

March 28, 1998

The Joseph Dwight Chaffee House (Part One)

Joseph Dwight Chaffee's Summit Street house pictured in 1894, just five years after it was built.



Joseph Dwight Chaffee (1847-1938) is a name long forgotten, but he and the Chaffee family have left interesting historical legacies in the towns of Windham and Mansfield - a magnificent Victorian house at 183 Summit Street, Willimantic and "Chaffeeville" a road and village in Mansfield. The Summit Street house was built by J. D. Chaffee in 1889, Bruce Bellingham, the current owner, is giving a talk and slide show at 3 pm tomorrow, at the

Windham Textile and History Museum, on his restoration of Chaffee's magnificent house. Don't miss it.

Thanks to its proximity to Mansfield, Willimantic benefited from Mansfield's early 19th century silk industries. Several of its silk manufacturers moved to Willimantic after the Civil War to take advantage of Willimantic's textile workforce. Also, more efficient steam engine technology freed the silk manufacturers from their reliance on Mansfield's rivers and unreliable rural workforce -- the milking of cows and the harvest was often deemed more important than silk spinning. The Chaffees were true Yankees. Thomas Chaffee, a descendant of a Norman family that conquered England in 1066, arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1637. His descendant, Frederick Chaffee farmed in the northern sections of Mansfield in the late 18th century. Frederick had two sons, Orwell and Olon, who would become part of the Mansfield silk craze of the early 19th century. Orwell S. Chaffee was born in Ashford, Connecticut in 1807. He married into the Conant family and began work in his father-in-law's silk mill at Conantville. After Joseph Conant's death, Orwell built a silk mill in the area today known as Chaffeeville. Production commenced in 1838.

Joseph Dwight Chaffee was born in Chaffeeville in August 1847, a son of Orwell S. Chaffee and Lucinia (Conant) Chaffee. He was educated privately in Mansfield and at the Fitch Academy in South Windham. In 1862 J. D. Chaffee was hired as a clerk for a Boston, Massachusetts firm, but he returned to Mansfield the following year and worked in his father's Chaffeeville silk mill. In 1872, Orwell Chaffee organized the O. S. Chaffee & Sons silk company in Willimantic in a mill located at the southwest junction of Church Street and Valley Street. The company's silk braid and fishing lines gained a nationwide reputation. O. S. Chaffee & Sons continually expanded during the 1880s. Orwell Chaffee died in April 1887. He had been involved in silk manufacture for over

fifty years. Almost immediately, Joseph Chaffee began an expansion of the company, and went into partnership with Willimantic's Morrison Machine Company, manufacturers of silk spinning and weaving machinery. The two companies built a large four-story brick and granite factory on North Street. In November 1887, J. D. Chaffee announced the formation of the Natchaug Silk Company, to weave high quality dress silk cloth in the new factory. In July, 1888 the Church Street silk mill was closed, and the machinery transferred to the new North Street factory. This building had been officially opened on June 5, 1888, with a ball and concert under the factory's state-of-the-art, "dazzling electric lights." In August 1888, Chaffee announced an increase in his company's capital stock from \$25,000 to \$200,000. In March 1889, Chaffee reopened the Church street mill after installing new machinery. Business was booming, but trouble was just around the corner.

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