**The Bridges of Windham**

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The official opening of the Thread City Crossing on June 23, 2001 introduces to the world one of the most architecturally significant bridges ever built in Connecticut. The Thread City Crossing's unique ornamentation not only represents the long and diverse history of the town of Windham, it also stands as a monument to two local men; the late David Phillips a Willimantic-based college professor, and a Willimantic-born politician, John Lescoe. David Phillips worked tirelessly for the inclusion of the bridge's frogs and spools in the new bridge's designs. He is perhaps best remembered for his book, *Legendary Connecticut* (1983). And everyone knows John Lescoe, the last Mayor of Willimantic in 1983, a long serving State Representative and Windham's current First Selectman. John Lescoe's political tenacity and ability ensured that the Thread City Crossing would be built. He first suggested that Willimantic should have a new highway bridge in the mid-1980s, and continually fought for its eventual construction.

Bridges have played a significant part in Windham's history. The town possesses many rivers and brooks, including the Shetucket, Natchaug, and Willimantic Rivers, and the Potash, Beaver, Frogs, Potters, Ballymahack, Obwebetuck, and Jordan Brooks. All these waterways had to be bridged or forded so the colonial population could conduct its commercial, social and religious business. Tensions often arose regarding the funding of the bridges, and many lawsuits were fought, throughout the last 300 years or so.

A bridge in the vicinity of The Thread City Crossing was first mooted shortly after the Civil War, when the borough's rapid growth meant that the two main bridges over the Willimantic River were becoming increasingly crowded. After Willimantic's development in the 1820s, the ancient horseshoe bridge that takes the Bricktop Road over the Shetucket River, became more important as traffic increased from Windham Green to the area known as Willimantic Falls. In 1910 it was decided to build a camelback steel truss bridge, which stood in that location until it was replaced by a concrete bridge, circa 1987.

Windham's wooden bridges needed constant repair, but rebuilding was often resisted because of fiscal conservatism. By 1912 the town records are constantly refer to the negative impact of automobiles on the town's ancient bridges. In 1913 an inspection of Windham's bridges was made, and the two stone arch bridges over the Willimantic River were subsequently tarred and paved, and in 1925, the town decided to replace all wooden bridges with new bridges of concrete or steel construction.

Political battles over the building of new Windham bridges became more frequent as industrialization demanded that they be of more robust construction to withstand spring floods and storms, and to allow for increased weights. One of the town's most important and picturesque bridges was replaced in the early years of the twentieth century. The wooden covered bridge that once took the road, now known as Route 203, across the Shetucket River was built shortly after the Civil War, and replaced circa 1910, when increasing automobile traffic made it obsolete.

Substantial stone arch bridges had replaced the wooden bridges over Willimantic's major routes in the mid nineteenth century. Windham boasts two fine examples of stone arch bridges. They were constructed by a master builder named Lyman Jordan, who gave his name to Windham's Jordan Road. They both owe their existence to the cotton industry.

The narrow stone bridge, which spans the Willimantic River and bisects the old American Thread mills has never possessed a consistent name since its 1857 construction. Prior to 1908, it was known as the South Main Street Bridge, because Windham Road was then called South Main Street. It was also referred to as the Jillson Hill Bridge, and the Lower Bridge (the Upper Bridge being the Bridge Street Bridge). It was built from gneiss, the stone quarried from the bed of the Willimantic River that was utilized to build town's early cotton mills. The 1857 stone arch ridge cost $3,200 to build. It was paid for by the Willimantic Linen Company, and an 8% tax increase on the town's wealthiest citizens. This is the bridge, now closed, which is being developed as a scenic addition the Windham Mills Heritage Park.

Willimantic's stone arch bridges were financed and instigated by the town's rapidly growing cotton companies. The precarious existence of the wooden bridges that traversed the Willimantic River, threatened the economic security of the borough's expanding cotton industries. The fast-flowing Willimantic often destroyed the wooden bridges, causing hold-ups in production, so the cotton companies went into action.

