

## Local History



# When Willimantic impressed a big-city newspaper reporter

**Willimantic in 1890**  
**(Part One of Two)**

Willimantic was not always the place to attract sensational headlines from out-of-town newspapers. In comparison to the contentious Heroin Town articles published several years ago, the Hartford Times of March 22, 1890, devoted many column inches showcasing the Thread City's progress and industries. Entitled, "Flying Spindles: Busy Towns between the Hills," the article discussed the borough's history, mills, schools, churches, fire companies, banks, hotels, theaters and railroads.



*Tom Beardsley*

The Times article commenced with the observation that Windham's first settlers could never have forseen the busy and thriving borough of Willimantic. It noted how in early 1822 Dr. Perry Richmond of Providence, R.I., left the practice of medicine to spin cotton thread in a 40-by-60 wooden mill, located adjacent to the river on what today is Recreation Park. This small cotton mill opened the floodgates, and manufacturers, such as the Jillson brothers, followed Richmond and beat a path from Rhode Island and Massachusetts to Willimantic.

Ten years later, Windham's representative in the state legislature, Stephen Hosmer, petitioned for the Willimantic section of the town to be independently governed as a borough.

The Times correspondent outlined the borough's numerous cotton and silk companies existing 116 years ago. They included the Willimantic Linen Co., "an offspring of earlier industries" incorporated in 1856, the Holland Manufacturing Co., the Natchaug Silk Co. It also mentioned two lesser-known but important industries, the W. G. and J. H. Morrison Co., which manufactured silk weaving machinery; and the Turner Silk Co. which operated in a Bank Street mill, later taken over by the

Willimantic Trade School. These industries and others supported W.M. Gorry's brass and iron foundry on Mansfield Avenue.

Willimantic's expanding population in 1890 needed educational services, and the borough provided three public schools, plus the recently established State Normal School. This was currently operating out of rooms in the Savings Institute building until the completion of the State Board of Education's new \$75,000 college on the north side of Valley Street. The borough also boasted two high-standard parochial schools to educate Willimantic's expanding Roman Catholic population. The first Catholics, Irish railroad workers, arrived in Willimantic in 1847, but the first legal Catholic service was not held until 1849, in Franklin Hall, by Father Brady who traveled across eastern Connecticut's mill villages providing services for Irish millworkers. A generation later, the Catholic Church was fully established in the borough, and the society built St. Joseph Church in 1874.

Before the arrival of the Irish and French Canadian millworkers, the Hartford Times article noted that the borough's Yankees opposed to the teachings of the Congregationalists established a Baptist Church in 1827 and a Methodist Church in 1829. The redevelopment agency demolished the latter church on Church Street in 1974, but the former church still stands.

The Congregationalists tired of trekking to Windham Center and organized a Willimantic society in 1828, eventually culminating in 1870 with the building of a fine new edifice on Valley Street.

At the time of writing in 1890, there were four other small churches in the borough, two organized by Swedish immigrants, a Spiritualist Church and an Episcopal Church.

*Next week with the help of the Hartford Times correspondent, we'll explore Willimantic's fire companies, hotels, banks and railroads as they were 116 years ago.*

**Continued Next Week**

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