My Experience with an Old Willimantic Building

By Jamie Eves • April 13, 2019

My friend, Nicholas Khan, is working on an art graduate school project. He asked folks in Willimantic, CT, to write up their experiences with some of the city's historic buildings. This is what I wrote.

As the Executive Director of the Windham Textile and History Museum in Willimantic, CT, my job includes caring for the Museum's main structure, built in 1877. The Willimantic Linen Company – a large cotton mill that specialized in various types of thread – constructed it as a three-story company store and library at the corner of what are now Union and Main Streets, then Willimantic's two major thoroughfares. Local lore has it that the Superintendent of the Mill, William Elliot Barrows, decided to open a company store in order to compete with Willimantic's many Main Street shops and stores, the owners of which dominated the City Council that had just raised the Mill's taxes. As an added bonus, the previous structure on the lot (which was almost directly across the street from the Mill's office building) had been a saloon, which Barrows – an ardent temperance advocate – was happy to demolish so as to no longer watch his employees head for drinks after work. The first floor of the new store — in essence, Willimantic's first department store — was for groceries, the second floor was dry goods, and the third floor was a library. When the American Thread Company bought out the Willimantic Linen Company in 1898, it converted the first two floors into office space (the era of company stores having come to a close), but retained the library until 1940.



The Mill Museum today.

Although the building appears quaint and old-fashioned to today's visitors, in 1877 it was ultra-modern. The Queen Anne-style architecture with faux Tudor beaming, gingerbread trim, and intricate brickwork on the first floor, were the latest style. The library had a high, pitched ceiling, with neo-gothic beaming, also in vogue in 1877. The ground story featured a poured concrete floor covered with linoleum – a new product at the time. The building had gas lights, and within a few years the Company installed steam heat and brass pneumatic tubes to connect with other buildings in the Mill complex. Two massive vaults protected both payrolls and the Company's secret dye recipes.



The same building shortly after it was built in 1877.

Managing a 19th-century building poses challenges. Roofs leak. Heating and cooling systems stop heating and cooling. Ground water enters after every rainstorm. There is no insulation and the windows are very large, so heating bills are high. Floors slope. The brickwork needs repointing. And of course there is no elevator – heavy objects have to be carried up and down stairs. In the winter, pipes can freeze.



The third floor of what is now the Mill Museum was originally a library, as shown in this late 1800s photo.

The Museum is spookiest on dark, windy nights. The beams and windows creak. Lights flicker. Squirrels occasionally get into the rafters and scurry about. Keeping mice out in the winter is almost impossible, and they scritch and scratch as they prowl through the hollow walls. The building feels almost alive, creaking and shaking in rhythm to the passing city traffic – breathing in time with the pulse of the city, or perhaps beating as the city's still living heart. Believers in ghosts are convinced the building is haunted, and the faithful have carried out numerous investigations. I have not yet met "Madeleine," but I am told that she is here, watching over us, an ethereal – or imagined – link to the past, connecting the ages.

Despite the challenges, acting as steward for a historic building also provides a deep sense of satisfaction. The Museum is a public trust, an artifact from a bygone time, a relict of a golden age when Willimantic was thriving. As long as the building remains, some part of the city's legacy still lives – some part which did not crumble into dust when the Mill left, but fought on, lived, and preserved the memories of a lively, pulsing mill city before it fell into the decline of deindustrialization, empty buildings, and urban decay. Repainted, re-roofed, kept in repair, and full of joyful people and activities, the venerable Mill Museum is evidence that life still courses through the city of Willimantic. It is, for me, the city's beating heart, and being in it means touching life.