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— HISTORY —

An explosion that felt like an earthquake

The Willimantic Gas Light Co.'s gasworks were built in 1856 on land just west of the railroad depot. It was a convenient location as freight trains deposited the coal there that was burned to extract the gas.

The residue, or coal tar, was stored in a tar well before being sold for other urban and industrial uses, such as binding crushed stones for town roads. The town gas was stored in a large holding tank, and gas mains distributed it to private houses, stores and streetlights in the borough, where it was widely used for heating, cooking and lighting.

In 1887 a group of prominent Willimantic businessmen organized the Willimantic Electric Light Co., and two years later the same assemblage purchased the Willimantic Gas Light Co.'s plant, and formed the Citizens Gas Light Co. They appointed Edward Evans of the Hartford Gas Light Co. to superintend a renovation program of the old gasworks that included adopting Evans' patented process for manufacturing gas.

Evans also took charge of both the gas and electric company. In 1891 the borough's gas mains were extended to the rapidly

developing hill district, and by 1894 there were 10 miles of gas mains in Willimantic. The popularity of electricity and oil for heating and lighting saw the demise of the gasworks, which were abandoned in the 1950s.

The Willimantic site was decontaminated of industrial wastes in the mid-1990s, and there's little evidence that a gasworks ever existed. However, the residents of Willimantic needed no reminding of that on a February night in 1904.

At 8:15 p.m. on Feb. 7, Willimantic residents thought an earthquake had struck them, as a huge explosion shook the city. Just before blast, people on Main Street complained that they could smell gas.

Many people ventured carefully into their cellars to check that their gas heaters were not leaking. It soon became obvious that the explosion had taken place at the gasworks. People hesitated to visit



Tom
Beardsley

the site, as a further explosion was feared, but soon afterwards several hundred people were gathered around the burning gas works.

The explosion took place in the Willimantic Gas Light Co. original gas holder, located directly beneath the gas house. It had been adapted as a tar well by the Citizen's Gas Light Co. during its renovation program, and was 50 feet in diameter, covered with five-inch wide chestnut planking. However, the snow and ice had blocked the vent, and increasing pressure had led to a chemical reaction between ammonia, water and tar in the tank.

An engineer on an Air Line steam locomotive stood nearby claimed that his engine had been lifted about a foot of the line by the explosion, but luckily he was not derailed.

He reported that debris was blown about 100 feet into the air. Those arriving at the depot at 9 p.m. on a train arriving from New York claimed they had heard the explosion in East Hampton.

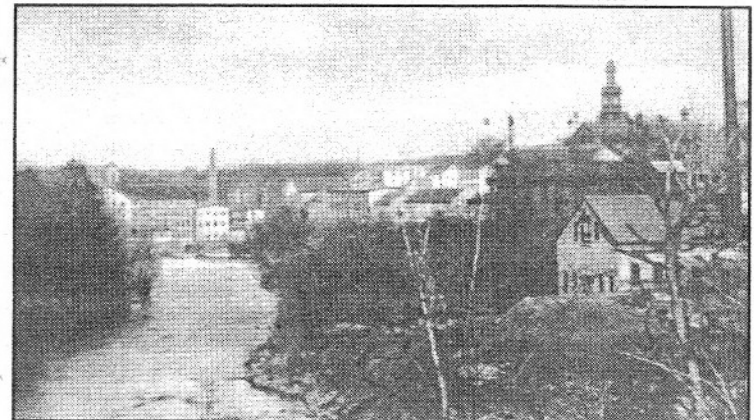
The explosion caused much damage on Main Street, cracking a valuable plate-glass window in the Union Shoe Store, and breaking windows at the Murray Block.

Many windows were broken in the rear of the Main Street buildings facing the gasworks, including Franklin Hall, the Maverick Laundry, and the Chapman Block. Virtually every house on the north side of Pleasant Street suffered broken from broken windows and slight structural damage, and over 200 panes of glass were shattered in the florist's greenhouse operated by Mr. Southward.

It was also reported that the explosion was heard in Warrenville. The Natchaug Pumping Station building shook

in Mansfield, and the crockery rattled in virtually every house in South Windham.

The fire companies quickly brought the gasworks blaze under control, and the fire chief was amazed that no one had been killed or injured. The gas and electric company had to pay out extensively for damages, but it hoped to keep the price of gas down. So, the Chapman Block, built in 1876, survived a gas explosion but it looks as if neglect and urban decline will ultimately lead to its decline.



The Willimantic Gas Light Co.'s plant can be seen in this 1906 view of the Willimantic River taken from the footbridge.