

December 05, 1998

Valley and Church: Then and Now

Then - Valley and Church.

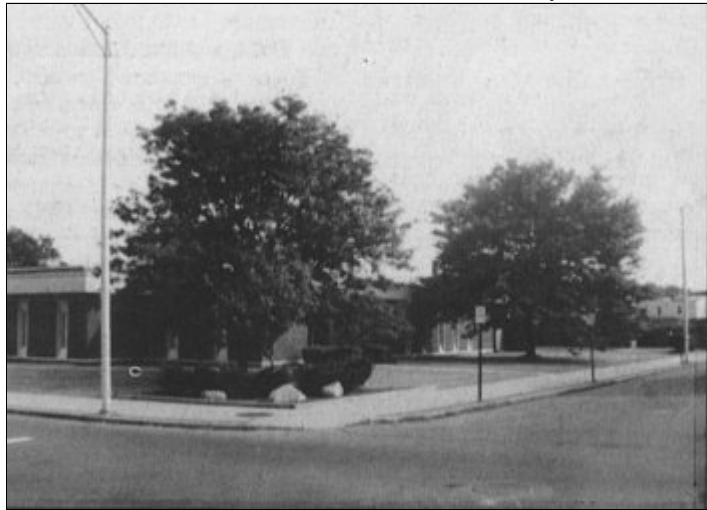


It's easily forgotten that the Thread City, famed for its cotton thread was one of the nation's leading silk thread and cloth manufacturers, and producers of silk spinning and weaving machinery. We are reminded of Willimantic's silk heritage in this 1894 view, looking west down Valley Street from the junction with Church Street. The building at the center of the photograph was erected in 1870 and housed a silk mill owned by

Scotsman James McFarlane, and aptly named the Paisley Silk and Thread Company. It was purchased in 1874 by Mansfield's Orwell Chaffee who manufactured silk thread there until his death in 1887. After Orwell's death, his son Joseph Dwight Chaffee expanded the concern and formed the Natchaug Silk Company, which located in a newly-built brick mill on North Street. The Chaffee Silk Mill in the picture continued to manufacture high quality silk fishing line into the 1930s.

Now -- Valley and Church.

The 1894 view down Valley Street reveals two more buildings. The first is a wood-framed building erected in 1874 by Walter and Arthur Morrison to repair and manufacture silk thread spinning machinery. This organization, the W. G. and A. R. Morrison Company, exported the silk twisting machinery to Scotland, China and Japan and across the United States. In 1888, the Morrisons rented a floor from J. D.



Chaffee's new North street mill which housed the Natchaug Silk Company. The Morrison Company collapsed during the 1894 financial depression. The Morrison's wood-framed building was demolished in 1911 by the Windham Silk Company and it was replaced with a large brick structure. The next building in view, located on the northwest corner of Valley and North, was known as the Washburn block and over the years it housed a carriage repository, an undertakers, rented furnished rooms, and a third floor meeting hall where local voluntary associations met, and dances and

concerts were held.

In the present day view the urban/industrial character has totally disappeared. The southern section of the city block encompassed by Valley, Church, North and Main houses the Windham Court House, built in the early 1970s, and landscaped with a manicured lawn and decorative trees -- jobs in silk have been replaced by jobs in law. In 1894 this city block housed livery stables, a Methodist Church, tenement houses, a bakery, the police station and city jail, a grocery store, a warehouse, the Brainard Hotel and Dr. Hills hospital. Today it is dominated by the vacant Todd's store, a parking lot, Hurleys and the Courthouse. So today, in this city block, one can buy a suit, park a car or be charged for a misdemeanor -- lawyers, judges and salesmen have replaced silk industry workers.