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14 ALBUM, Chronicle, Saturday, October 26, 2002

— HISTORY —

All aboard: The Willimantic-Baltic line kicks in

(Part one of two)

On February 2, 1901, the Willimantic city council endorsed a petition organized by local businessmen to build a city wide trolley car system.

The General Assembly granted a charter to the Willimantic Traction Co. in June 1901, which had planned to build an interurban line to connect the Thread City with Southbridge, Mass. However, this project fell through.

It was thought that a southerly line would prove to be more profitable, so a line was built to Baltic to connect there with the Norwich Street Railway Co.'s line, and provide a interurban line between Willimantic and Norwich.

Ground was broken for the Willimantic-Baltic line in July 1902, and the first track was laid the following September. It was built through Dugway Hill to South Windham, and from beyond there a bridge was built at William's Crossing to take the trolley line over the railroad line at that point. The track traversed the location occupied today by the Franklin mushroom farm, and by

Dec. 8 it had reached as far as Bailey's Ravine, also known as Ayer's Gap.

Construction work was then halted because of worsening weather conditions. When work recommenced the following spring, embankment building and blasting was undertaken so the line could traverse the difficult topography in the Ayer's Gap region.

The Willimantic Traction Co. estimated that the line to Baltic had cost \$12,000 per mile to build, but this did not include the compensation paid to landowners for right-of-way permission. Furthermore, it did not take into account the expense of the company's powerhouse and car barns, being built at South Windham.

The powerhouse, an electricity substation, was a one-story brick building built on the site of an old gristmill. The car barn, a two story wood frame building, was



Tom
Beardsley

located next to Avery's store. The car barn's second story was fitted up and occupied by the trolley company's officials and employees.

The entire 10-mile-long trolley line from Willimantic to Baltic was completed in July 1903, and the first test drive left from the corner of Quercus Avenue for Baltic on Aug. 5, 1903. Willimantic went "trolley crazy" when the line officially opened on Sunday, Aug. 16 1903.

Between 10:30 a.m. and 11 p.m., the company collected almost 4,000 fares. Crowds of people waited in turn, and when each car arrived there was a rush to climb on board.

Each trolley car was designed to hold 84 people, but it was estimated that on average they carried 125 people per trip on that first day. On one journey, 165 people packed themselves onto a car, filling the running boards and the spaces between the seats.

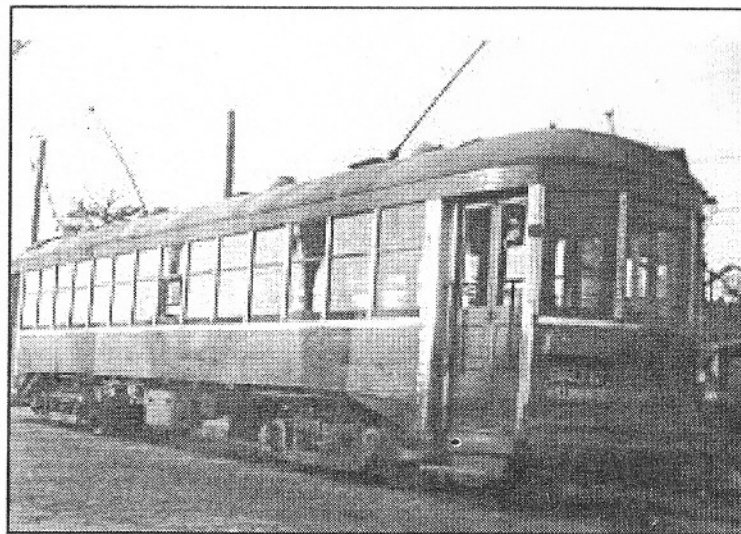
Although the Willimantic Traction Co. built a trolley car bridge over the railroad line at William's Crossing at Lebanon, it was considered too expensive to build a trolley tunnel or bridge to

traverse the New York New Haven Railroad grade crossing in Willimantic, so the trolley line could continue westwards up Main Street.

Instead passengers and crew on the cars from Baltic and South Windham stepped off their car and walked across the railroad line, and stepped onto a

waiting trolley car that took them up Main Street as far as the terminus at the Willimantic Cemetery. The car on the west side of the railroad line remained on Main Street overnight and was padlocked until service resumed the following morning.

(Continued next week)



A Willimantic-Baltic trolley car waits next to the New York New Haven Railroad grade crossing in 1908 for passengers arriving from the Main Street trolley car line.