

Happy
2018

Willimantic Victorian Neighborhood Association

Winter 2017

P.O. Box 555, Willimantic, CT 06226

WWW.VictorianWillimantic.org

Neighborhood News

Building a Community

By Bob Horrocks

This is a good time of the year to think about our community. Christmas is a time of rebirth, and Willimantic has done this many times. A century ago, Willimantic was a thriving city. The mills were producing textiles and threads, and as the town prospered, people from many countries came here to work.

As the workforce grew, we needed supervisors, and it was they who built the magnificent Victorian homes we enjoy today. The WVNA has sponsored home tours so people could see what life was like then. Some of our homeowners have gone so far as to buy authentic furnishings in order to show how beautiful, or ornate the furniture, jewelry, wallpaper, statuary, and place settings are. That shows dedication to our history, and now, to our visitors.

Nowadays, we enjoy many "celebrations":

- The Boom Box Parade
- Third Thursday Street Event
- Trick or Treat on Main Street

And Willimantic has three, yes, THREE museums!

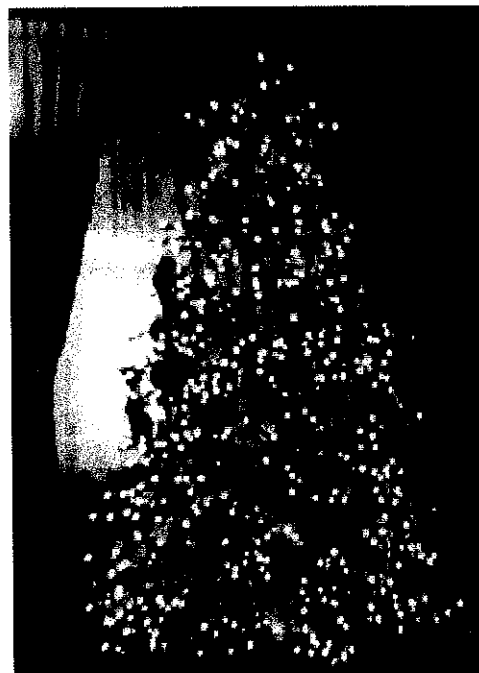
All of this is the work of many people. Bruce Bellingham, Jean deSmet, Mary Lou DeVivo, Lynn Duval, Jamie Eves, Karen Gilbransen, Pam Horrocks, Faith Kenton, Claire and Doug Lary, the MacDonalds,

Bev York to name a few. A big round of applause for these wonderful people!

The WVNA has put Victorian Willimantic on the map. We have had visitors from all of the New England states, New York, New Jersey, and way beyond. In the past 16 years, many of these people have come to the Home Tour more than once, and some come every year.

We must continue this work. Willimantic is an important city. I am eager to welcome new members to join our stalwarts so we can carry on the work of the WVNA. As we grow, so will the city!

Thank you.



Mill Number 4

Willimantic's Famous Factory

by Bev York

The Willimantic Linen Company (which became American Thread Company) was famous for many innovative ideas: spooled thread, Dunham Hall Library, Quecus Avenue company housing and the Coffee Break! But perhaps the most famous story revolves around Mill Number Four. Post Civil War prosperity led to expansion and plans for a new modern factory. The structure built in 1880 was designed to be lit with electric lights. It was a massive structure and the largest single-story lighted factory in the world to be lit when it was built.

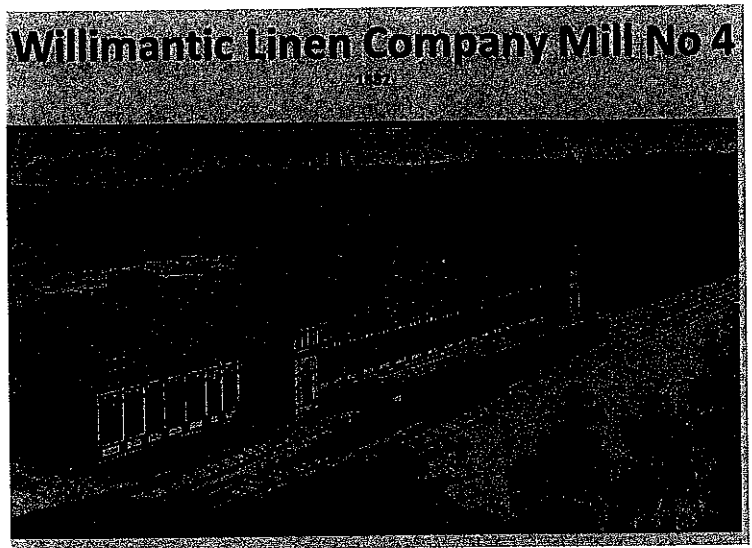
Previous to electric lighting, textile factories were long and narrow. They were no wider than 74 feet in width so the natural lighting could reach the middle of the factory floor. The stone mills on Main street today are perfect examples of structures long and narrow with countless windows. Textile factories could not utilize candles or kerosene lighting because the cotton is highly combustible.

