers completed interior work by late September.

Barrows officially opened his company store on Oct. 29, 1877. The Willimantic Enterprise noted the building's unique architectural style and that its grocery and meat departments were always crowded. "Although the exterior of the building has a Foreign Mission look, it is evidently intended to benefit home mission."

Mr. Farr's dry goods department sold out regularly and local mill workers quickly disposed of Mr. Potter's oysters and meats. Moreover, the local townspeople crowded into the Dunham Hall library and reading rooms, named for company founder Austin Dunham.

Librarian Jenny Ford opened her library from noon to 6 p.m. and from 7 to 9 p.m. every day. It boasted 1,300 volumes of essays, biographies, poetry and fiction.

The Willimantic Journal noted, "All can assemble in their leisure hours and read to their hearts content in a convenient warm room, well lighted and ventilated. The library's adjoining room is for amusement with tables arranged for games of chess, and checkers."

Barrows' store became a thriving community focal point. In 1883, he replaced the store's gas lighting with electrical lighting. However, the company's progressive manager had his critics and shortly after Barrows left to take up a post in Pullman, Ill., the Willimantic Linen Co. dispensed with the store, although management retained the library.

In April 1885, the company sold Barrows' store to Julius Pinney, who had managed the Cheney Silk Mill Store in Manchester. Pinney profitably conducted business there for four years.

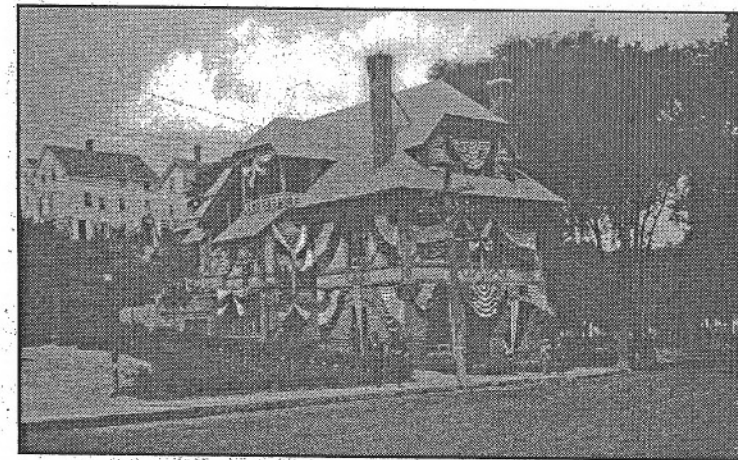
But in May 1889, he sold it to S.E. Amidon and Charles H. Dimmick, the proprietors of the Windham Co.'s store then located on Main and Bridge streets. Amidon and Dimmick conducted business in Barrows' building until early 1892, before moving into new business premises on Main

Street. As soon as Amidon and Dimmick, left, the Willimantic Linen Co. remodeled the interior and converted it into company offices.

For almost a century, from 1892 to 1985, Barrows' building contained offices populated by managers, clerks and draftsmen and shortly after the American Thread Co. left town, an active and energetic community effort enabled the establishment of the Windham Textile and History Museum in the building.

Saturday's Snow Ball is a continuation of community involvement and will provide a launch pad for 20 more years of history and programs at the museum. Those attending should look for a gentleman in a tuxedo, sporting a goatee beard and bow tie.

The old colonel will be nodding his approval as he walks among those waltzing in the Town Hall.



William Barrows' store decorated for July 4 celebrations.

In April 1879, Barrows opened the store's dry goods and boot and shoe department on the second floor and inaugurated a public library on the third floor, wherein he organized Episcopal Church services each Sunday morning. These ended with the establishment of St. Paul's Church in Willimantic, but the library remained open until 1942.

Business boomed in 1878, with sales amounting to \$125,000. Mrs. Black's millinery department and Mrs. Burnham's boot and shoe department barely kept up with demand.

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