

April 05, 1997

Partnership Helped Build Windham Road Bridge (Part Two of Three)

It is probably one of the narrowest bridges in Connecticut and one of the busiest. It is the main southern exit and entrance for Willimantic. That it still stands is a testament to its builders, Lyman Jordan and Nathaniel Olin. That it has never been widened is surprising. It has a long and interesting history going back 140 years which will explain why it is still so narrow and hazardous. This is the first of three parts designed to examine the bridge's rich history. When the new bridge is built, connecting Jackson Street and Main Street with Pleasant Street and Windham Road (Route 32), the old bridge will be closed to vehicular traffic, and become part of the Windham Mills Park. It is proposed to call it the Bridge of Flowers, and it will only carry pedestrian traffic. This is its story.



The Windham Road Bridge is shown from an unusual angle, looking west in this 1911 postcard view. Mill One can be seen at the top right hand corner.

The Windham Road Bridge bridge was built by the building partnership of Lyman Jordan and Nathaniel Olin during the summer of 1857. Stone arch bridges were very expensive. They were more durable than wooden bridges and usually reserved for the most important roads. The bridge cost \$3,200 to build and was paid for by the Willimantic Linen Company, and an 8% tax increase on the town's wealthiest citizens.

Lyman Jordan was born in Coventry, Rhode Island in 1817, and came to Willimantic with his parents in 1833. His obituary described his subsequent career: "In company with Nathaniel Olin, he built the lower stone arch bridge and a few years later the one that spans the river from Bridge Street. On the latter he placed his name, claiming the work as his monument. And it is indeed a monument that will hand down his name and handiwork to generations yet unborn. He has been an industrious worker, and probably no man in the section of this state has done so much masonry work for the manufacturers."

Jordan was a devout Methodist with a "melodious tenor voice," who led the Willimantic

Methodist Church's choir. He was a member of the committee which purchased the Willimantic Methodist Camp Ground, and did much to develop it. He was married in 1835 to Louise Kenyon, and had ten children, including Jules Jordan, a noted tenor of the time, Julian Jordan, a composer and music teacher in Providence, and George E. Jordan, a stonemason who rebuilt the dam to Mill Number One in 1888, when the original 1857 wooden dam was destroyed by floods following the 1888 blizzard. Lyman Jordan built a large 11 room Greek Revival-style house, constructed from fieldstone, in Windham, on an old public road to Lebanon (138 Jordan Road) in 1863. He died there in 1882

Captain Nathaniel (Nason) Olin (1819-1893), Jordan's building partner, was a stone mason from Plainfield, who was employed by the Willimantic Linen Company in 1857 and 1864 to build Mill Numbers One and Two. He also built at least one other stone arch bridge at Packerville, a small mill village on the Canterbury-Plainfield town line.

By the late 1860s, both bridges over the Willimantic River were becoming crowded and dangerous. Petitions began for a footbridge, but that would not be built until 1906. In 1875, a 6 foot wide wooden sidewalk was added for pedestrian safety. In 1890, an iron pipe railing was added, and records reveal that the sidewalk was replanked in 1888, 1903, and 1914. The 1903 replanking was probably part of the modification work carried out when the trolley car line was laid over the bridge during that year. The north end of the bridge was raised about two feet, either in 1863 or 1882, due to realignments and regrading of Main street during those years.

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