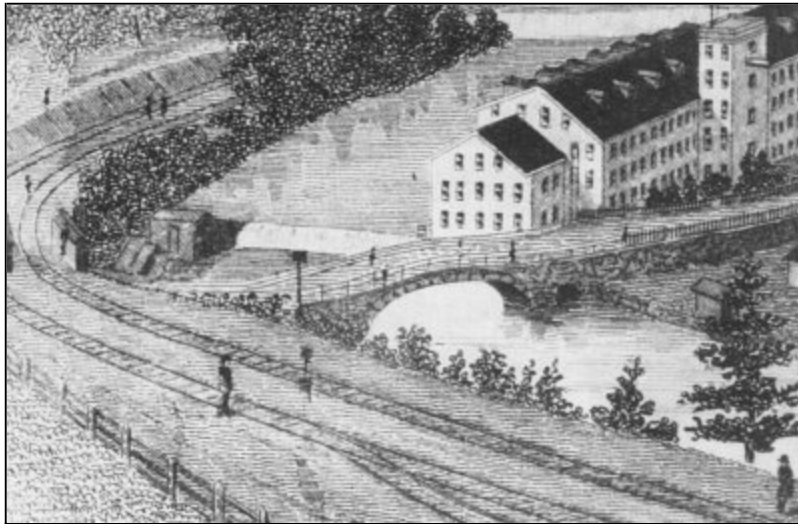


March 29, 1997

Small Stone Bridge the Entrance for Willimantic (Part One 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.



This view from an 1879 engraving reveals the Willimantic Linen Company's Mill Number One, and the "lower arch stone bridge." Note the pedestrians walking along the railroad tracks.

The narrow stone bridge which spans the Willimantic River and bisects the old American Thread mills, has never had a consistent name since its construction in 1857. It was known for many years as the South Main Street Bridge prior to 1908, Windham Road was known as South Main Street. It was also referred to as the Jillson Hill Bridge, and the Lower Bridge (the Upper Bridge being the Bridge Street Bridge). It was built from granitic gneiss, the stone quarried from the same source that built the Willimantic Linen Company's Mills One and Two, from the bed of the Willimantic River.

The road carried by the bridge has been an important one since the early 1700s. Willimantic's Main Street was first laid out as a public highway in 1707 for the convenience of Windham farmers gathering hay from meadows alongside the river. In 1727, a bridge was built to connect that highway to places to the south. This wooden structure was adjacent to an iron forge and became known as the Iron Works Bridge. It was destroyed by a flood in 1771, and rebuilt. It later became part of the Windham County Turnpike. A turnpike was a road on which travelers had to pay a fee to travel.

This fee paid for the road's upkeep, and provided a profit for the turnpike company shareholders. The company which constructed this east-west highway was incorporated in 1799, and dissolved in 1852, unable to compete with the railroads. This ancient turnpike is better known today as Connecticut Route 14.

The borough of Willimantic was formed in 1833, and became responsible for the growing mill village's roads. The town meeting minutes of the 1850s reveal several lawsuits against the town of Windham to improve the roads. They were in a shocking state, and the old Iron Works Bridge badly needed repairing, due to increased traffic. In 1856, the Willimantic Linen Company planned to build a new mill adjacent to the old bridge, so the town fathers saw the opportunity to get a new bridge built, partly financed by the Linen Company. In April, 1857, Willard Hayden petitioned for a 80 foot span stone arch bridge which he had designed. Hayden (1808-1886) was a prominent local manufacturer, keen to get a modern stone bridge built to improve vehicular traffic flow in the growing borough. Regular readers will recall that he built the Hayden Block on Main Street in 1876.

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