

January 04, 1997

## Not Perfect, But Bridge Completed: Part 4

The footbridge pictured in 1947, when Willimantic was still a busy railroad junction.



On June 22, 1906, the prefabricated sections of the bridge arrived by rail from Owego, New York, where they had been constructed in the company's workshops. It was decided to bolt the sections together on site, rather than weld them, so the bridge could be easily dismantled if the railroad companies decided it should be removed or elevated. After the sections were bolted together, the painters arrived on the scene and added coats of white, green, and black.

The bridge was almost completed by August, but a problem arose. An anonymous engineer wrote to the *Chronicle*: "I don't believe any good bridge engineer would ever accept that bridge as it stands." He pointed out several examples of cheap construction in technical terms. The worst example of bad workmanship was at the stone pier built at the south west corner of the Vermont railroad's freight house. He explained that the bridge did not rest squarely in the center of the pier, but rested at the west side so that the shoe on the north west corner projected over the pier two or three inches. At the east side the pier support juttred out some 18 inches.

The bridge foreman said that he had done the best job possible under the circumstances, that the piers were built in the wrong position because of poor, rushed plans. A special committee was formed to inspect the bridge. The engineer responsible, Mr. Mitchell, claimed that the problem was not due to his final plans, as they had not been completed before the stonework began. He claimed that the piers were built from his sketches, which were rushed out to quickly start construction, (to beat the weather and the anti-bridge faction). He did not realize that his preliminary sketches would be used as actual plans. Despite the misalignment, the committee declared the bridge safe.

At the end of August, a gang of Western union linesmen rerouted the telegraph wires over the bridge, and the painters applied the final coats of black, glossy paint. On September 6, 1906, the *Chronicle* reported that, "The coloring greatly improves the appearance of the bridge and the people who have been criticizing its looks for so long are forced to admit that it isn't quite such an eyesore after all. The planking is about two thirds completed and the public will soon have the pleasure of walking over it."

On September 9, workers installed electric lights, and fitted a wire fence. By September 14, the final planking was in place, and the authorities were concerned that people were climbing over the fences at the approaches, and illegally promenading back and forth over the bridge. People were warned to stay off the bridge until it was officially opened. The people that did sneak across the bridge said that there was a great view of the river

and railroad depot, but that the fencing was cheap, just like "chicken wire."

The bridge committee complained to the Owego Bridge Company about the "chicken wire," and on September 20, Mr. Higley, the company manager, arrived in town from Owego and toured the bridge with officials. It was agreed to replace the wire netting with an iron pipe fence. On October 19, the wire was replaced with iron pipes at a cost of \$195, by W. S. Johnson, a local contractor. The opening was delayed, when the bolts for the pipe fencing did not arrive. But at last, after a small ceremony on November 19, 1906, the bridge was officially opened by city mayor Danny Dunn. It had cost \$12,420.88. to build. The season's first snows arrived on December 3, 1906, and several people slipped and fell as they crossed the bridge. Luckily, no one made any claims, and the city ensured that the bridge was swept and sanded throughout the winter.

Boston store owner, Hugh Murray, a long-time proponent of a footbridge, was delighted that the project was at last completed. At Christmas, 1906, he had a model replica built of the new footbridge, and displayed it in his windows, and filled it full of Christmas presents. But still there were criticisms. Willimantic Board of Trade Members complained bitterly about the shocking state of the city's sidewalks, and lack thereof. The snow, slush and mud was keeping customers away from their businesses downtown. Why, they asked, had \$12,000 been wasted on a footbridge. It would have been better spent building sidewalks.