After the Willimantic Linen Company financed the building of the stone arch bridge adjacent to its Mill Number One, which replaced the historic Iron Works Bridge, two Willimantic cotton cloth manufacturers at the west end of the borough, the Windham and Smithville Manufacturing Companies, replaced the wooden bridge that crossed the Willimantic River between their cotton mills. This bridge was consistently being damaged or destroyed. It was eventually replaced in 1869 by the largest stone arch bridge in Connecticut. Lyman Jordan's Bridge Street Bridge held this record until 1908, when Hartford's multi-arched Bulkeley Bridge was completed. This is bridge that now carries Interstate 84 over the Connecticut River.

In celebrating the opening of the Thread City Crossing, it must be remembered that Willimantic already possesses a very unique bridge. The famous 1906 footbridge was actually a political compromise between opposing forces, between those who demanded a new highway bridge in Willimantic, to relief the pressure of traffic over the city's stone arch bridges after the introduction of the trolley car to the city, and between those who resisted the financial outlay of such "extravagant" projects.

The building of a bridge over the railroad tracks and river to connect Pleasant Street and Main Street had been a burning issue throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, but the project was consistently shelved because of funding issues. In the 1890s the control of the city council fell into the hands of progressive Irish-Americans, and under the leadership of Mayor Danny Dunn a new bridge across the Willimantic River opened for business in November 1906, but it was not the highway bridge originally envisioned.

The cost of a new highway bridge, originally planned in 1901, to accommodate the city's new trolley cars, was calculated to be $200,000. This terrified the town fathers, and was strongly resisted. The Willimantic Traction Company, which held the trolley car franchise, were keen supporters of a new bridge, but it offered no financial support. A letter from a highway bridge proponent summed the matter up succinctly:

Not a day passes that teams from New London and South Windham and other villages, sources of income to Willimantic, are not discommoded at our underpass on South Main Street and threatened with extinction at our Union and Lower Main Street railroad crossings. In many cases loaded teams have been caught at the underpass and extracted with great difficulty, say nothing of the numerous railway collisions, etc. which are a weekly occurrence.

The town fathers were slowly convinced, and called for estimates. The $200,000 estimate was considered excessive, and a Mr. F. H. Works of the American Bridge Company was invited to speak at a town meeting in April 1902. He said it would be necessary for engineers to make detailed surveys to produce plans and estimates, and this would take some time. He thought that the best ground for a bridge was from Railroad Street to Pleasant Street, at the site of the current footbridge. He envisaged a 24-foot wide, 624-foot long bridge with two six-foot sidewalks for pedestrians, designed to carry trolley cars of 30 tons weight. This would cost in the region of $55,000. The cost would be less if permission could be obtained from the railroad company to put a supporting pier on their land to reduce the span of the bridge.

The town formed a bridge committee, and Melvin Eugene Lincoln, a long time bridge-proponent, was appointed chairman and prepared a report on its feasibility. It was presented on August 6, 1903. Several sites were considered for the new highway bridge. Improving the Bridge Street Bridge to accommodate the trolleys and increased traffic would have cost $20,000 including land damages, and a new highway bridge was also considered at the position now occupied by the Thread City Crossing.

The town meeting of August 27, 1903 voted to construct a highway bridge at a cost not exceeding $75,000 at a site to be selected at a future meeting. This met with staunch opposition, and James Johnson, a farmer living on Pleasant Street, prepared a petition calling for the widening of Lyman Jordan's stone arch bridge which ran between the American Thread mills to accommodate the trolley cars. A town meeting was called for on September 10, 1903 to discuss other options. Joseph Wood, a Center Street livery stable worker, was a keen supporter of the bridge. He was aware of a growing opposition to the highway bridge, so he walked around Willimantic and put together a six foot 10 inches long petition containing 307 names to convince the selectmen to go ahead with the financing of the bridge. On August 12, 1903, he took a chair and sat near the railroad lines just east of the depot and counted the number of people who were dangerously crossing the railroad bridge across the Willimantic River, owned by the Central Vermont Railroad. It was the existing short cut between Main and Pleasant Street. Between four am and noon he counted 300 people.

Despite the renewed enthusiasm for a new highway bridge, a bridge that would have pre-dated the Thread City Crossing by some 95 years, the project was crushed. Nevertheless, the highway bridge campaign energized those who had long desired a footbridge. In May, 1904 a footbridge committee, led by local attorney George Hinman, was formed and plans were prepared after they had examined the numerous plans drawn in past years by the various committees.

