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Willimantic Was Subject to Late 1800s City View Craze (Part One of Four)

This old lithograph shows a 1909 view of Willimantic, with Main Street seen at the bottom of the picture. Also note the Willimantic Normal School building on Valley Street which burned down in 1943, and the old Windham High School which burned down in 1913. The vacant area on Prospect Hill is now the ECSU campus.



For those interested in viewing Willimantic as it used to be, there are three birds-eye views of Willimantic, published in 1876, 1882 and 1909. We will take a close look at these views, their artists and the history of urban views, this week and for the next three weeks. The 1876 and 1909 views can be seen in the Willimantic Public Library, and the 1882 view can be examined at the Windham Textile Museum. For those interested in urban views of American cities, check out *Views and Viewmakers of Urban America* (U. of Missouri Press, 1984) by John W. Reps. This outstanding work has collected, catalogued and

displays many of the thousands of lithographed urban views produced in the United States during the 19th and early 20th centuries. You may find your home town.

Such views of American cities, from imaginary viewpoints high in the air, were highly popular between 1870 and 1910. Several artists, such as Albert Ruger, Augustus Koch, George Norris and Oakley Bailey, traveled all over the U.S. and made a lucrative living out of producing these views, until aerial photography made their work redundant in the early 20th century. Nineteenth century Americans hungered for pictures of their country - and more than 5,000 lithographic prints of over 2,400 places were produced.

Lithographic printing first came into commercial use in the United States in the 1820s. It was cheap and easy compared with the traditional processes of engraving or etching. Lithography made it easier to produce tonal effects, and color was introduced in the mid 1800s.

Viewmakers obtained free and favorable newspaper publicity to promote the growth and prosperity of growing cities such as Willimantic. A first notice announced the arrival in town of an artist, agent and publisher, mentioning that views by these artists had already been published of nearby or rival towns, and that the artists were contemplating such a project in this town. A week or so later, an article would appear

stating that the artist was now at work sketching the community's buildings, and that he would shortly be exhibiting a preliminary drawing and accepting subscriptions for lithographed versions.

Local newspapers, such as the Willimantic Chronicle and Willimantic Journal, usually supported the venture and urged that local businessmen should order copies. A third announcement would refer to the drawing as appealing and accurate and called for subscribers to come forward in the numbers said by the agent and artist to be the minimum required to justify the expense of printing, and suggested that the eventual lithograph would be a splendid addition to the walls of every drawing room and business office and should be sent to other places in the country to show how attractive and prosperous the town had become. The artist or agent also sought business from local governments attempting to persuade city councils to subscribe for multiple copies to advertise the town around the country, and maybe attract new industry to the area.

Popular features of these views were the borders, which featured houses of the wealthy, churches, principal public buildings, industrial plants, office blocks and retail and wholesale businesses. The three Willimantic views are classic examples of this. A person wishing his home or business to be included usually paid a fee or bought multiple copies. The artists job was arduous, tramping the streets and sketching the buildings and including them on a perspective grid on which he redrew the buildings from his sketches. He produced an attractive drawing for display, and noted criticisms and omissions and made corrections. The drawing was then sent to the lithographer who redrew it on stone.

View making declined because of an economic depression in the 1890s. Also cities in the 1890s were expanding and changing rapidly, so the view was soon out of date. Cities were becoming so large that accurate views were impossible, and tastes changes and city views in parlors or offices became unfashionable. It is interesting to compare the Willimantic of 1876 to the sprawling urban area of 1909. But there has been a revival in the use of these old views, and they are useful tools for research in the history of architecture, city planning, transportation, and urban geography.

Continued next week.