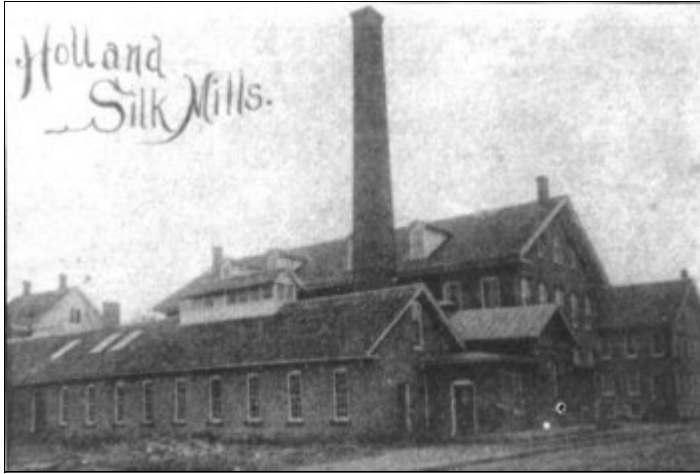


December 12, 1998

Valley and Church: Then and Now

Then - 1894 view of Valley and Church.



The 1894 view of the northern junction of Willimantic's Valley and Church reveals the Holland Silk mills. These brick mills stood on this location for about 75 years. The 1998 scene reveals a vacant commercial building on the site of the Holland Company's west mill, a gymnasium on the site of the eastern mill -- which once housed the A & P Supermarket -- and just beyond the west mill is St. Mary's

Church, built nine years after H. W. Rich took his photograph of Willimantic's premier silk company.

In 1864, the silk manufacturing brothers, Goodrich and James Holland of nearby Mansfield built a silk mill in Willimantic to take advantage of the city's available workforce, and the convenience of steam powered engines, which enabled the brothers to free themselves from rural Mansfield's fast running rivers -- and the agrarian town's unavailability of a regular workforce -- one that would not leave the machinery to feed the cows. The first silk mill, the eastern mill, built on the site of an earlier silk mill, was followed in 1874 by the western mill. The Hollands, and James Atwood, had designed highly efficient silk spinning spindles, which were soon in use across the United States. In 1876, the Hollands importance was reflected in the fine stand they built at the nation's Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia.

Now -- Valley and Church.

At the time of Rich's photograph, the Holland Silk mills were employing over 200 men, women and children. They produced over 1,000 pounds of high quality silk thread each week. It was sold across the nation through its New York and Chicago sales houses. The Holland Silk Company continued to prosper, despite the nation's regular economic slumps, well into the 20th century. But the Company did not weather the crippling economic chaos brought on by the collapse of the stock exchange in 1929. In 1932, the Holland Company asked the city to help reduce its tax



burden. The city fathers refused, stating the Company had enjoyed substantial reductions over the previous three years. The Holland Silk Company responded by closing its long-established Willimantic operation, and moved it lock, stock and barrel to Stroudsberg, Pennsylvania. The company's president, Edward Kenney claimed that the city favored other companies and were discriminating against their operation.

The mills closures came as a shock to the city. The transfer of machinery and personnel began in March, 1933. By the end of that summer some 85 of the company's 155 employees, and the mills machinery, had been transferred to Pennsylvania. These extensive brick and stone mill buildings remained empty during the 1930s, and in 1940 they were demolished. The Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company built the city's first supermarket on the site in the 1950s.