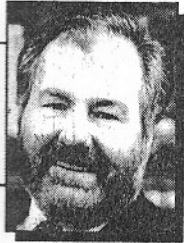


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Construction starts despite opposition



Tom Beardsley

Third in a series

After meetings with officials of the Central Vermont Railroad, the footbridge committee reported that a bridge 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.

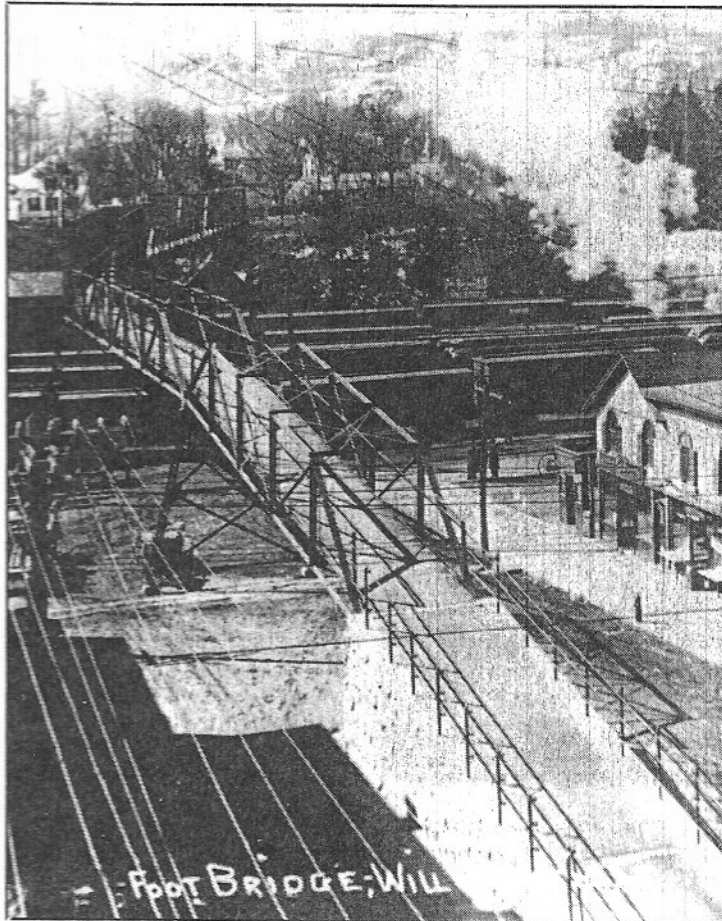
But the footbridge had enemies — the town's newspapers, the Willimantic Chronicle and the Willimantic Journal wanted a highway bridge.

On Jan. 6, 1905, the Chronicle editorialized:

"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 there was a stranger approaching who may be considering 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, particularly when the bridge committee's negotiations with the railroad companies were successfully pointing to the commencement of its building.

The Journal believed the footbridge plans were "little



F. Gamache

The footbridge in its heyday, about 1912, with a busy Willimantic railroad depot below.

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. It worked hard through 1905, clearing bureaucratic hurdles. In September members 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, N.Y., which bid \$9,900 for the steel work, and Charles Larrabee of Willimantic was awarded the stone work contract after bidding \$2,200. The plans called for the bridge to be 600 feet long, and 8 foot wide to accommodate fire-fighting equipment.

The Owego Bridge Co. was formed in 1893, and manufactured several hundred steel and iron bridges across New York state before it closed in 1917.

(Up until 1991, it was be-

lieved that only two of the company's bridges were still in existence. One spanning the Susquehanna River in Binghamton, N.Y., and one spanning the Battenkill Creek in Washington County, N.Y. Emma Sedore, Owego's town historian, was delighted that a third was still in use in far-away Connecticut. She had not realized that the company had built a bridge for use outside of New York state.)

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 sought to stop the construction, inasmuch as that it was illegal for the city to proceed to ask for bids and award the contracts before benefits and damages to property owners had been assessed.

But the footbridge committee recalled how the town hall building went ahead against opposition. It simple ignored the naysayers and started building. On Nov. 3, 1905, Charles Larrabee and a gang of men hurriedly started work on Pleasant Street, but in their haste they slightly miscalculated the siting of a stone supporting pier.

The controversy continued over the winter, but the town fathers ignored it. The following June, inspections of the stonework revealed that the southern stone supporting pier was slightly out of line, and some feared that its foundations would be weakened as it stood on the site of an old brook.

But Charles Larabee convinced the bridge committee that this problem could be overcome by a slight realignment of the steelwork, and that the pier stood on a secure rock ledge. And on June 18, 1906, work began on the Railroad Street bridge approaches.

NEXT: Built, at last.

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