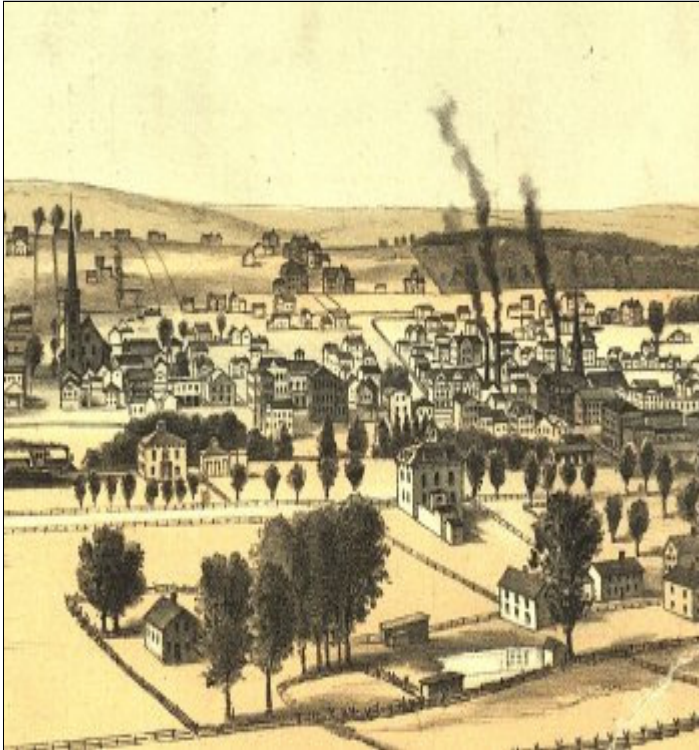


August 16, 1997

## Willimantic's 1882 City View Created Quite a Controversy (Part Three of Four)

This section of the 1882 View reveals a Pleasant Street some 30 years before the armory was built. To the left is the Congregational Church on Valley Street. The smoke on the right comes from the chimneys of the Holland and Chaffee silk mills.



The 1882 view is entitled Willimantic, Conn., 1882. From Blake Mountain, and measures 24 by 32 and 1/4 inches (61.1 by 82 cm.) It was published by the W. O. Laughna Art Publishing Company in New York, drawn by Wils Porter and printed by Charles Hart Lithography of 36 Vesey Street New York. There is a copy at the Connecticut Historical Society at Hartford and the Windham Textile and History Museum has a framed copy on exhibit.

Charles Hart (1823-1913), the printer of the 1882 view, was born in London, England. His obituary in the New York Times stated that he was in the lithography business,

"up to four years ago." at 36, Beaver Street. He had resided in Brooklyn since 1843 and died at the grand old age of 91 at his home, 444 Sixth Street, Brooklyn. Hart was involved in 17 bird's eye views as lithographer, artist, photographer and printer between 1869 and 1913. A view of New York was printed by his firm three years after his death.

"Wils Porter," the artist, was William A. Porter (1842 - 1909). He was born in Worcester, England. Porter was educated at the South Kensington Museum in London, and taught in the Art Department of Philadelphia's Spring Garden Institute for more than thirty years. His first job when arriving in the United States in 1870 was to decorate a service of china for President Grant. Porter was a landscape and porcelain painter and a member of the Art Club of Philadelphia, the Pen club and the Philadelphia Sketch Club.

The Willimantic Chronicle announced on May 10, 1882 that a New York artist had just completed a pencil sketch of Willimantic for the purpose of, ". . . engraving a birds eye view of the village. It will differ from the one already in existence by representing a perfect draft of each house and by being more extensive and elaborate. Some of the principle buildings will be engraved separately and printed in the margin of the picture.

It will be ready for distribution about the 1st of July."

The picture was ready in time, but not to everyone's satisfaction. The Chronicle announced on July 5 that, ". . . a dubious picture of Willimantic has been produced by a professional artist and is being delivered to subscribers who bought without seeing the goods. It is difficult to decipher whether the picture was made to represent Willimantic or Halifax, if we judge from the likeness." The following week, the Chronicle reported that, ". . . with a few exceptions the subscribers for the picture meant to illustrate Willimantic refused to accept the worthless portrait which had been executed and those who did received it under protest. The artist doubtless regards that imposition as a profitless adventure."

The drawing, lithographing and publishing of birds eye views was so competitive that standards did suffer, but the discriminating public expected more for their money. The fact that Porter produced so few bird's eye views was probably a reflection of the inaccuracy of his work. Judging by the negative coverage in the Chronicle, the artist made no attempt to check the accuracy of his work with Willimantic's inhabitants - a standard procedure in the business. Porter was only active as a city view artist during 1881 - 82 when he producing five views Meriden, CT., Middletown CT., and Altoona & Tyrone PA., during 1881, and Bridgeport and Willimantic in 1882.

Gloria Deak, has put together an extensive catalogue of urban views of the USA, entitled the Picturing America Catalogue. There are no entries for the 1876 or 1909 Willimantic views, but the controversial 1882 view is described in some detail. It is reproduced below.

"Willimantic lies in a picturesque valley about 24 miles southeast of Hartford and is part of Connecticut's Windham County. Its location at the junction of the Willimantic and Natchaug rivers - which meet to form the Shetucket River - gave it the water power necessary for it to prosper as a mill town. Its first cotton spinning facilities date back to 1822 and since that time it has earned the name Thread City.

We see from the lithograph that in 1882 Willimantic's factories were at a high point of activity; the opening of three railroad lines had had an immediate impact. Across the whole plane of the drawing, vertical columns of smoke rise higher than the church steeples, indicative of increasing industrialization. The twenty vignettes surrounding the valley scene offer a closer look at some of the industries as well as some of the important buildings. Four vignettes are devoted to a principal source of the New England town's prosperity: the Willimantic Linen Company. We are shown its no 1, No. 2, and no. 4 mills, as well as the company's large store. The upper vignettes are flanked by the Congregational Church at the left and St Joseph's Catholic Church at the right. The lower insets focus on several prominent residences, the Loomer Opera House, a hotel, a savings bank, and a savings institution."

Artist Wils Porter chose to depict Willimantic at eye level rather than from the aerial perspective that was the vogue among viewmakers in the 1880s. He also sought to

make his urban image more attractive by appearing to integrate the building close ups in the top and bottom margins with the cityscape itself. This he does by presenting only the thinnest of borders between the central image and the vignettes. The device works in part

Continued next week.