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John Ashbel Conant (1829-1918) Willimantic Candidate for Vice President in 1884



John Ashbel Conant When you are driving on Route 195, adjacent to the East Brook mall in Mansfield, you are passing through the old village of Conantville, an old center of Connecticut's historic silk industry. Conantville came into being in the years before the Civil War, when Joseph Conant built a silk mill, and several houses were erected for operatives. The Conantville mill will be remembered as the home of the Max Pollack Thread Company, and later the Shaboo night club

Like so many "villes" across Connecticut, the name originated from a prominent local family. Richard Conant was born in Dorsetshire, England in 1592, and came to prominence as a founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and a founding father of Salem, Massachusetts. Six generations later, members of his family were prospering in the nascent American silk industry.

John Ashbel Conant was born in Chafeeville in 1829, at the heart of Mansfield's historic silk industry. There was little doubt that male Conants would be farm and/or silk thread workers. John's apprenticeship began in the Gurleyville silk mill in 1844. He went on to work for Messrs. Chaffee, Hanks, Atwood, and with the Cheneys when they operated a silk mill in Mansfield Hollow, before their more well known successes in Manchester. By 1864, Conant had worked for virtually every prominent silk manufacturer in Connecticut. In that year he went into partnership with Goodrich and James Holland who owned and operated the Conantville silk mill, built by Joseph Conant in 1853. Joseph Conant was John Ashbel Conant's uncle.

The Holland brothers were the first silk manufacturer in the area to take advantage of the increasing sophistication of steam engine technology, and in 1865 they built a brick, steam powered mill on Valley Street in Willimantic, and on January 1, 1866 the Hollands put John Ashbel Conant, the overseer in their Conantville mill, in charge of their new Willimantic venture.

During J. A. Conant's tenure as manager, the Holland Manufacturing Company became one of the nation's leading suppliers and manufacturers of fine dress silk thread, and exported it around the world. The company had offices in New York, Philadelphia and Boston. It was a major employer in Willimantic for 68 years, with a payroll of more than 200. The company's business began to

suffer during the Depression, and after failing to get its local tax bill reduced, the silk thread producers departed Willimantic in 1934, and relocated in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. The Company's extensive mills on Church and Valley streets were demolished in 1940. Several months ago, construction workers unearthed a tunnel under Church Street used by the company either as a culvert to divert spring water, or as access between the company's two buildings.

J. A. Conant's name was synonymous with Willimantic silk, but he was also well known as an active Christian and politician. Before the Civil War, he was an active member of the Free Soil Party which advocated the banning of slavery in the North and in the new territories, but allowing its existence in the South. He was president of the New England Christian Association in the 1880s, and was actively involved in the Temperance movement, and became a leading figure in the Prohibition Party, dedicated to destroying alcohol and its evils. In 1884, Conant was nominated as the vice-presidential candidate on the Anti-Secret Society ticket, which was part of the American Party.

John Ashbel Conant worked for the Holland Manufacturing Company for 41 years, from 1866 until 1907. The company founder, Goodrich Holland died in 1870, and Conant became managing director and the virtual owner, operating the business for the Holland family up until 1907. John Ashbel Conant, silk producer, devout Christian, active politician, and one of Chaffeeville's most famous sons, died December 8, 1918, aged 89.