

History

Fabric mill's history had its ups and downs

Part Two

The Smithville Co.'s existence was checkered by boom and bust. In 1877, it raised its dam by 2 feet, and installed new water wheels and flumes to increase its motive power. Production increased, and during that year it manufactured 3 million yards of print cloth from 428,500 pounds of cotton.

By 1879, it had ceased production, announcing \$600,000 of debt. More than 225 hands were thrown out of work, and the local economy slumped. A local farmer complained that his milk sales had fallen by 25 quarts a day. Cotton cloth manufacturing was resumed in May 1880, thanks to a financial package organized by the Chelsea Savings Bank of Norwich.

In 1887, the late Whiting Hayden's controlling interest in the Smithville Manufacturing Co. was sold to Oliver Washbourne of Providence, R.I. Despite this new owner, the mill was still widely referred to by locals as "Hayden's Mill."

In 1890, Washbourne's Smithville mills were fitted with state-of-the-art machinery, including three water wheels and a large double Corliss engine driving 20,856 spindles and 508 looms. Some 300 employees produced top



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quality cotton goods, including twills and prints which were distributed across America and around the world. The Smithville Co. was refinanced by the Chelsea Savings Bank in May 1891, but it was further hit by the financial panic of 1893, and went on to short-time work. It was subsequently liquidated in February 1895 and more than 300 hands were thrown out of work. The name "Smithville" now began to disappear from the local lexicon.

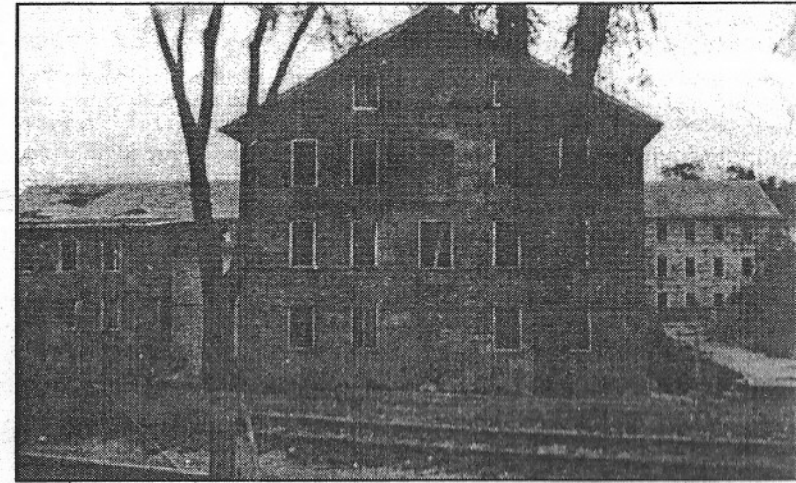
The abandoned Smithville Co. was revived by a new company known as the Willimantic Cotton Mills Corp. It was organized in November 1895 by Englishman Joseph Mercer, a well-known proprietor of cotton mills in Greenville, R.I. The following year, Mercer's new company was providing employment for 400 local hands. Joseph Mercer operated the old Smithville mills until March 1907, when the Windham Manufacturing Co., which occupied

the mill on the west side of Bridge Street, purchased the site.

Mercer had entered 1907 with debts of \$80,000, and he was forced to sell the Willimantic Cotton Mills Corp.'s entire stock for \$75,000. It was purchased by the Windham Co.'s chief shareholder, Frank Sayles of Providence. Mercer's massive inventory included two Hercules water wheels of 125- and 100-horsepower, and a Collins 125-horsepower water wheel. The Windham Co. also obtained a 500-horsepower Corliss steam engine, and 281 weaving looms.

A further influx of capital from Rhode Island enabled Willimantic's ancient mills, east and west of Bridge Street, to consolidate into one company on Nov. 5, 1907. The new enlarged Windham Co., now owned by J.H. Hambly of Providence, appointed Walter B. Knight as its agent and manager.

This new company lasted for only three years. It closed in August 1910. In June 1911, the Quidnick Manufacturing Co. of Providence purchased the mill complexes on the east and west of Bridge Street. A number of local businessmen invested capital, and the company became known as the Quid-



Ruth Ridgeway

This 1937 view of the decaying Smithville mills points to the southeast, and reveals the railroad lines that still pass this same point. Also note the raceway to the right, which supplied water power to the mill.

nick-Windham Manufacturing Co.

After World War I, a large number of New England's cotton manufacturers decided to relocate to the south, citing economic difficulties. Willimantic's Quidnick-Windham Manufacturing Co. went into receivership in May 1926. The old Smithville Co. mill, known as the Quidnick-Windham Manufacturing Co.'s east mill, closed down in June, and the west mills closed their doors in November 1926.

Attorney John King, who took

the photograph accompanying this article, labeled it on the back "Quidnick-Windham east mill, 10/37." By the time of the photograph, the Smithville name fell from memory.

These mills were to stand for little more than a year after King snapped the pictures. They remain has a valuable historic document of one of Willimantic's earliest cotton companies.

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