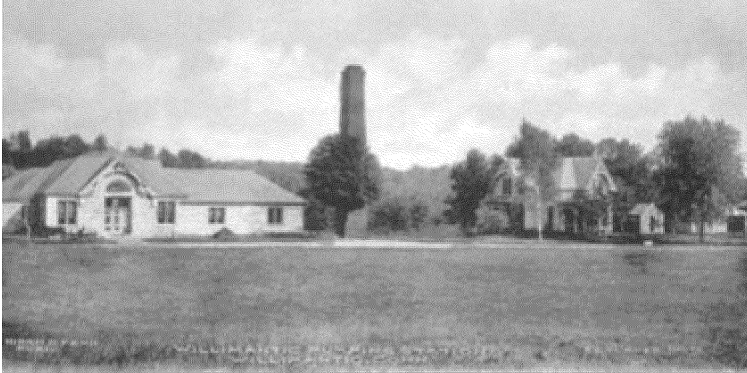


Water, Electricity and Fire Department Featured in 1899 City Report (Part Two of Two)

The Willimantic Water Works in Mansfield, pictured in 1907.



From 1893 until 1983, Willimantic was chartered as a city, but the rapid suburbanization of Connecticut in the post World War Two years, and the decline of major manufacturing industries, meant that Willimantic would return to its pre 1833 status, as a governed section of the town of Windham. Each year from 1893 to 1982, the mayor of the city of Willimantic made an annual statement on its state and finances. These city reports reveal much to urban historians, enabling one to get a feel of life in the city before interstate highways and automobiles transformed them. In 1899, the mayor of Willimantic, Oscar O. Tanner (1858-1933), presented his first annual report. Last week, we looked at the condition of the city's streets and its police department. This week, we'll take a brief look at the city's water, electric lighting, and fire departments of a century ago.

Mayor Tanner noted that the Willimantic water works was being fitted with modern pumping equipment. This would ensure no summer "water famines" in the city. The old steam pumps would be left in position to act as a back up if the new electric pumps failed. The whole department was in a "splendid condition" and was becoming self-supporting. The Superintendent of the Water Works, Henderson Moulton, was visiting the places in the city that used most the most water, and was trying to convince the owners to fit water meters. He had managed to place 54 new meters during the previous year. Tanner added that, "the system will never approach perfection until every consumer is metered. Then there will be no waste and the city will have a municipal department that will pay a revenue." However, water quality of 1899 cannot be wholly judged by today's standards. The report published the resulted of the city's monthly examination of the standard of its drinking water. The water in the winter months seemed to be the safest. For example, the July 1, 1899 inspection revealed that there was a white sediment and a vegetable odor. And in four other months, the water had a "moldy" smell and white sediment. Willimantic's water works had been constructed in 1885. A dam, pumping station and engineer's house were erected on the Natchaug River in Mansfield. Water was piped via an iron transmission line that went along Jackson, Valley, High and Bridge Streets to a holding and distribution reservoir on Hosmer Mountain, and then by gravity, pumped into the city streets.

Electric lighting of the city streets was a recent innovation for Willimantic. Six new lights had been added in 1899, and others had been relocated, adding "greatly to the advantages of the public." In 1887, the Willimantic Electric Light Company had received its charter from the General Assembly. Its generating plant was located at the foot of Railroad Street, and provided electricity for the city until it became part of the Connecticut Light & Power Company.

The city purchased electricity each month to light its streets, at a cost of \$650 a month. Luke Flynn was the Willimantic Fire Chief in 1899. He called for four new fire hydrants in the city, particularly for the Alms House (Friendly's is located on the site today), which was some distance from the nearest hydrant. Flynn apologized for the greater expense needed to run the department, but he pointed out that, because of the bad winter, the fire houses had to be constantly heated by the coal boilers, as it was necessary to keep horses in waiting to get apparatus to a fire in case of an alarm.

There had been no major fires in town during the year. The most serious was in Dennis Shea's meat market on Jackson Street, caused by an exploding oil lamp. Other than brush fires, there had been minor fires in tenements, caused by a burning pipe left in someone's pocket, a fire in a chimney, and children playing with matches. There was also a small fire in George Maloney's harness shop, caused by sparks from a steam engine.