

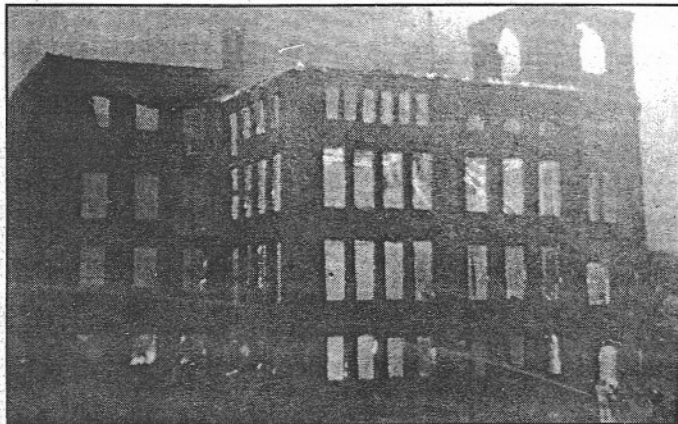
This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

14 ALBUM, the Chronicle, Saturday, December 4, 1999

History

Normal School fire brings the community together

There was jubilation and celebration in Willimantic in 1888 when the state educational authorities chose Windham over Norwich as the site of Connecticut's new teacher training college, or "Normal School." Central to the decision to locate in Willimantic was the gift to the state of four acres of land by the Windham Cotton Manufacturing Co., which owned extensive tracts of land in this section of the city.



Willimantic Fire Department

The blaze at the Normal School building illuminates the night sky in Willimantic on Aug. 30, 1943.

finest educational facility in the eastern United States. Furthermore, the local authorities stressed the fact that students who came to live in Willimantic, and study to become teachers, could do so at little expense. Willimantic was a small city, and good room and board could be found for as little as \$3.50 a week.

The Normal School, or State Teachers' College, became an established institution in the city and prospered and expanded into the next century,

despite a threat of closure in the 1930s when it was proposed to centralize the state's teacher training program at New Britain. The college's imposing budding dominated the Willimantic skyline for almost half a century. By 1943, the 1895 building served as the college's administration building, and housed a library containing 60,000 volumes. It also had seven lecture rooms, plus the state Department of Education's rural education office.

At 4 a.m. on Aug. 30, 1943,

local residents contacted the fire department when they heard a tremendous explosion, and soon afterwards the alarm was sounded from Box 19 at the intersection of Windham and Valley streets. Flames, estimated as high as 50 feet, began to engulf the building. Burr Hall, the college dormitory, was not in danger, but several homes in the locality were quickly evacuated.

Hundreds of spectators watched the blaze. The crowd grew when the switcher-engine crew working in the Willimantic Depots rail yard, spotted the fire and blew their locomotive whistle, attracting the attention of residents in the suburbs and outlying districts. The local firemen were quickly joined by the Hampton Fire Department, who sprayed water on surrounding buildings,

In the 1942-43 academic year, the college had 175 students, and a similar enrollment was expected for 1943-44. Fortunately, the school records were stored in a fireproof vault, and were saved.

Dr. George Shafer, the college president, assured everyone that the college year would begin as planned, and students

would attend classes in the Windham Street School, which was used as a training school by the college. Furthermore, Windham High School Principal Egbert Case announced that he would open his school for the displaced college students, thus providing classes in the laboratories and other facilities in the science department.

Dr. Alonzo Grace, state commissioner of education, arrived later in the morning and surveyed the devastation. He told reporters that a decision would be made about rebuilding at a board meeting later that week. It was obvious that shell of the building would have to be demolished. There were rumors across the city that German or Japanese agents had sabotaged the building, but it was thought that the fire was caused by the school's boiler exploding. There were many concerns in the city, that the fire would be an excuse for the authorities to dose down the Willimantic facility, but rebuilding went ahead and the foundations of Eastern Connecticut State University were established.

Want to read more about Willimantic history? Log on to www.threadcity.com.



Tom
Beardsley

Normal School classes commenced in the Willimantic Savings Institute building in 1889. Construction of the Normal School, on rocky ledges above Valley street, began in 1891. The vast building was ready for occupation in the spring of 1895. The central portion of the new school measured 118 by 80 feet, exclusive of the north wing. It cost \$125,000 to build, and was considered to be the