

Local History

Fire companies played an important role in 19th Century

Willimantic in 1890

(Part Two of Two)

In the spring of 1890, a Hartford Times correspondent climbed on the train and took the short rail journey to Willimantic. He produced an urban review of the growing borough, three years before it became a city. This informative piece, published on March 22, provides a valuable historical document. Last week, we looked at the growing borough's mills, churches and schools. This week we'll explore its fire companies, railroads, hotels, theater and street lights.



Tom
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As Willimantic developed, the correspondent noted, the need for efficient fire services became paramount. Locals formed the first company in 1830, three years before the community gained borough status, when the legislature passed an act establishing the Willimantic Fire Engine Company. By June 1837 the company boasted 15 members, and a fire wagon.

The borough experienced its first serious fire on Jan. 8, 1842, with the burning of Potters Tavern on Main Street. Nathan Benchley was crushed to death by the falling of the chimney, and a 10-year-old girl, who had been living with proprietor Niles Potter, burned to death. The tavern's destruction caused the borough's wardens to adopt the following bylaw: "That all persons in the borough obey the fire warden's directions in assisting at all fires, under penalty for \$10 fine for each offense."

The Willimantic Fire Engine Company disbanded in 1858, and interest was lost until the burning of Franklin Hall on March 4, 1868. This massive fire led to citizens paying \$100 for a second-hand fire engine and wagon, purchased from Greenville.

In 1872, Joel Webb organized the Hook and Ladder Company, which had a wagon and two extinguishers.

From that point, more fire companies were organized to cope with the expanding urban fabric, and the

foundations of the efficient fire-fighting system in place in 1890 were thus laid.

Although railroads had arrived in the borough before the Civil War, the building of the Air Line through the city in the early 1870s turned Willimantic into an important railroad hub, making it far more important in this respect than "Norwich, New London, Rockville, Middletown and other places." Accordingly, "strangers" who happened to stay over in Willimantic could enjoy great lodging facilities and good food in five hotels, the Brainard House, the Hooker House, the Hotel Commercial, European House and Chaffee House. The Times correspondent observed that the Hooker House was "one of the largest and best equipped in the state."

Nevertheless, the Hartford Times reporter believed that the Loofer Opera house was the borough's greatest building, a venue which "traveling theater companies find a paradise, and which is one of the finest theaters in all off New England"

The Thread City's new street lighting system also gained great praise:

"Willimantic is well provided with the World's goods; she has come out of darkness into light, and it is a light that shines for all. Not a great many years ago private individuals supplied street lighting, but as the borough grew gasoline lamps found their way onto every street.

"Now these are things of the past, and in their stead the electric street lights stand out like monuments in memory of the extinct gasoline lamps."

The visitor from Hartford eloquently summarized his impressions of the borough in typical 1890 prose:

"This brief sketch plainly indicates that Willimantic is a thrifty town whose citizens are keeping pace with this century of progress.

"Nestled down between the hills are the homes of many happy families whose habits of industry and well-ordered management of public affairs aid to the pride of New England citizenship."

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