At a special town meeting in October, 1904, George Hinman spoke eloquently of the need for a footbridge:

The other side of the river is growing in population and erection of buildings. If the city is to grow, it will grow in this portion and more so if the bridge is built. The people on this side of the river often need to go to the other side on business and pleasure and we need it as much as they do. The inconvenience of crossing the river at the present time is great and a dangerous thing. It involves a violation of law, trespassing on the railroad for which so many transients are fined in the police court.

After meetings with officials of the central Vermont Railroad, the committee reported that a footbridge could be built for as little as $10,000. When seen in context with the $75,000 needed for a highway bridge, it seemed a trifling. But the footbridge had enemies-the town's newspapers, the *Willimantic Chronicle*, and the *Willimantic Journal* demanded that a new highway bridge be built. On January 6, 1905, the Chronicle left no one in doubt where it stood on the bridge question:

Let us cast across the sparkling waters of the Willimantic a bridge that would answer the needs of the city for a century. Let us have a bridge we can all enjoy. One we could all be proud of. One that we would not be ashamed to show to visitors...To build (a footbridge) would be like sending a boy on a man's job. It would not answer the needs of Willimantic for the years to come. When the bridge is built let it be a model one that will be a credit to the city and a real service to all its citizens. We do not want a little two-cent picayune, half fledged weakling of a bridge that we would want to hide under a horse blanket if we saw a stranger approaching who may be considering of locating his business in Willimantic. We want a good bridge, one that we can get chesty about, and brag about and point the finger and say, 'that's how we do things in enterprising, progressive Willimantic.' Let's face the bridge question.”

The *Willimantic Journal* was equally negative about a footbridge. The *Journal* believed the footbridge plans were "little pee wee, shilly shallying, picayune, white livered, mush and milk, makeshift, and impotent." The Journal's editor continued in none less eloquent fashion than that of the *Chronicle's* editor:

Don't let us throw a plank across our beautiful river and call it a bridge. We do not want to have something we will be ashamed of, something we feel compelled to use only in the gloom of night, something to cover with ashes and throw a screen about at the approach of strangers who perhaps if favorably impressed would be inclined to locate here and add to our industrial wealth. No, when we get ready for a bridge, let us have a good one. A bridge that will be of use not only for today but for a hundred years. A bridge that will be a thing of beauty and usefulness and something for us all to be proud of.

But the footbridge committee was not deterred. They worked hard through 1905, clearing bureaucratic hurdles. In September they successfully negotiated with Connecticut's Railroad Commissioners, and received final permission to go ahead with the building of the footbridge. Building contracts were put out for bidding. The winner was the Owego Bridge Company of Owego, New York, which bid $9,900 for the steel work, and Charles Larrabee of Willimantic was awarded the stonework contract after bidding $2,200. The plans called for the bridge to be 600-foot long, and 8 foot wide to accommodate fire- fighting equipment.

Opposition to the footbridge was growing. It was considered by some to be too expensive. Also, the highway bridge supporters knew their bridge would never be built if a footbridge went up. So an injunction was applied for to stop construction of the footbridge. The footbridge committee ignored the injunction and started building. On November 3, 1905, a gang of men hurriedly started work on Pleasant Street, but in their haste they miscalculated the siting of a stone-supporting pier. The following June, inspections of the stonework revealed that the southern stone supporting pier was out of line, and some feared that its foundations would be weakened, because it stood on the site of an old brook. But Charles Larabbee convinced the bridge committee that the problem could be overcome by a slight realignment of the steelwork, and that the pier stood on a secure rock ledge. Work began on the Railroad Street bridge approaches on June 18, 1906.

On June 22, 1906, the bridge's prefabricated sections arrived by rail from Owego, New York, where they had been constructed in the company's workshops. The sections were bolted together on site so the bridge could be easily dismantled if the railroad companies decided it should be removed or elevated. The bridge was almost completed by August, but it was obvious to some that the footbridge's construction was flawed. An anonymous engineer wrote to the *Chronicle:*

"I don't believe any good bridge engineer would ever accept that bridge as it stands." He pointed out several examples of cheap construction in technical terms. The worst example of bad workmanship was at the stone pier built at the south- west corner of the Vermont railroad's freight house. He explained that the bridge did not rest squarely in the center of the pier, but rested at the west side so that the shoe on the north west corner projected over the pier two or three inches. At the east side the pier support jutted out some 18 inches.

