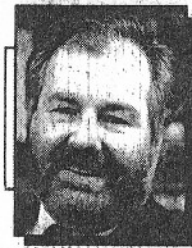


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Opponents unable to bridge differences



Tom Beardsley

Second in a series

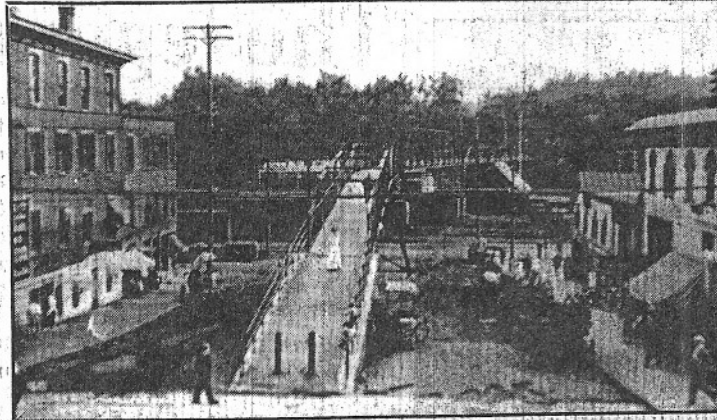
A bridge committee was formed in Willimantic and Melvin Eugene Lincoln, a long time proponent of a bridge to connect Pleasant Street and Main Street, was appointed chairman and ordered to prepare a report on its feasibility.

Political wrangling with the trolley and railroad companies held the report up, but it was finally ready on Aug. 6, 1903.

Several sites were considered for the trolley crossing. Improving Bridge Street would have cost \$20,000 including land damages. A bridge was considered approximately in the position where it is proposed the new "bridge of frogs" will be built, from Jackson to Pleasant. A highway bridge, in the position of the footbridge today, was estimated at \$57,000.

The town meeting of Aug. 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. It was also voted to organize a committee to ascertain where the funds should come from. This met with opposition and James Johnson, a farmer living on Pleasant Street, prepared a petition calling for the widening of the narrow stone arch bridge which ran between the thread mills, to accommodate the trolley cars.

Those who cross that bridge



Willimantic's footbridge was eventually built despite lots of opposition.

regularly today will know that, it was never widened. Johnson and 21 others also called for the decision of the voters at the meeting of Aug. 27 be rescinded. A town meeting was called for Sept. 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 had walked around Willimantic and put together a 6-foot-10-inch petition containing 307 names to convince the selectmen to go ahead with the financing of the bridge.

On Aug. 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 streets. Between 4 a.m. and noon he counted 300 people.

The Sept. 10 meeting was a nasty affair. Again, just as the case with the town hall building, several "anti-bridgers"

tried to make illegal the decisions made at previous town meetings regarding the bridge, using minor clerical mistakes as an excuse.

Melvin Lincoln was aware of the resistance, and he prepared a plan which called for an underpass beneath the railroad lines which crossed Main Street. He believed this would cost the city some \$30,000, much less than the \$75,000 for the bridge, and the trolleys could enter Main Street beneath the subway, and a line could be connected to Coventry, and eventually continue through to Hartford via Bolton. But the "anti-bridgers" won the day, and the highway bridge plans were abandoned.

The city then appointed committees to estimate the cost to eliminate the grade crossings. Melvin Lincoln's plan was considered. It was calculated to cost \$50,000, requiring extensive earth excavation, surface water drainage, relaying of water pipes, curbs and gutters and the cost of a plate girder bridge. This plan called for highway underpasses to be dug

under the railroad tracks on Main Street, with a headroom of 14 feet. This plan was considered too expensive and opposition from the New Haven and New York railroad crushed it.

Nevertheless, the bridge campaign energized those who had long desired a footbridge.

And 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. Some of these old drawings can be examined in an exhibit currently on display at the Windham Textile & History museum.

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

He said: "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."

NEXT: Lots of opposition.

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