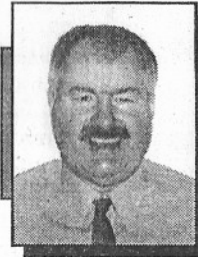


History

The mystery of St. Joseph's missing statue

The Rev. Father Florimond DeBruycker is a highly important figure in local history. He arrived in Connecticut in 1863 as a Catholic missionary from Belgium. His task was to organize the newly arrived Roman Catholic immigrants working in Windham County's textile mills.



Tom Beardsley

DeBruycker was known for his "forcible character." He was also a "gifted organizer." In 1865, he secured 30 acres of land for St. Joseph's Catholic cemetery. By his energy alone, St. Joseph's Church was built in 1874. DeBruycker organized St. Joseph's parochial school in 1878, convent in 1892 and hospital in 1907, and started the St. Joseph's Temperance Society, and a Temperance cornet band. He recruited six Dutch nuns from Tilburg, Holland, to teach in the parochial school. DeBruycker was principal for 24 years. He also successfully organized Windham's bicentennial celebrations in 1892 after competing Protestant factions had abandoned it. He died in December 1902, and the Willimantic parish split into French Canadian and Irish factions. DeBruycker had forecast this and left money in his will for the development of a French church, St. Mary's.

In early 1892, in recognition of his sterling service for St. Joseph Church, DeBruycker was granted leave by the Diocese to tour Europe and to visit his hometown in Belgium. He was greatly missed and was warmly welcomed on his return. His Catholic church in Belgium gifted DeBruycker a statue of Christopher Columbus. During his service on Sept. 19, 1892, he announced that the statue had arrived in New York harbor and would be shipped to Willimantic in a few days. He planned to unveil it on Columbus Day.

Willimantic celebrated Columbus Day in style. The mills and businesses were closed on Monday, Oct. 22, 1892, so the populace could celebrate the 400th anniversary of the "discovery" of America. The celebrations began at 9 a.m. with a service in St. Joseph's Church. The church organized a vast parade, which began on Valley Street, turned south onto Jackson Street, and then west onto Main Street. It was headed by local Chief-of-Police J.H. Hills, and a platoon of policeman. They were followed by the town's dignitaries, who marched to the stirring, patriotic music of the Thread City Band.

The town's fraternal organizations were well represented, including the



Willimantic's own statue of Christopher Columbus was a gift of the people of Belgium.

Grand Army of the Republic, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the St. Jean Baptiste Society, the Montgomery Hose Co. and the Knights of Columbus.

The town warden and burgesses reviewed the parade from a stand located at the corner of Bank and Main streets.

The afternoon's celebrations took place in front of the new Catholic Convent on Jackson Street. At 2 p.m., a choir and orchestra performed a program of patriotic singing and music. The assembled crowd was then addressed in French, before DeBruycker unveiled the statue of Columbus. It depicted Columbus in the act of stepping on American soil for the first time, bearing a cross and a banner. The statue was fitted on a pedestal, and placed in the grounds of the new convent. In the evening, the children of the parochial school rendered a four-act drama in St. Joseph's hall, portraying the voyage and discoveries of Columbus, "with musical and literary pieces."

The pedestal of the statue can still be seen in the grounds of the old convent and hospital. Upon it there is a plaque, written in Latin, which reads, "1492-1892. Unus Erat Mundus; Duo Sint Ait. Iste Fuere ait." Loosely translated, this reads, "There was one world. He insisted there were two. This man said it. And there were." But the statue of Columbus is gone, and has been replaced by a statue of Jesus.

Do you recall the Columbus statue? If you do, and know of its whereabouts, give me a call.

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