Austin Dunham, the company's owner, did install some electric lighting into mill Number two and other buildings. In 1878, he purchased one of Charles Brush's latest arc light systems to be installed and tested out in Mill No. Two. They invited several distinguished guests to observe a demonstration of the lighting.

In 1880 William Barrows arranged a competition in Mill No. Four to compare two types of electric arc lighting. The companies were competing for the contract to install the lighting. The Brush system was already in place. However, the United States Electric Lighting Company from NYC promoted its "Maxime" light to be superior.

Eventually, the Willimantic Linen Company had reservations about the Brush system because of the concerns about fire. The Brush system was reliant on water power and when water was low the lights went out. Austin Dunham had been keeping track of the progress of his acquaintance, Thomas Edison.

In 1882, the company dispensed with the Brush arc light system and purchased Edison's newest invention, an "incandescent plant." After trial and error



and overcoming some difficulties, Thomas Edison's system was installed gradually replacing other lighting systems.

The Mill No. 4 building was 168 feet wide, 840 feet long and 400,000 sq. feet making it the largest cotton factory in the world. It held the carding and other departments. To accommodate the lights hanging from the ceiling, the leather belting and shafting was placed under the floor instead of overhead which improved both safety and aesthetics.

Its chief architect was Eugene S. Barrows who believed that happy workers in pleasant surroundings are more productive. Barrows included features such as 600 striking stained-glass windows, ornate wainscoting and decorative turrets. The entrance with eloquent style was featured in a watercolor by A.N. Wyeth of Willimantic. (Prints are available at the Windham Textile & History Museum.)

Mill No. 4 met its demise in a massive fire in June 10, 1995. Officials believe the early-morning fire started when debris, including a chair and some papers, was set ablaze inside the red-brick building. Firefighters from Willimantic and 15 nearby towns spent more than eight hours battling the Main Street fire, extinguishing flames with 5 million gallons of water. Smoke could be seen 10 miles away and embers were smoldering more than a week later.

Austin C. Dunham having been successful with electric lights in Willimantic, became president of the Hartford Electric Light Company for over three decades.

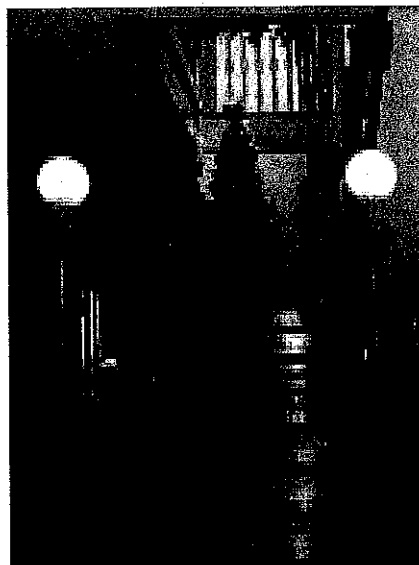
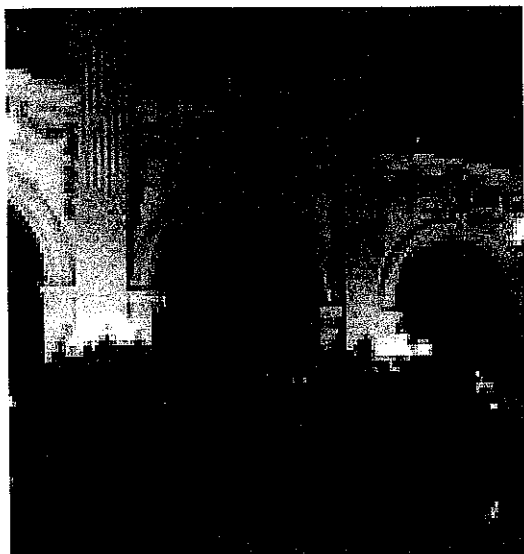
Read more about Willimantic's pioneering with electricity in *Willimantic, Industry and Community*, by Thomas Beardsley, a former town historian.

