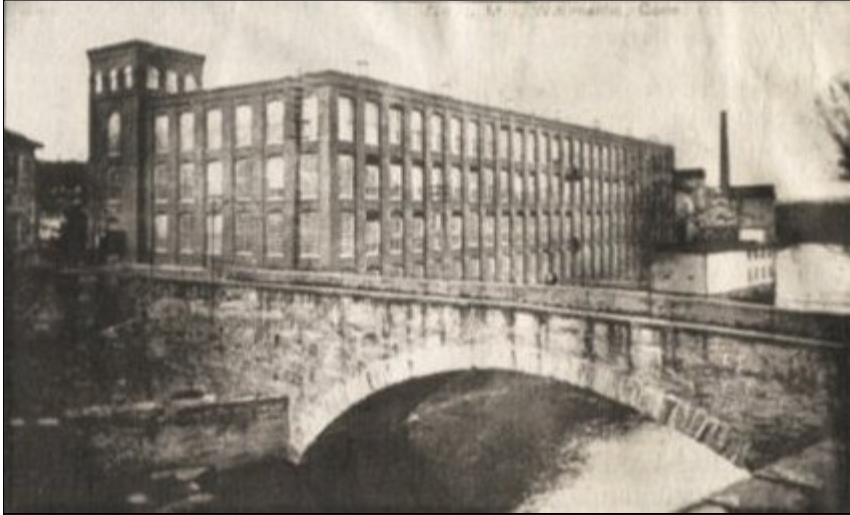


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"Gene" Boss' Memories of Willimantic, 1842-1909 (Part Two of Two)

American Thread's Mill 5 pictured shortly after its completion in 1900. Eugene Boss was the driving force to get this mill, and Mill 6 built in Willimantic.



In 1845 and 1846, Boss' father, Harry, took in two lady boarders at \$1.25 a week rent, and any meals missed were deducted. "The "old side hill," now known as Prospect Hill, was covered with a splendid growth of chestnut lumber and the children who wandered into it were frightened and afraid of wild animals.

George Lathrop had a store where Edith Casey's is now with a big sign over it, the "New York Store." The method of getting to New York was by stage to Norwich and by steamer from there. When Sam Lee went to New York twice a year to buy goods it was a great event in the village and talked about for weeks. The supplies of the cotton mills were all brought from Providence as our mills were then owned in Providence.

Engineers came from Rhode Island to investigate the matter of water power, and picked out the privileges where the Windham and Smithville mills now are (Bridge Street). But later on it developed that the privileges lower down were much more valuable (American Thread).

Harry Brainard was one of the drivers of the Providence teams and Jim Loomis was another. They drove four horses and tooted horns. The (Willimantic) river was teeming with fish, perch, pickerell, dace and bullheads and eels. The only church was the Congregational near to where the Melony building is now. The first pastor was Andrew J. Sharpe. It was a cold and barren place." Boss remembered going there with his grandmother who had an old fashioned foot warmer, there being no stoves in the church.

"The services lasted all day Sunday, but after milking the cows we boys could go skating and have a good time. Jim Tyler was the Tithing man and he was a holy terror to the boys. The Tithing man was also sexton or janitor at the church. The mills were lighted with old oil lamps and on the 20th of every April, the mills stopped lighting up and the boys used to celebrate the cessation of night work by engaging in a fight with balls of waste on the lot at the back of the watering trough, and sometimes with the Jackson Street gang. John Tracey was agent of the upper mill and Horace Hall, father of

John Manning Hall was superintendent. If people working in the mills did not behave they were walloped the same as in school. The first school house was just at the back of where George Elliot had his first business.

Windham was the important part of town and the town meetings were held there. It was a great event to go to those meetings. The Pages and Jillsons came to town and the duck mill was established on the lower part of the town and this part began to be built up. The railroads came in 1848 and 1849, and up to that time the space between the Franklin Hall and the Thread Company's old store house was a side hill full of birches, beeches and brush."

Boss remembered riding down by stagecoach to Norwich from Willimantic with his mother, and he saw his first steam locomotive there on the Norwich and Worcester railroad, and he also saw his first steamboat in Norwich harbor. Boss continued, recalling the origins of the Willimantic company which became known as American Thread:

"The Willimantic Linen Company was incorporated in 1854 for the manufacture of linen goods occupying what is now known as the spool shop. Lots of the descendants of the help there are living here. When the Crimean war came on they couldn't get the necessary supply of flax and they went by the board. Lawson C. Ives and Austin Dunham made a good team but they did not succeed in this industry. About 1855 they took up the thread line in a small degree in South Willington. About 1847 or 1848, a party started up the thread business on the basement floor of the Smithville mill using the name of Coats, and there was a law suit with the Coats thread people which the latter won. The Linen Company occupied a portion of the spool shop and finished thread in a small wooden building nearby. Then they decided to build Number One Mill. In 1856 and 1857 the panic came on, but through the indomitable wills of Messrs. Ives & Dunham the project was carried through."

Boss continued to say said that he commenced his services at the Willimantic Linen Company in 1858 when Gardner Hall was Superintendent, and Egbert and Edgar Hall were overseers. "Gardner Hall Jr, now of South Willington, worked in the bleachery at nine dollars a week. When the war broke out prices advanced and the company pulled through having a big stock of goods on hand, and in 1864 they built number two mill and a large portion of it was unoccupied for a long time. Number four mill was built, and Number three mill was purchased and there are now number five and number six mills."

Boss predicted a marked advance in the thread industry in the next decade in the way of building and spinning mills. He took an optimistic view of the future of Willimantic. There were some things the Board of Trade should undertake. One was to demand the elimination of the railroad crossing, and another desirable thing was a safe drive bridge across the river. Breathing spaces should also be established. We already have a park

and something ought to be done with it. Boss' address was heartily applauded and he was given a rousing vote of thanks.

Mr. Eugene Lincoln (1849-1939) was next called upon to speak to the Chamber, and he told about the year 1863 when his father attended the saw and grist mill which stood on the site occupied by number two mill: "I came here and went into business 40 years ago, Dr. Rogers was the only man in mercantile business who is still in business here . . . Progress in Willimantic in 40 years has been large." Lincoln believed that Willimantic had entered upon a new era of growth and prosperity. He saw his first train of cars in Willimantic in 1854. He was so absorbed that he ran his head into a stone post in front of Stearns harness store. Allen Bennet Lincoln (1858-1941, author of a Modern History of Windham County [1920]) was introduced, and he looked forward to the future of Willimantic. Lincoln said he remembered Gene Boss as a young man who "Did Things," and was now the head of one of the greatest industries in the state. Gene Lincoln was another young man who "Did Things." "Willimantic today has a great opportunity before it. It is bound to grow. It is one of the coming cities of the state. And we all should pull together to help it get there."