

# History

## Finally, a connection between sea and city



Tom Beardsley

### Part Three of Three

On April 30, 1851, the officers of the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Railroad voted to negotiate a connection with the Norwich and Worcester Railroad at Norwich.

Contracts were completed by February 1852, and construction began of a connecting track in Norwich in August 1853. The first train ran from New London onto the Norwich and Worcester Railroad in November 1855, giving the Quinebaug Valley mills a direct connection to the deep-sea port of New London, and to New York City.

Thomas W. Williams, the railroad's president, was exhausted by his efforts to build the road. He resigned in June 1852 and embarked upon a lengthy tour of Europe with his family. He returned in 1855 and was reappointed as president. In October

1852, the railroad hired Harry Storrs as Willimantic stationmaster for an annual salary of \$480.

By the mid-1850s, the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Railroad was deeply in debt, and in 1856, the Norwich and Worcester Railroad purchased the section of the company's road from Norwich to New London for \$500,000, and created a direct link from Boston to New York City. South Windham's Elisha Holmes moved the motion for the sale to go through, thus linking the Norwich and Worcester Railroad with the New Haven and New London line, and with the profitable steamboat lines that sailed between New London and New York.

The total length of the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Railroad was 66 miles. The first passenger trains reached an "official" maximum 22 mph. The company employed seven engines. The Ontalaunee was built in 1843; the New London was built in 1849 at the Taunton works, along with the Stafford and Willimantic. The Chicopee was built at Taunton the following year, and the Monson was built at the Hinckley Locomotive works in 1851. The line's final engine, the Thames, was built at Manches-



The railroad station of South Windham, pictured above in 1883, was originally built in 1849. Although its decorative columns have gone, the structure still stands in the community.

ter, N.H., in 1856. They were all wood burners, and each depot had a large woodshed.

The railroad suffered badly from the financial panic of 1857 caused by the failure of the Ohio Life and Trust Co., and went into liquidation in 1859, and re-emerged the following year as the New London Northern Railroad Co. The railroad is still used for freight in the 20th century, and passenger service briefly returned to Willimantic in the mid-1990s thanks to the "Mon-

trealer."

Writing in 1942, Charles G. Woodward recounted his grandfather's memories of the Willimantic railroad.

The New London Northern locomotive emerged from the reverse curve at Dugway, about the same time as a New York and New England Railroad Co. train from Providence, would cross the bridge over the Shetucket River. "Clouds of bituminous smoke enveloped the cars that swayed and lurched ominously over the

light rails, while the windows were filled with heads, waving arms and shaking fists as the train raced by the station of the Methodist Camp Meeting toward Willimantic just as fast as the wheels could roll."

*Come and join me on a bus tour and discover the rich history and industrial heritage of the Quinebaug Valley tomorrow.*

*Contact the Windham Recreation Department at 465-3046 for details.*

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