The bridge foreman claimed that he had done the best job possible under the circumstances, because the stone piers were built in the wrong position. A special committee was formed to inspect the bridge. The engineer responsible, Mr. Mitchell, claimed that the problem was not due to his final plans, as they had not been completed before the stonework began. He claimed that the piers were built from his sketches, which were rushed out to quickly start construction, (to beat the weather and the anti-bridge faction). He did not realize that his preliminary sketches would be used as actual plans. Despite the misalignment, the committee declared the bridge safe.

After a small ceremony on November 19, 1906, city mayor Danny Dunn officially opened the bridge. It had cost $12,420 to build. The Boston Store's proprietor, Hugh Murray, a long-time proponent of a footbridge, was delighted that the project was at last completed. At Christmas, 1906, he had a model replica built of the new footbridge, and displayed it in his windows, and filled it full of Christmas presents. But still there were criticisms. Willimantic Board of Trade Members complained bitterly about the shocking state of the city's sidewalks, and lack thereof. The snow, slush and mud was keeping customers away from their businesses downtown. Why, they asked, had $12,000 been wasted on a footbridge. It would have been better-spent building sidewalks.

It can be argued that the building of Willimantic's famous footbridge delayed the construction of a new highway bridge by almost a century. Construction began on the Thread City Crossing in early 1999. It is built in a historically significant place, because just a few feet to the east of its northern supporting pillar are the foundations of Asa and Seth Jillson's cotton mill, constructed in 1826, and demolished in the 1930s.

Be sure to attend the historic opening of Connecticut's newest, and most original highway bridge on Saturday. It took more than 150 years to get it built - but it was well worth the wait.

The historic plaque to be unveiled at the official opening of the Thread City Crossing

The frogs upon this bridge recount the celebrated Windham Frog Fight of 1754. The spools represent Willimantic's historic prominence in cotton thread manufacture. David E. Phillips, an inspirational teacher and writer, suggested the decorative design.

Windham was founded in 1692. In May 1726 Connecticut's General Court organized a new county to administrate growing settlements at Ashford, Canterbury, Killingly, Plainfield, Pomfret, Voluntown, Windham and Woodstock. Windham gave its name to the new county and was designated the administrative seat. By the mid-eighteenth century the town of Windham had developed into a thriving legal and mercantile community.

The following account of Windham's famous frog fight is condensed from David E. Phillips' Legendary Connecticut (1984). In 1754 Windham's Colonel Eliphalet Dyer raised a local regiment to fight in the French and Indian War. Those left behind felt vulnerable to attack. The Windhamites worst fears seemed realized during a steamy-hot June night when unearthly screams emanated from the darkness. Old men and young boys grabbed muskets and fired blindly into the night. Some believed that the Day of Judgment had arrived, and gave prayer. Others hid under their beds.

The awful truth was revealed at dawn. Several hundred dead and dying bullfrogs were discovered in a dried-up millpond, two miles east of the village center. They had fought to the death in futile attempts to find moisture in the drought-ridden pond. Windham became forever known as the scene of the "Battle of the Frogs."

Between 1822 and 1857 five major cotton mills were built along the banks of Windham's fast-flowing Willimantic River. In 1833 several small mill communities combined to form the industrial borough of Willimantic. The largest of those companies, Willimantic Linen (1854-1898), and its successor, American Thread (1898-1985) manufactured high quality cotton thread, and Willimantic became known nationwide as the Thread City. Several major silk manufacturers also operated in the borough after the Civil War. Cotton and silk spools thus accompany frogs as historic symbols of Windham.

In 1857 the Willimantic Linen Company built a large cotton mill and bridge constructed from gneiss stone mined from the bed of the Willimantic River. The Windham Road Bridge is located 200 yards to the east of this bridge.

The borough expanded rapidly after the Civil War and as early as 1872 plans were drawn up to build a new highway bridge across the Willimantic River to connect the borough's northern suburbs to its commercial center.

But vigorous opposition thwarted all attempts to build this new bridge. In 1903 the trolley car exposed the old stone bridge's limitations, and in 1904 a project was launched to build a new highway bridge some 600 yards to the west. That scheme was also energetically opposed, and the Willimantic footbridge exists as a 1906 compromise between pro and anti highway bridge forces. It has taken more than a century to build, but welcome to Willimantic's new highway bridge.

