

August 23, 1997

Cemetery Fence is a Substantial Structure (Part Four of Four)

The iron fence that encloses the cemetery was erected in 1880. The fence and entrance can be seen in this 1908 view. Note the size and variety of the shade trees.



In 1880, a local benefactor, George H. Chase, donated the iron fence to the cemetery, which still faces onto Main Street. Unfortunately, because of a clerical error, the town forgot to thank Mr. Chase for the gift. This was corrected in 1897, when the town appropriated \$200 for an engraved tablet of bronze to thank Mr. Chase. In the

1881 Willimantic Directory, the cemetery was described as a tract of land containing about 20 acres, situated on the Coventry Road, with two main entrances, running north and south. In 1883, a fence was erected between the cemetery and the railroad. This fence, in its heyday, was a substantial structure. Ninety-five granite pillars are still standing, but the steel or iron bolted to them was probably removed during the World Wars to be melted down for the war effort. An entrance and steps from the railroad still exist. It was common practice to transport bodies and mourners by railroad in the 19th century, and in Willimantic's case this would have been relatively easy as the depot was only a mile to the east. This access also enabled the easy delivery of the cemetery's fine monuments, from the railroad.

In 1889, George H. Chase, who had donated the cemetery's iron fence in 1880, contacted the town fathers, and told them he would donate a portion of his land if the town agreed to turn it into an urban park. The land was, "a grove of chestnuts on the west side of High Street." The town turned down the offer, but six years later it had to pay \$15,000 for the same land when they decided to build the new town hall on that site.

The cemetery was loosely administered by a Cemetery Committee, but the rules were tightened in 1897 when the Committee's funds of \$927.32 went missing. Treasurer James Walden blamed the loss on the collapse of the Dime Savings Bank, but proof of the deposit was never discovered. The new committee, headed by O. A. Sessions, T. C. Chandler and D. C. Barrows, added a professional dimension to the running of the cemetery's affairs, and a trust fund for the "perpetual care of the lots," was set up. In the same year, George L. Chase, the son of the original benefactor, donated \$500, and the Committee recorded a minute that read, "May his shadow never grow less."

In 1897, the artificial lake needed repairs and maintenance, and \$160 was expended on

the digging of drainage ditches, and the lake was refreshed with the addition of water provided from a spring located on the grounds of the town farm. In 1898/99, George L. Chase of Stamford donated a further \$1,500 to the Cemetery, and this enabled the town vault to be raised and graded, and for the cemetery's main drives to be macadamized.

In 1904, it was announced that the cemetery was overcrowded, and no medium or small lots were now available, so it was imperative that the cemetery again be expanded. In 1905, the town called for the building of a cemetery chapel, but this never came to fruition, probably because of the vast expenditure needed to expand the cemetery. There was also a call for a new town vault to store bodies. Apparently the winter of 1904/05 made it difficult to dig graves, and bodies were overflowing in the vault, waiting for burial. It was thought that it would cost more than \$4,000 to build a new vault, and the law of averages demanded that the winter of 1905/06 could not possibly be as bad as the previous two. Again, the demand for new land for a cemetery was considered to be of the most importance. In August 1906, the town purchased a small tract of land just west of the cemetery, but it soon became obvious that this was not sufficient for expansion. This land was subsequently utilized as market gardens for the growing of fruits and vegetables, and worked by tenement dwellers who paid a small rent for the land.

In August, 1908/09, over \$5,000 was paid for a further portion of the Potter Farm on the South Coventry road, and work began on grading and landscaping this "new cemetery" in August, 1911. In the same year it was discovered that the picturesque lake in the "old cemetery" was causing some damage. The outlet pipe of the lake had become choked and the resulting overflow had caused "injury to adjacent stones and graves." The Cemetery Committee replaced the pipe, to, "restore this beautiful part of the old cemetery to its former pleasing appearance." But in 1917, it was decided to fill the lake in, probably because of continuing damage, and because it would open up new lots. The lake was filled in during September, 1917, by Charles Leonard for \$77. 41. The main section of the old lake remained undeveloped, but its east end was purchased by Hugh Murray two years before his death, and is now the site of the cemetery's most impressive, and some may say ostentatious mausoleum, to honor the memory of one of the town's wealthiest citizens. Considering his influence, it is feasible that Murray himself was responsible for removing the lake, so he and his family could be buried at the heart of this beautiful cemetery, in the city he loved, and not in the outskirts up on the South Coventry Road.

In 1915, the town engineer, R. E. Mitchell, who designed the footbridge, surveyed and staked out the new cemetery. The following year, almost \$5,000 was spent on landscaping, walls and paths and the erection of a new fence.

James Martin, an ancestor of the Chronicle's publisher, Mrs. Lucy Crosbie, was the sexton of the Willimantic Cemetery from its probable inception in 1831 until his death in 1881. Martin's son, Andrew continued as sexton until 1931. So, for a century, a father and son carried out the sexton duties. The "Old" Willimantic Cemetery is now officially "full" and only long-term family plots remain. All new burials take place at the "New"

cemetery.