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Eugene Boss Was Influential in Textile Industry, Republican Politics (Part One of Two)

Eugene Boss, pictured in 1894.



It is a name largely forgotten, but Eugene Stowell Boss (1842-1920) is probably one of the most influential figures in the history of Willimantic. "Gene" Boss was born and educated in Willimantic. He was considered to be a mathematic prodigy as a boy, but he left school at 13 and worked on a farm. In 1858, he began his long career with the newly-formed Willimantic Linen Company. Boss grew with the company, and was its manager/secretary when it became a part of the American Thread Company, a British controlled textile trust, in 1898.

Boss' first job for the Linen Company was in the finishing department in the Willimantic mills where he worked as a dresser tender. In 1860, he was transferred to New York City to fill a clerical position in the firm's head offices. He returned to Willimantic in 1865, aged 23, to start work as a paymaster and general clerk. He was then transferred to the company's Hartford offices.

Boss was employed in the company's Hartford offices until 1879 when, at age 37, he became agent and manager of the Willimantic Linen Company. A job he held for the next 37 years until his retirement on April 1, 1916. He was continually employed by the same company for 58 years.

Boss was very active in Connecticut's Republican movement. In 1877 and 1891 he represented the town of Windham in the General Assembly. In 1880, he was a member of the electoral college which made James Garfield President of the United States. He was also Senator for the Seventeenth District in 1882-83, and a delegate to the Republican National Convention at Chicago which, in 1896, nominated William McKinley for President.

Despite his intense involvement with the thread industry and Republican politics, Boss found time to be Commisary General of the Connecticut National Guard, the first President of Willimantic's Gas Light Company, President of the Willimantic Electric Light Company, President of the Willimantic Fair Association and President of the Hall

and Bill Printing Company. He was also a Director of the Atwood Machine Company and an active member in various Masonic Lodges. His grand dwelling, built in 1880, still stands on Windham Road

Boss was keynote speaker at the 1909 annual meeting of the Willimantic Board of Trade, the predecessor of the Chamber of Commerce. He spoke about his earliest recollections of Willimantic, thus providing a unique view of the city during the mid 19th century. His father arrived in Willimantic in 1845 at the "upper end" where the bulk of the population lived around the mills of the Windham and Smithville companies. Boss continued: "The town's store was the Windham company's store kept by Samuel Lee. There were no railroads, the principal street was Main Street and there was High Street and Jackson Street heading north and the town was thinly populated. On the south side was River Street. The mills were run entirely by water power and the employed "American Yankee people." The only person of foreign birth was "Mr. Elliot, " an Englishman who kept a tailoring establishment.

The first Irish people came to Willimantic were the Maxwells, Crowleys and the O'Neils. Their descendants are here still and they make most excellent citizens. Children aged eight and upwards ere employed and the help began work at 5. 30 in the morning. They were out to breakfast at 7. 30 and at noon they came out for dinner and worked to 8 or 8. 15 at night. The prices of living were low in some things. The mills had slaughter houses and the price of sugar was double that of today. The prices of calico and such things were nearly double and the demand for luxuries was small. A spool of thread cost eight cents, but the real cost of living was much less than today. Boys made between 40 and 75 cents a week in the mills and a dollar a day for labor was good pay. Times were hard and employees did not get their pay regularly. Mill people amounted for very little. The farmer was the big man. There were no reservoirs and the water was always low in the summer time."

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