

Natchaug High years

From 1865 to 1883, a significant number of Connecticut's leading late 19th and early 20th century businessmen and politicians were educated at Natchaug High School.



Tom
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This once famed Willimantic-based, educational institution has now long fallen from the public memory. However, when this private academy closed its doors at the end of the 1882-83 academic year, its governors etched the establishment's name in memory by planting and dedicating a memorial grove of trees on the grounds. The verse on the accompanying plaque read:

Growing, remembered, memorial tree

May'st thou never lack the power

*To kindle thoughts in any hour.
Historic, honored, hallowed tree*

As we gaze upon your leafy bows

Thou dost the thoughts of bygone days arouse.

*Let us ne'er from memory blot
The scenes that cling around
this sacred spot."*

The building in which the school was located stood at the junction of Jackson and Milk streets, on the site occupied today by Natchaug Elementary School. The town fathers built it in 1865 to replace the second school district's old stone school house that had served Willimantic since the 1830s.

Those of the local elite class established the school in the new building's third story as a preparatory school for university entrance. The school charged a fee. A college education was a privilege

held by the wealthy Yankees in those days.

For example, the school did not serve the children of French-Canadian or Irish mill workers during its 18 years of existence.

Perhaps the most well-known graduate of this elite school was Mansfield's Wilbur L. Cross (1862-1948), who was governor of Connecticut from 1931 until 1939. He was also a professor of English and dean of the graduate school at Yale University.

In 1866, the Natchaug High School governors hired David P. Corbin as headmaster and the town simultaneously hired him to establish a grade system for the second district's public school. Corbin had established the prestigious Willimantic Institute in 1863 on Main Street's Franklin block. He organized private high school classes on the top floor of the Milk Street building, employing the methods used in his own academy in the Franklin block.

Corbin remained in the Natchaug post until 1869, when ill health forced his retirement. Nevertheless, during that short period, his expert tutelage encouraged wealthy parents from surrounding towns to have their children prepare for Yale, Harvard and Columbia universities in high school. A Scotland native, Thomas Hart Fuller, replaced Corbin,

and remained in the post until 1872. John B. Welch, a graduate of Wesleyan University in Middletown in 1870, followed Fuller as principal and remained in the post until the high school closed in 1883.

By 1883, the Milk and Jackson street area had changed significantly from the time of the high school's establishment. In the

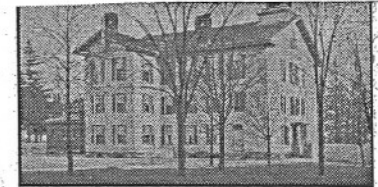
early days, the school building was in a pastoral setting but 18 years later it was located in an Irish immigrant enclave and a Roman Catholic Church, St. Joseph's, was built on the adjacent lot. All this was too much for the Yankee elite and after 1883, the high school's governors closed the school's doors. Welch was asked to remain as principal of the grade schools but he declined the offer and moved on.

Welch's private and public students had known him as a strict disciplinarian but under his guidance, both private academy and grade schools in the old Natchaug building had gained a high reputation.

When he left his post in 1883, Welch ceremoniously planted a tree in the memorial grove. However, Welch and "Old Natchaug"

remained strong in the public memory and in 1905, staff and alumni organized a reunion banquet. The reception took place in the Hooker Hotel on June 20 and the organizers presented Welch and his wife with an engraved cup and established a memorial fund in Welch's name to provide prizes to high achieving students.

The 1905 reunion was so successful that the "Old Natchaugers," as they were called, arranged an old school and old home week to take place 10 years later in 1915. Alumni came from across the nation to celebrate the school's memory but when they



The old Natchaug School

arrived, they found that the old school building had been demolished and replaced the previous year by a brick structure that still stands. Nevertheless, those who returned in 1905, 1915, and again in 1920, all came to celebrate the memory of "Old Natchaug."

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