Holiday Traditions in Newport and in Romantic Willimantic

Three WVNA member friends recently spent a few days in Newport, RI, where, among other majestic sights, they were dazzled by the Christmas decorations at the iconic Newport “cottage,” The Breakers. Built by the railroad magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1895 as his family’s summer get-away, it is certainly one of our most visited East Coast landmarks. And to visit it during the holiday season is to see it in all its gilded brilliance.

It becomes immediately apparent upon entering the Great Hall that we are in for a tour of unequalled floral and decorative excess. The most unflappable visitor could not escape being awed by the room’s centerpiece, a majestic 15-foot-tall tree made entirely of red poinsettia plants. Only secondarily does the eye take in the sweeping grand staircases festooned with large white poinsettias or the gigantic kissing balls hanging at each entrance to the hall. The Great Hall was an appropriate introduction to the splendor that greeted us as we moved, almost speechless, from the main rooms to bed and bathrooms throughout the mansion. Alabaster and marble columns, fireplaces; frescoed ceilings invoking classic myth figures; flower arrangements, garlands, and decorative features all give a glimpse into the lavish lifestyle enjoyed by the people who today might be labelled the 1%ers.

In fact, the extravagance brought to mind the query of King Arthur in the popular 20th century Broadway hit “Camelot.” With apologies to Lerner and Loewe, we echo the protagonist question, “What do the simple folk do?” with a question of our own ...”How did ordinary Victorians celebrate?”



Anyone who had the pleasure of visiting Claire and Doug Lary’s 1889 Colonel Jos. Dwight Chaffee home open house in 2008 could see how the holidays might have been celebrated in Victorian America in the late 19th century. Not exactly “simple folk” but certainly an example of how a middle-class family would decorate for Christmas.

A festive tree, a tradition borrowed from Germany, was often the home’s centerpiece, decorated with glass balls, tinsel, cones, stars, and angels. The tree originally was lighted with candles (dangerous!!), and, after the 1880s, by electric lights. Often it sported popcorn strung by the family youngsters. Fragrant evergreens, fruits, and cones, along with colorful greeting cards, all provided a festive atmosphere. Since pianos were a staple in the average home, the household would gather to sing carols. The gentleman from The North Pole, aka Santa Claus, most likely visited the home via the expansive fireplace to leave presents for all the good little girls and boys. We all know what the other children got!

It may be difficult to imagine, but all the hoopla that has come to characterize “the holidays” today is a relatively recent phenomenon. December 25th, as it is now celebrated, has existed only since the post-Civil War era when it served as a unifying force during a time of great turmoil. That would coincide roughly with the dates of the Vanderbilt and Chaffee homes during America’s Gilded Age.

Back to the king’s question, “What do the simple folk do?”. It seems that they probably observed the same customs, decorations and traditions but on a different scale – far less lavish than at the king’s court or at the Vanderbilt’s palatial seaside retreat, for that matter. That said, the spirit of the holidays promotes a measure of social unity when people of all economic means seem comfortable greeting friends and strangers alike with the universal “Merry Christmas” or “Happy Holidays.”

WILLIMANTIC IN THE 20TH & 21ST CENTURY: A TIMELINE

This is the conclusion of the 325th Anniversary Timeline of Windham/Willimantic meticulously outlined for our readers by our two Town Historians.

1938 The Great New England Hurricane wreaks major damage in Willimantic. The steeples of both the First Congregational Church and St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church are toppled, as are several chimneys and some buildings. The Willimantic River floods Sodom along lower Main Street.

1939 World War II begins in Europe. (It had already begun in Asia and Africa.)

1939 Electro Motive, a producer of capacitors, moves from New York to Willimantic, taking over the South Street plant of a company that made pants.

1941 ATCO closes the Dunham Hall Library – which, although owned and managed by the company, was open to any Willimantic resident – after 64 years of operation. With a public library in town, the company no longer believed its library was needed. The space is converted to offices.

1941 Willimantic got its first supermarket, when A & P consolidated its several small groceries into one large store at 91 Valley Street.

1941 Pearl Harbor.

1943 The Willimantic Teachers College academic building at the corner of Valley and Windham streets burns. It will be replaced by Shafer Hall.

1944 Electro Motive expands into the old Quidnick mill on Bridge Street.

1945 World War II ends.

1946 Vivien Leigh and her husband, Sir Laurence Olivier, along with 44 other passengers, experience an emergency landing at Windham Airport.