Thomas R. Beardsley  
Windham Municipal HistorThe Bridges of Windham

Gallery One

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| [The American Thread](https://web.archive.org/web/20020519033516/http:/threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic01.htm)  The American Thread "bridge" that welcomed travelers to Willimantic between 1916 and 1998 | Lyman Jordan's 1857 stone arch bridge pictured in 1900. It is being traversed by a horse and buggy, but the introduction trolley cars to Willimantic in 1903 instigated a movement to build a new highway bridge. |
| [Stone arch bridge in 1920](https://web.archive.org/web/20020519033516/http:/threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic03.htm)  A trolley car crosses the stone arch bridge in 1920, revealing the need for a new highway bridge - a bridge that would not be built until more than 60 years after the demise of the trolley cars. | [Lyman Jordan's 1857 bridge](https://web.archive.org/web/20020519033516/http:/threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic04.htm)  Lyman Jordan's 1857 bridge, soon to become a decorative walkway and part of the Windham Mills State Park, is pictured in 1906 looking west. |
| [Willimantic footbridge](https://web.archive.org/web/20020519033516/http:/threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic05.htm)  This 1908 aerial view of the Willimantic footbridge clearly shows the bend in the construction caused by its hurried construction two years earlier. | [Willimantic footbridge](https://web.archive.org/web/20020519033516/http:/threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic06.htm)  The Willimantic footbridge can be seen from the Willimantic's Union Railroad Station in 1910. |
| [Bridge over the horseshoe bend](https://web.archive.org/web/20020519033516/http:/threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic07.htm)  This bridge over the horseshoe bend of the Shetucket River on Bricktop Road was replaced in 1987. Note its camelback steel truss construction, a popular design for highway bridges before World War One. Note the weight limitations on the sign to the right. | [1916 photograph](https://web.archive.org/web/20020519033516/http:/threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic08.htm)  Asa and Seth Jillson's 1826 cotton mill can be seen in this 1916 photograph. It stood almost opposite to the entrance to Jackson Street. The entrance to the Thread City Crossing is located several feet to the west of where this historic mill was located |

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The Bridges of Windham

Gallery Two

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| [Jillson mill](https://web.archive.org/web/20030516204525/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic09.htm)  The foundations of the Jillson mill pictured shortly before bridge construction began in early 1999. | [This bridge is one of the most historic in Willimantic](https://web.archive.org/web/20030516204525/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic10.htm)  This bridge is one of the most historic in Willimantic, but few know of its existence. It is pictured here in a 1939 aerial view. The bridge was built under electric floodlight in 1880. It is well known however to those who worked at the American Thread Company. It was the connection to Mill Number Four, the large cotton mill destroyed by fire in 1995. |
| [covered bridge](https://web.archive.org/web/20030516204525/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic11.htm)  South Windham's historic wooden covered bridge was replaced in 1910 to accommodate growing automobile traffic. | [covered bridge](https://web.archive.org/web/20030516204525/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic12.htm)  The entrance to South Windham's covered bridge, photographed a century ago. |
| [wooden bridge](https://web.archive.org/web/20030516204525/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic13.htm)  This is a circa 1837 drawing by John Weaver of the southwest view Willimantic. The Windham Manufacturing Company's cotton mills can be seen on the left. This wooden bridge over the Willimantic River was constantly being damaged by floods, and was eventually replaced by the largest stone arch bridge in Connecticut, built by Lyman Jordan in 1869. | [stone bridge](https://web.archive.org/web/20030516204525/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic14.htm)  Jordan's magnificent 1869 stone arch bridge still carries Bridge Street over the Willimantic River. The view is looking west, and the mills in the distance belong to the Windham Manufacturing Company. The photograph was taken in 1891. |
| [stone bridge](https://web.archive.org/web/20030516204525/http:/www.threadcity.com/articles/chronicle/tccrossing/files/pic15.htm)  The largest stone arch bridge in Connecticut (1869-1908), Lyman Jordan's 1869 Bridge Street Bridge is pictured looking east down the Willimantic River in 1908. |  |

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