

History

Smithville mills are gone, but not forgotten



Tom
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Part One

Few people can recall the extensive cotton mills that once stood on the east side of Bridge Street. They were built of gneiss stone in the same manner as the old American Thread mills, now being refurbished by the Windham Mills project.

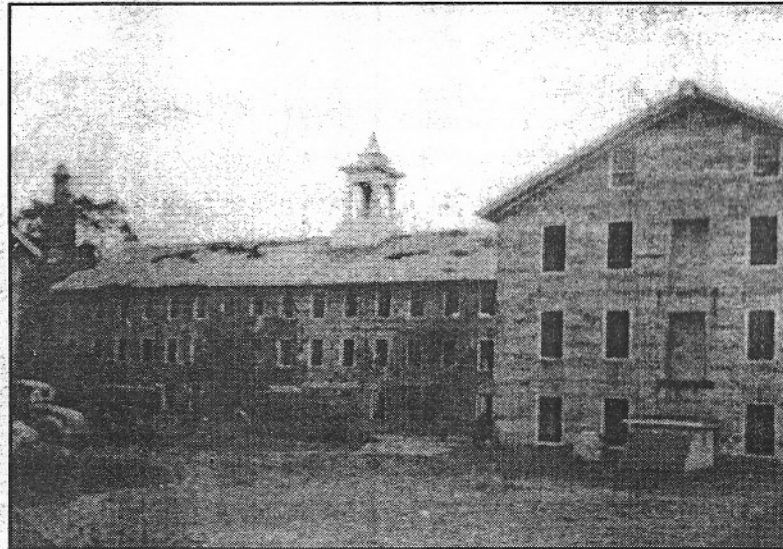
The mills depicted in the 1937 photograph here were demolished in 1939. Richard Giordano remembered that this was his first job after graduating high school. He also recalled how well those mills were built, and that a local builder purchased much of the granite and used it in houses he was building in Storrs.

Charles Lee first built a cotton thread-spinning mill on the eastern side of bridge street site in 1822. The mill village around it became known as Leesburg. It became a part of the new Willimantic borough in

1833. In 1845, James Smith of Providence, R.I., purchased Lees' mills, and the mills became known as the Smithville Manufacturing Co. Smith made massive improvements and extended the size of the mills. He was an absentee owner and put the mills under the control of Whiting Hayden. But Smith often rode from Providence and back in a day to check the progress of his profitable mills.

Stone-built mill additions were erected in 1846 and 1852. In 1850, the Smithville Co.'s 136 strong workforce, 81 women and 55 men, worked 176 looms, and produced \$85,000 of print cloth. Three years later, Smith built stone cottages for his workers. Production capacity was further increased in 1857 after another granite extension was added. As the Civil War approached, Willimantic's Smithville cotton mills were the most extensive in Connecticut.

The Smithville Co. suffered at the outset of the Civil War when its workers joined the Union Army, and the working hours of those remaining were reduced because of a shortage



Ruth Ridgeway Collection

The disused Smithville mills are captured in this photographic view by local attorney John King, on Oct. 27, 1937. This view is to the northwest. The Willimantic River flows past the mill structure on the right.

of raw cotton. Skilled help was rare, and to persuade weavers to stay in Willimantic, the Smithville Co. allocated plots of land to cultivate vegetables, free of rent.

The Smithville Co.'s first-generation workforce was mainly composed of Irish-born men and women. In early 1862, the company suspended operations

for several weeks due to an outbreak of smallpox among their Irish workers. Later that year, Irish mill workers entered into a "pitched battle" with the French Canadian operatives employed at the Windham Cotton Co. mills across Bridge street. There was much animosity between the Irish and the "Canucks," but relationships became more civilized

over the years. A generation later, instead of fistfights, differences between the ethnic groups were resolved by a baseball, a bat, and a diamond.

The Smithville Co. prospered after the Civil War. In 1866, it was agreed that the highway approaches to the Smithville and Windham mills should be improved. The companies fully supported the borough in its plans to replace the old wooden bridge, which had provided southern access to the mills and Willimantic since 1828. The old bridge was constantly being rebuilt or repaired because of floods. Lyman Jordan, a local mason, built a fine stone-arch bridge from the granite located in the adjacent riverbanks. The bridge was opened for traffic in 1868 and, at that time, the 80-foot arch made it the second largest stone arch bridge in Connecticut. Jordan's fine structure is still in use today, and remains the third largest stone-arch bridge in Connecticut.

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