1947 The Cold War begins.

1952 The last Willimantic Labor Day weekend agricultural fair is held at the Elks Club lodge on Pleasant Street, after nearly 40 years. It was great fun and eagerly anticipated each September.

1953 St. Mary Parochial School burns.

1955 The 1955 Flood floods Sodom once again. Many textile mills in northeastern Connecticut are wiped out when their dams burst, although the Willimantic mills all survive. The 1955 Flood will be the impetus for the construction of the upstream Mansfield Hollow Dam; Willimantic has not been flooded since the dam was built.

1955 Passenger train service in Willimantic ends (except for a brief resumption in 1991).

1955 The first migrants from Puerto Rico arrive in Willimantic to work first for the Hartford Poultry Company, and then for American Thread.

1961 Gem Theater closes The YMCA expands into the building from next door.

1966 The new brick post office on Main Street opens.

1968 St. Valentine's Day fire burns six buildings housing ten stores downtown.

1968 New Willimantic Public Library opens on Main Street.

1970 New Windham High School opens on High Street.

1971 "Redevelopment," also known as "urban renewal," commences in Willimantic. Costing \$11 million, redevelopment removes existing structures on 38 acres in downtown Willimantic, displacing 291 families (most of them renters) and 171 businesses. Some new construction did come out of the project (such as the Willimantic Fire-Safety Complex on Bank Street

and the new WILI building on Main Street), the proposed centerpiece – a shopping mall – never came to fruition, stymied by the 1975 construction of the East Brook Mall just over the border in Mansfield. “The Major Parcel” remained largely vacant for years to come.

1970s As part of local opposition to Redevelopment, the historic stone Jillson House is placed on the National Register of Historic Places, saved from the wrecking ball, and renovated into the Jillson House Museum, operated by the Windham Historical Society.

1973 Capitol Theater closes.

1975 Electro Motive closes and moves south.

1977 The new Willimantic Fire-Safety Complex is built at the corner of Bank and Meadow streets.

1980 Several local buyers’ clubs merged to form the Willimantic Food Co-op.

1981 Jillson Square Cinema opens.

1982 The Eastern Connecticut State University Warriors men’s baseball team wins a national championship.

1983 The city of Willimantic is dissolved and reincorporated into Windham, an event dubbed consolidation.

1985 The American Thread Company, once the largest employer in Willimantic, closes its massive stone factory and consolidates operations in the American South of North Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee. (Within two decades, most of those plants, too, close, as ATCO is gobbled up by corporate mergers. Today, most textiles are manufactured in Third World countries.)

1986 The Boom Box Independence Day Parade is inaugurated by activist Kathy Clark.

1989 The Windham Textile and History Museum (the Mill Museum) opens in two former ATCO buildings on lower Main Street.

1989 The Cold War ends.

1990 The Eastern Connecticut State University Warriors women’s softball team wins a national championship.

1995 The Roselin Company – a small manufacturer of silk ribbons, and the last textile mill operating in Willimantic – closes. An era comes to an end.

1995 The now-empty former ATCO Mill Number Four is destroyed by fire. The most architecturally significant building in eastern Connecticut – the prototype of all modern factories, designed in 1880 for steam power and electric lights – is lost.

1999 Construction begins on Willimantic’s “Frog Bridge,” officially named Thread City Crossing. The bridge is completed the next year.

2003 Residents of Windham voted to maintain “the Major Parcel” – the large grassy area left over from redevelopment as open green space, now renamed “Jillson Square Park.”

2004 The now-empty Chapman Block at the head of Bank Street – suffering from extreme water damage – is demolished by the Town, over the objections of preservationists.

2005 The Willimantic Food Co-op moves into the former A & P supermarket on Valley Street.

2006 Jillson Square Cinema closes.

2006 Arts at the Capitol Theater (ACT), a magnet school, opens in the old Capitol Theater on Main Street.

2009 Much of the historic Windham Town Hall on Main Street is restored.

The entire timeline was published in the WVNA newsletters beginning in the April newsletter with Windham’s history from 1650. We are all indebted to William McMunn and Jamie Eves who brought significant events in Windham and Willimantic alive for us.



Save the Date

THE 13TH ANNUAL
SNOW BALL

TO BENEFIT

Windham Textile & History Museum

SATURDAY, JANUARY 20, 2018
8:00 PM TO MIDNIGHT

NEW VENUE:

THE BETTY TIPTON ROOM AT E. C. S. U.

