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The Joseph Dwight Chaffee House (Part Two)

'Colonel' J. D. Chaffee, pictured in 1888



Joseph Dwight Chaffee (1847-1938), or the "Colonel," was one of the best-known personalities in late 19th century Willimantic and Mansfield. He acquired the rank of Colonel when he served on Connecticut Governor Phineas Lounsbury's staff from 1887 until 1889. Chaffee represented the town of Mansfield in the General Assembly, 1871-72, and was state senator from the then 24th district, which included Mansfield. In 1885, he became famous for installing Willimantic's first telephone, a line connecting the Chaffeeville and Church Street silk mills.

J. D. Chaffee decided to relocate from Mansfield to Willimantic, and in April, 1889 he purchased what was considered to be the most desirable building lot in the city, at the corner of Summit and North Streets. The ground was staked out by Sanford Comins, a local builder, who began digging out a foundation for Chaffee's new house in June, 1889. Comins, who lived on Walnut Street, built many of the fine Victorians in the "Hill District"-- then known as "Chestnut Hill" -- after the Civil War. Six weeks later, the Chronicle announced, "Chaffee's new house on the hill is raised." And then the immense job of constructing the interior began. The walls were plastered, and the building of the house's fine interior woodwork commenced. Chaffee decided to install a state-of-the-art steam heating system, manufactured by the Pitkin Brothers of Hartford. But the system did not work, and Chaffee sued the Company for the cost of the system, some \$3,000. Chaffee's Natchaug Company was a phenomenal success. Its fine, black dress silks were in demand across the United States, and Colonel Chaffee opened sales offices in New York City and Chicago. In 1892 the Natchaug Silk Company's nationwide advertising campaign explained that it manufactured dress silks, serges, satins, watch guards, eyeglass cords, sewing silk and machine twist. The Natchaug Company's fame was at its height in 1893, thanks to its exhibit at the Colombian Centennial Exposition in Chicago. But it all came crashing down in 1895 following the suicide of a Willimantic bank official, Mr. O. K. Risley. An investigation into his death led to an investigation of his bank's finances. It was revealed that the Natchaug Silk Company had been capitalized by highly creative means, in an attempt to survive the deep economic recession of 1893/94. The Natchaug Company was liquidated and Joseph Chaffee, and other officers of the company were arrested and subsequently put on trial for fraud.

Joseph Dwight Chaffee lived at 183 Summit Street from 1890 until 1907, when he moved to 290 Prospect Street. After the collapse of the Natchaug Silk Company, he went into

business with his son, Arthur Chaffee, in the old Church Street silk mill, and manufactured the highly successful "Natchaug Silk Fish Lines," along with silk, mohair, and worsted cloth. The Chaffee Manufacturing Company operated from 1900 until 1927. Joseph Chaffee lived in the basement of the silk mill when the business closed down. He died in Willimantic in 1938, aged 92.

Mr. Hurley of the Hurley-Grant Company purchased the mortgage to Chaffee's fine house, shortly after Joseph Dwight Chaffee's bankruptcy. The Chaffee house was vacant for a year, 1907-1908. Edwin Otis Sumner (1869-1948) purchased it in 1909. He was an Eastford farmer and businessman who relocated to Willimantic because of the Thread City's better business opportunities.

Edwin's son Stanley Sumner (1902-1994) recalled his childhood in the house that Chaffee built. He remembered that it was just over from the woods, and that the interior consisted of cherry tree wood, and the dining room was paneled with oak. Stanley also recalled that he and his brother had fun shooting at the house's weather vane with a BB gun. This vane is still intact, and has a large letter 'C', standing for Chaffee. Stanley Sumner is well known in Willimantic as the founder of the Sumner and Sumner insurance company. The Sumner family sold the Chaffee house in 1953. Amy Barber, the widow of Fred Barber -- the owners of the Bingham farm in Windham from 1916 to 1929 -- lived in the house until her death in 1960. The large house was divided into apartments, and had a number of tenants until purchased by Bruce and Patty Bellingham in the early 1980s. Along with a number of hill residences and their owners, Bruce and Patty have done a splendid job restoring their Victorian house.