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## The William Asher House (Part Two)

**This 1909 Bird's Eye View shows the area of Prospect Hill where William J. Asher built his distinctive late Victorian House**



The fine late Victorian house at 321 Prospect Street, Willimantic, built by William Asher in 1899/1900, is an excellent example of the Queen Anne-style of domestic architecture. It has a hipped roof with cross gables, a five-sided tower, and an extensively detailed porch that extends across the front and continues along the east side of the first story. The porch is raised, and entered by four stone steps. Tuscan columns on granite pedestals, between which run machined wooden railings, support its roof. The stone from which the porch is constructed was recycled from a local textile mill, destroyed by fire in the 1890s. Early 20th century insurance maps of Willimantic reveal that the house's original front porch was much smaller. The current, extensive porch was built between 1909 and 1914, probably at the same time as the stone garage.

The building's gables are faced with textured shingle. The house has five rooms on the first floor, five on the second and four on the third floor. The outside walls consist of wood clapboards and shingles. There is a distinctive patterned brick chimney, and the porch piers and walls are constructed of gray gneiss, known locally as "Willimantic granite." The east-facing gable has a cut-away corner forming a second-story balcony. The interior of 321 Prospect Street, is, to say the least, impressive by current standards of construction. It consists of detailed fir pine, cypress, oak, chestnut and maple woods. The house was converted to multi-family dwelling during the 1930s. The kitchen was enlarged in 1940, and new chimneys added in 1945. The building's deep foundation facilitates a large basement with fieldstone walls. The size of the house called for a large coal-fired boiler to provide adequate heating; the original steam radiators are extant in each room.

The curved second-story window on the west-facing wall houses an interior breakfast space. The window incorporates an elaborately floral patterned, stained glass colored pane. The house's tower forms a three-windowed front bay on the first two stories. The apex of the south-facing front gable is locally unique. It is finished with stucco, consisting of an elaborate, unique patterned ornamentation of inlaid scallop shells. The inlaid shells were considered to be a sign of good fortune and good luck in many European Jewish cultures. William J. Asher, the builder of the house, was a prominent member of Willimantic's early Jewish community. Although the house was converted to multi-family use in the 1930s, the third story, or attic, was built as a self contained apartment, and probably served as a butler's or housekeeper's accommodation.

Archibald W. Turner (1858-1925), a wealthy diamond and jewelry dealer, purchased the Asher house in 1914. Turner was born in Willimantic, and became the proprietor of the city's leading livery stable, renowned for the quality of its horses. Turner bought the house after the death of his first wife, Louise (Chaffee) Turner. After his death, his widow and second wife, Agnes (O'Neill) Turner, sold the house to Charlotte Ahern Donovan, the wife of Thomas Donovan (1895-1951), a district sales representative for the National Biscuit Company. In 1938, the Donovans sold the house to Aime J. Martineau.

Aime J. Martineau (1880-1942) was born in Quebec. He came to Willimantic in 1900 to work as a clerk with the H. E. Remington Company, the city's leading clothing company. In 1909 Martineau enrolled at the Barnes School of Embalming and Science of Anatomy in New York City. He subsequently worked as an embalmer for the New York and Brooklyn Casket Company. In 1912, Martineau launched an undertaking business in Willimantic. Four years later he purchased a tenement building at 31 Union Street and remodeled it into a furniture store. The undertaking/furniture business was incorporated as the Martineau-Bacon Company in 1924. It later evolved into the Bacon Funeral Home, located today on Prospect Street. Aime Martineau was a leading figure in the Franco-American Brigade and the St Jean Baptist Society. He assisted numerous Windham-based French-Canadians to achieve American citizenship. Martineau's obituary noted that he had "left a lasting imprint on the life of the community."

The house was sold to Gerald E. Loiselle (1902-1968) in 1942. Loiselle was born in Quebec and came to Willimantic as a child. He graduated high school in 1920, and worked as a reporter and manager at the Willimantic offices of the Norwich Bulletin. He later worked in Washington DC as secretary to Republican Congressman Thomas Ball. Loiselle organized a realty company in 1943, and became active in community development. He was particularly instrumental in bringing new industries to the area. In 1957, Loiselle was an organizer of the Windham Broadcasting Company. Radio Station WILI 1400 began broadcasting on October 5, 1957 as an independent, non-network-affiliated station. It is now the largest AM station in eastern Connecticut, and an affiliate of the ABC radio network. Loiselle's wife lived in the house until her death in 1987.

The historic 100-year-old structure housed a number of important figures in Willimantic's social and civic history, is currently on the market. It is standing there on the hill, waiting to be restored to its Victorian grandeur.