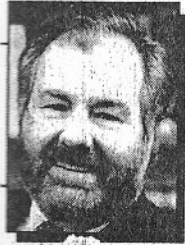


This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The Willimantic Public Library. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "The Chronicle" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Building the footbridge wasn't easy



Tom Beardsley

First of a series

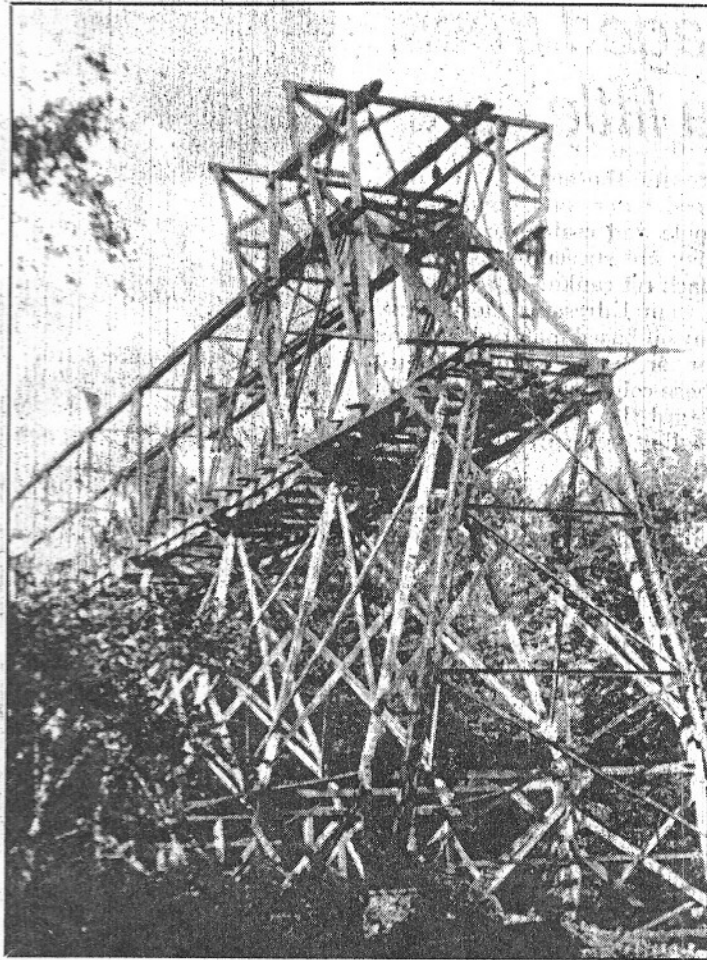
The building of a footbridge over the railroad tracks and river to connect Pleasant Street and Main Street had been discussed since the Civil War.

In 1872, the Willimantic Journal optimistically forecast that, "Probably a bridge of some kind will be built before a great while across the river about midway between the present bridges."

The Willimantic Enterprise of Jan. 11, 1877 reported that a petition had been prepared by E.B. Sumner and 54 others, praying for a survey and layout of a foot way and footbridge from Main Street to Pleasant Street." The cost was considered to be too expensive, and the plan abandoned. A year later the Enterprise editorialized that, "... the question of a foot bridge from Pleasant Street to Main Street is again agitated. It is stated that the approaches will cost \$10,000. We think that the same amount of money would do more good if spent on an efficient system of sewerage."

In 1888, a footbridge feasibility committee was formed, led by local leading citizens John Hunter and George Burnam, but again the cost was considered too prohibitive.

Four years later detailed plans were again prepared. The Chronicle of Aug. 10, 1892 reported that, "Now that the plans for the proposed new bridge over the river and railroad tracks from Railroad Street to Pleasant Street are completed and the specifications and estimates are soon to be forthcoming, together with the report of the bridge committee, this much talked about



The footbridge under construction in 1906.

affair will be resumed. From the plans submitted it seems a beautiful structure can be made and something of this kind can't be denied." It was.

Along with the historic fiscal conservatism of the town fathers, there was another issue which denied the building of a bridge for so long. The Yankees, south of the river, did not want the Irish and French Canadian immigrant mill workers to have easy access to this part of town. But gradually, control of the city council fell into the hands of the Irish-Americans and under the leadership of Danny Dunn, the final hurdle was completed and the bridge opened for business in November 1906.

The turning point for the pro-bridge faction came in 1902, when the trolley cars came to town. It was a tight

squeeze under the railroad bridge for the trolley cars and over the old stone bridge between the American Thread Company's Mill's One and Six.

Accidents were common and the public demanded a new highway bridge over the river and tracks to "convey teams, trolleys and foot passengers," in the position often cited for the footbridge. Furthermore, it was forecast that trolley cars would travel to Hartford from Norwich, through Willimantic, so some means had to be prepared for those trolley lines to cross the railroad lines on lower Main Street.

But the cost of a highway bridge, at the site of the current footbridge, projected originally at \$200,000, frightened the town fathers and a stiff resistance was built up. The

Willimantic Traction Company, which held the trolley car franchise, was a keen supporter for the bridge, but it offered no financial report. There was also the question of property damage. No, this scheme was too ambitious. But the pro-bridgers ploughed on, convening meeting after meeting.

A letter from a pro-bridger 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." There was also strong local support for the digging of a tunnel under the Willimantic river.

The town fathers were slowly convinced and they called for estimates. The \$200,000 estimate was considered excessive and a Mr. F.H. Works of the American Bridge Co. 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 the best ground for a bridge was from Railroad Street, which in those days ran both sides of the footbridge. He envisaged a 24-foot wide, 624-foot long bridge with two six-foot 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.

NEXT: More problems.

Tom Beardsley, a freelance public historian, is a former