DANCING TO THE MUSIC OF *"RED SATIN"*

SILENT AUCTION

HORS D'OEUVRES CASH BAR

\$65 PER PERSON BLACK TIE OPTIONAL

Black & White:

Then and Now

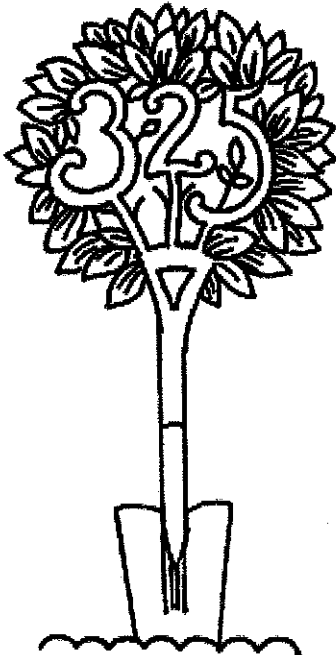
FEATURING VINTAGE BLACK & WHITE
PHOTOS FROM THE MUSEUM'S
COLLECTION, SIDE-BY-SIDE WITH IMAGES
OF THE SAME SCENES TODAY

CELEBRATING THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN
THE MUSEUM AND THE UNIVERSITY

LIMITED SEATING. RESERVATIONS REQUIRED
CALL 860-428-7573
OR EMAIL THEMILLMUSEUM@GMAIL.COM

The 325 Tree Drive

By Faith Kenton



The first year of the 325 Trees/Shrubs project was very successful, adding 107 native trees and shrubs to our neighborhoods. Our featured site was Memorial Park where volunteers planted 25 tall, healthy trees to add beauty, shade, and cleaner air to this active area.

Other locations in town include the new Greenway, Town Hall, Poets Park, the Textile Museum, and Jillson Square. Next year? Many possibilities ...

For more information, please call Faith at 860-456-0817

WVNA Progressive Dinner

March 17, 2018

Join in the Fun!

Homes & Hosts are needed for the
Progressive Dinner

Contact Robert Horrocks at 860-456-1666
if you would like to host one of the following:
Opening Reception for the entire group
Soup & Salad entire group
Entrée for 8-10 people

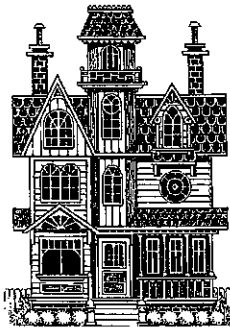
Dessert and coffee for the entire group

This has always been a favorite "end of winter" celebration.

Thank you
for renewing your
currently due
WVNA Membership

Individual: \$15
Family: \$25
Contributing: \$50
Sustaining: \$100

Mail to: WVNA PO Box 555;
Willimantic, CT 06226



*Willimantic Victorian Neighborhood
Association*

*"Working to Preserve and Promote the
History, Architecture, and Character
of Victorian Willimantic"*

**Happy 326th
Birthday
to the
Town of
Windham
and
Happy New Year
2018!!**

Jennifer P. Clark, REALTOR SFR

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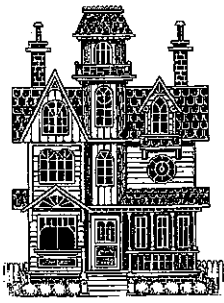


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Please call on the WVNA Officers & Board for Information or Assistance:

President, Bob Horrocks	456-1666
Vice President/Secretary, Barbara Lacey	456-1214
Treasurer, Claire Lary	456-3088
Membership, Pam Horrocks*	456-1666
Home Tour & Newsletter, Lynn Duval*	456-4476
Publicity, Public Relations, Newsletter	
Shirley Mustard	423-1481
Social, Jennifer Clark	208-6257
Legal, Charles Krich	456-8874

Board Members

Sue Humes	423-0576
James Lacey	456-1214
Gordon MacDonald	423-8845

* Non-voting members

Photos by

**Barbara Korsu
Pat Miller**

The Willimantic Victorian
Neighborhood Association
is the key to communication in
regard to the Hill Section,
the Home Tour, Economic Development
and a better quality of life in our town.
Join today if you have not already done
so. Send us your ideas and thoughts,
participate in the meetings and events.
Be a part of this wonderful community
and this extraordinary neighborhood.
Call Bob Horrocks (860) 456-1666.

Calendar of Events

Next Meeting of the
Willimantic Victorian Neighborhood
Association

Date to be determined

**Peace, Health & Happiness
in the New Year**

**Next Newsletter
End of February 2018**