

Population boom gave rise to Willimantic homes on the Hill



JUNE 27, 1996

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Between 1870 and 1890, the township of Windham's population almost doubled from 5,412 to 10,032. The rapid development of the borough of Willimantic's cotton and silk industries caused these dramatic demographics.

During the 1880s, Prospect Hill, just north of Willimantic, became a much sought after address for the borough's growing middle class. When farmer Eli Hewitt purchased a 30-acre tract on the eastern slopes of Prospect Hill in the 1840s, he had no idea what a gold mine this remote, hilly, out-of-town area would become.

In 1886, Eli Hewitt's son, George Hewitt of Norwich, laid out two wide avenues, initially named New Side Hill Street (now Summit Street) and Hill Street (now Lewiston Avenue), westward from Jackson Street connecting with Church Street.

Oak Street was surveyed and graded between Prospect and Lewiston during the summer of 1887. Hewitt Street, named for the landowners, was laid out east of Oak Street, connecting Prospect and Summit streets. Lewiston Avenue was



Fran Funk

A view of the foot of Prospect Hill that was developed between 1887 and 1900. Lower Jackson Street, as seen above, was referred to as 'Irish Row' and 'County Cork in miniature.'

probably named for Joseph A. Lewis, (1829-1900), a nurseryman and market gardener who planted his crops on the Hewitt land. His house and gardens still stand at 315 Jackson St.

Having spent \$3,000, George Hewitt opened up 50 highly desirable building lots and sold 13 of these in 1887. Three successful local businessmen, John J. Hickey, John F. Hennessy and Paul F. Moriarty, were among the first purchasers.

Hickey, a drug store owner and grocer on Union Street, famous for his Hickey's cough balsam, built 154 Jackson St. on a hill overlooking the Natchaug School. Hennessy

was the proprietor of a successful grocery store at 187 Main St. He built an attractive Victorian house north of Jackson Street's junction with Prospect Street (190 Jackson St.). Paul Moriarty, of plumbers and suppliers Moriarty & Rafferty, had worked on many of Willimantic's post-Civil War houses. He built 204 Jackson St. All three fine houses were completed and occupied by the fall of 1888.

Hickey, Hennessy and Moriarty were first- and second-generation Irishmen. This suburban growth on lower Jackson Street signaled the arrival and establishment of Willimantic's expanding Irish mid-

dle class.

In the spring of 1888, Frank Larabee, another Willimantic grocer, built a stylish residence on the east corner of the junction of Prospect Street and the newly laid out Oak Street (55 Prospect St.). In 1892, an overseer at the Willimantic Linen Company, Irish-born John McAvoyn, built a fine house at 3 Bellevue St. In 1892, Willimantic's future Irish-American mayor, Danny Dunn, built a house on Summit Street, and Irish-American tobacconist, stationer and local politician William Sweeney invested in building new houses on Jackson Street. He built No. 233 for himself opposite Jackson

Street's junction with the recently laid out Summit Street and moved there in 1893.

The southwestern junction of Oak and Summit streets proved to be irresistible for the town's growing Swedish population. They raised their Lutheran church there in 1892.

During the spring of 1889, *the Chronicle* reported that "every building lot save two on the south side of Lewiston Avenue, the uppermost street on the hill, has been disposed of to parties who intend to build this season. It will soon be desirable to open streets towards the north for northward the star of empire seems to wend its way in Willimantic."

Lewiston Avenue was subsequently graded westward from Church Street to High Street and, in July 1892, the *Willimantic Journal* reported that "new houses are springing up like mushrooms on Lewiston Avenue on the Hewitt estate."

Around this time, Windham Street was laid out northward from Main Street, and proved to be a favorite spot for Willimantic's wealthiest citizens.

More about Windham Street's attractive Victorian mansions in a future column.

Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, was the scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum from 1990 to 1995.

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