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— HISTORY —

## A Willington native and his fine Windham gravestone

Marcus Monroe Johnson's memorial and gravestone is one of the most striking in the Willimantic Cemetery.

Johnson, however, was not a native of Willimantic. He was born into one of Willington's leading families in 1839, and was educated at the Bacon Academy in Colchester.

However, when Marcus' father was killed in an accident, his mother sent him to Wethersfield, where he became the ward of his uncle, Elisha Johnson, who enrolled him in the prestigious Wethersfield Academy. Once his education was completed, M.M. Johnson clerked in a country store, and later worked as a traveling salesman, selling seeds to Connecticut farmers.

He avoided being drafted in the Civil War, by working as an attendant in a Providence hospital. Not knowing what to with his ward and nephew after the Civil War, Elisha Johnson decided to introduce him to the cotton industry. Elisha Johnson had established

the Willington Thread Co. in 1840, along with two brothers, Origen and Gardiner Hall, the sons of Willimantic cotton manufacturer Nathan Hall.

In 1850, Origen Hall's son-in-law Timothy Merrick was introduced to the company, and shortly afterwards the concern began manufacturing cotton thread. In 1860, Origen Hall, Timothy and Austin Merrick took over an abandoned silk mill at Mansfield Hollow, and organized the Merrick Thread Co. to manufacture cotton thread.

By 1864 the Willington Thread Co., now known as the Gardiner Hall Co., was enjoying considerable success, and Elisha Johnson provided his ward and nephew, M. M. Johnson, with a partnership in the company. This move did not prove successful, so in 1869



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Elisha put his nephew in charge of a cotton mill at Stafford Springs, which burned down in 1872.

The following year Elisha Johnson organized the National Thread Co. at Mansfield Hollow. It took over the operation of Origen Hall's Merrick Thread Co., which had transferred production to Holyoke, Mass. Uncle Elisha must have hoped that it would be third time lucky for his ward and nephew Marcus, when he provided him with a partnership in the National Thread Co. with Timothy and Austin Merrick.

The Mansfield Hollow-based cotton company suffered badly from the economic downturns of the 1870s. However, when trade began to improve in the early 1880s, two Willimantic businessmen Henry Royce and George Elliot, entered into business with M.M. Johnson, and provided much of the capital to build a new stone mill at the Mansfield Hollow site in 1882.

Johnson and his new partners were highly successful, but in

1899 the American Thread Co. gave the National Thread Co. an offer it could not refuse. ATCO purchased this rival concern, closed down production and transferred the business to its Willimantic facility.

Johnson subsequently retired, and purchased the house now occupied by the Bacon Funeral Home at 71 Prospect St. in Willimantic. He made extensive improvements, and transformed the house, built by William Morrison in 1885, into one of the most architecturally striking in the city. Unfortunately, M.M. Johnson did not have much time to enjoy his retirement, and died of a heart attack in August 1900 while on vacation at the Bay of Fundy, Nova Scotia.

Willimantic undertaker O.A. Sessions was sent to Canada to recover Johnson's body, which was later interred in the Willimantic Cemetery under the impressive memorial, which reflected his status, wealth and family connections.



Marcus M. Johnson, 1885