

## History

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# Larrabee's house is as historic as the man who built it

During the weekend of May 15-16, the Chamber of Commerce Inc., the Willimantic Victorian Neighborhood Association and the Windham Textile and History Museum are sponsoring the Victorian Willimantic Home Tour and Symposium. From 11 a.m. until 4 p.m. on both days, 10 Willimantic hill district houses are opening their doors for visitors.

To whet the appetite, we'll be looking at the history of five of those houses. Last week we looked at Gordon MacDonald's house at 196 Church St. This week we'll examine the history of Mark and Christel Donahue's house at 55 Prospect St.

On April 25, 1888, the *Willimantic Chronicle* reported that, "Grocer Frank Larrabee has purchased the spacious and fine building lot at the cor-



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ner of Prospect and Oak Streets of the Hewitt estate and will erect a handsome residence thereon this season." Frank Larrabee's grocery store on Church Street was a 19th century Willimantic landmark. It was located in the Chronicle block, situated next to the old Methodist Church.

Frank Larrabee was born in Windham on March 18, 1857, into an old Huguenot family that had resided in the town since the early 18th century. Larrabee attended the State

Normal School in New Britain and trained as a teacher, but became engaged in the growing borough of Willimantic's grocery trade. In 1888, he moved his expanding business into the new Chronicle building, at 20-24 Church St. Thanks to Willimantic's useful position on the railroad network, Larrabee was able to import the best and freshest fruits from California and Florida. He was also engaged in the sale of crockery and lamps, and supplied goods to smaller grocery shops across northeast Connecticut. Larrabee employed four teams to deliver groceries to his customers.

Frank Larrabee was deeply involved in the civic and business affairs of Willimantic. In April 1901, along with a group of Willimantic businessmen led by Hugh C. Murray, Larrabee became a director of the Windham Silk Co. The new company was located in the mills of the defunct Natchaug Silk Co. on North Street. The Natchaug Co. and its mills were founded and built by J. Dwight Chaffee, the owner and builder of a house also included in the May 15-16 tour — the Bellinghams' residence at 183 Summit St. Frank Larrabee became president of the Windham Silk Co., and in 1911, with business booming, the company built a new mill on Valley Street.

Windham Silk closed in 1937, some six years after Larrabee's death. Willimantic's most well known grocer had



A modern-day cable TV, electric and phone lines cannot obscure Frank Larrabee's imposing Eastlake-style house, built in 1888 on the northwest corner of Prospect and Oak.

also been the president of the Willimantic Savings Institute from 1915 until 1927, the bank's second longest-serving president. He was also a founding director of the Willimantic Building and Loan Association, a position he held for 35 years, and a president of the Willimantic Chamber of Commerce. Larrabee died on Sept. 22, 1931, at 55 Prospect St. after a long illness. He was 74. His wife Carrie died in 1937, and shortly afterwards the house was purchased by Windham County police detective Rowe Wheeler, who in 1929 had been involved in the investigation in Willimantic's infamous, unsolved "Jackson" murder case on Quarry Street.

From 1837, Windham/Willimantic was the home of an active abolitionist society and a station on the underground railroad, wherein southern slaves escaped and headed to freedom in Maine and Canada. Local legend has it that a tunnel located on the Larrabee property was a refuge and/or escape route for the slaves.

This imposing house, rectangular in structure, is a combination of Queen Anne and Victorian Eastlake styling. It has a large square tower, cross-axial wings, scrolled woodwork in the gables, and turned porch-supporting posts. The house was purchased by Mark and Christel Donahue in 1990 and is undergoing restoration.



Frank Larrabee poses with his staff in this 1894 photograph of his Church Street grocery store. Larrabee is the third on the right.