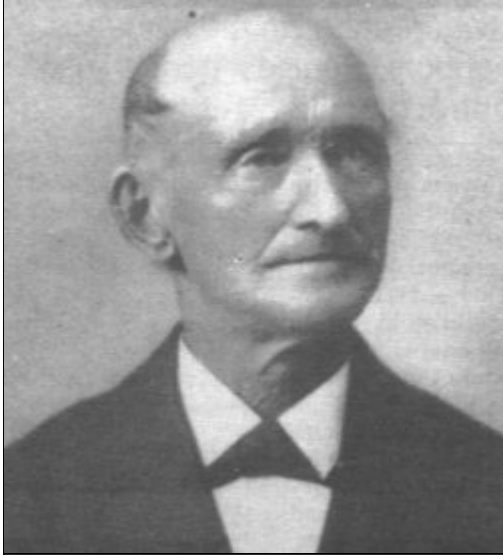


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Lewis Was Willimantic's 'Johnny Appleseed' (Part One of Two)

Joseph Allen Lewis.



Joseph Allen Lewis' name lives on in Willimantic in the name of Lewiston Avenue. In the late 19th century Willimantic was renowned for its beautiful tree-lined avenues and streets -- particularly on Jackson Street that was lined with tall, handsome maple trees. The works of the Willimantic Linen Company (American Thread) were adorned with Norway maples. J. A. Lewis had raised all these trees from seed.

In the mid 19th century, travelers heading northwards out of Willimantic, into Mansfield, along Jackson Street would pass several farms located on their right. Immediately to the left was the farm of Eli Hewitt, who gave his name to

Hewitt Street, and then the homestead of a black farmer called Jackson, who gave his name to the thoroughfare. On the right were the Capen estates, the Freeman farm, and then the nursery and farms of Joseph A. Lewis and Joseph Frye. The Frye farm's northwest corner is today occupied by the BP gas station at the southeastern junction of Jackson and Ash. The Lewis farm began at the location of Terry Street, where the Lewis homestead still stands, across Terry Avenue from the home of Willimantic's Curbstone Press. The Lewis nurseries frontage continued south down Jackson street for 200 yards. Joseph Allen Lewis was born in Exeter, Rhode Island in January 1829. He was directly descended to William Lewis who had arrived in Boston, Massachusetts on the ship "Lion" in 1632. Lewis first occupation was schoolmaster. This vocation gave him his first experience of Windham, Connecticut. In 1848 Dr. Jabez C. Fitch (1819-1885) hired Lewis to teach in his private boys school, the Pine Grove Seminary in South Windham. But Lewis first love was horticulture, and he subsequently returned to Rhode Island and found employment as a nurseryman in Providence, and then in horticultural nurseries in Springfield and Dighton, Massachusetts.

In 1853, whilst employed at Dighton, where he worked in a nursery and taught school, Lewis married Caroline Frye of West Greenwich, Rhode Island. Five years later, he was looking around for an opportunity to begin his own nursery. In 1858, Lewis and his brother-in-law, Joseph Frye, purchased an original tract of nine acres of land on Jackson Street, from Martin Harris, in the rapidly expanding borough of Willimantic. Lewis and Frye immediately began growing vegetables and trees on the fertile land just north of the borough. In 1861 Lewis erected a fine house at the nursery, and moved in with his family in April 1862. The house, at 315 Jackson Street, still stands, and can now be viewed easier since a later house in front of the Lewis house, burnt down several years ago.

Lewis and Frye first concentrated on raising trees from seed, and growing fruit. But the partners soon became experts in raising tomatoes. Lewis eventually soon had over 70 acres under cultivation, growing and canning for the wholesale trade. He erected a cannery on North Street in 1892, and began canning his fruits, berries and other vegetables. Local Farmers used the cannery to can their produce. In one season, Lewis canned 40,000 bushels of apples. Unfortunately, the cannery was destroyed by fire soon after it was built, throwing a number of people out of work, and Lewis then sent his produce to a cannery in Colchester. Nevertheless, the Lewis nurseries regularly employed 75 people, and thanks to Willimantic's rail links, Lewis' canned fruits and vegetables were transported and sold across New England. At their height, the nurseries had 100 acres of land under cultivation, with 18,000 feet under glass. Lewis' strawberries and pickles were also particularly popular.

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