

April 11, 1998

321 Prospect Street (Part One)

The 1899 William Asher house, located at 321 Prospect Street.



321 Prospect Street, Willimantic, built in 1900, is a fine example of the Queen Anne genre of late nineteenth century domestic architectural design. We'll take a close look at this building, and its occupants, this week and next. Although Willimantic gained fame as a textile city, an economic and social elite, who had no direct relationship with the city's cotton and silk industries, built the vast majority of Victorian mansions in the city's hill district. I'll be occasionally examining some of these outstanding houses and their builders and occupants over the next few months, so let's put the building-up of Willimantic's hill district into some historical context.

There was significant urban growth along the Willimantic River, in southeast Windham county, from the 1820s through the 1850s, and the expanding borough of Willimantic experienced a phenomenal growth rate after the Civil War. In 1860 Willimantic's population was 4,261. By 1910 it had risen to 12,604, thanks to large influxes of Irish, French-Canadian and Polish families drawn by employment in "Thread City's" cotton and silk mills. Windham County's court sessions were based in Willimantic after 1880. Willimantic borough (1833) became a city in 1893. By 1900 it was the region's wholesale and retail center, and at the hub of New England's railroad network. The hill district began to develop on "chestnut hill," or "prospect hill" after the Civil War. In 1909, a prominent local manufacturer recalling his boyhood in Willimantic noted that in 1845 "prospect hill." was covered with a splendid growth of chestnut lumber. The aero-view of Willimantic, published in 1909, reveals that Victorian mansions have replaced the chestnut trees on prospect hill. Farmer Eli Hewitt purchased a 30-acre tract on the hill's eastern slopes in the 1840s. Prospect Street was laid out in 1868, but remained undeveloped until the 1880s. In 1886, Hewitt's son sold the land on the north of Prospect Street as building lots, and the area became home to Willimantic's growing middle and professional classes.

The hill's new residents were not plagued by industrial pollution from the valley below, and were provided with a spectacular view. Prospect Street's subsequent westward growth met with land owned by the Windham Manufacturing Company, a local cotton cloth manufacturer. This company donated land for the building of the Windham Normal School in 1894-the Normal School evolved into Eastern Connecticut State University. The land value of the Prospect Hill locality increased when the city built a new high school in 1897. Two years later, a local industrialist William J. Asher and his

wife Nellie purchased a lot opposite the school, from the Windham Manufacturing Company. Both the original and subsequent owners of the house were typical of the commercial and industrial leaders who made their homes on "the Hill."

William J. Asher was born in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1865. He arrived in Willimantic in 1888, and purchased the Connecticut Steam Laundry at 828 Main Street, renaming it the Maverick Steam Laundry. He installed a 12-horse power boiler, a six-horse power steam engine and built a large steam-heated drying room. By 1894, the prospering business was touted as the "only steam laundry in Windham County." Asher subsequently began manufacturing domestic washing machines in New London. In 1910, at the urging of the Willimantic Chamber of Commerce, the "young businessman" was asked to bring the business from New London to his "hometown."

As stated, the part of Willimantic upon which Asher built his house was originally owned by the Windham Manufacturing Company, and sold by the company's agent, Walter Knight, to Asher in 1899. The house's original plot of land was several acres, but a large section was sold to Eastern Connecticut State University with the idea it would be developed into a park, instead it became a parking lot.

Asher owned one of the town's first automobiles, and built a custom garage for it beneath the rear porch, and installed a subterranean gasoline tank east of the garage. It is not known whether the tank is extant, but a fuel line into the garage from beneath the surface testifies to its one-time existence. This seems to be the oldest surviving custom-built garage in the town. Members of the Willimantic Automobile Club, formed circa 1902, stated that existing barns and stables provided suitable cover for their horseless carriages. Asher left Willimantic in 1914 and relocated to Worcester, Massachusetts.

Next Week: A detailed description of the Asher house, and also discover its well-known residents from 1914 through 1987.