

— HISTORY —

# A summer's walk becomes a trip down memory lane

In July 1863, William Weaver, the Willimantic Journal's highly respected editor and noted local historian, responded to requests from old Windham residents who no longer lived in the town. He had been asked to describe the changes in Willimantic, "over the river."

Weaver set out on a pleasant summer morning and walked over the arched stone bridge with pen in hand, noting that here had once stood the old Iron Works Bridge. He walked under the railroad bridge and then turned right onto Pleasant Street, which he recalled had been appropriately named by the late Asa Jillson.

Before setting off westward, Weaver paused to recall the old schoolhouse that had been demolished to make way for the railroad. He remembered the old road to the school, the pure cold water springs, and the great overhanging trees and hemlock shrubbery along its length, all now replaced by the practical, but not very poet, iron rail.

As he walked along Pleasant Street, the morning train from Hartford went thundering by, and Weaver again recalled the pre-railroad era when this historic part of the old Middletown turnpike had virtually no buildings along its course.

He then noted the fine houses on his left, built on a bluff overlooking the growing village by Messieurs Conant, Reed and Hall. Weaver then reached the Alfred Young homestead, formerly owned by the late Capt. Zephaniah Young. It still looked much like it had 40 years previously.

William Weaver again looked back to his youth as he walked west up the old turnpike, and remembered that this area had been known as the "Hemlocks." It was a shadowy and lonesome



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place, but cutting and slashing had cleared the large trees that darkened the way.

At this point there had been an area of small, running brooks where cattle pounds were once located. But now, two fine houses had been built to the east and west of the brooks, overlooking the Willimantic River valley. The first had just been completed by the Willimantic Baptist Church as a deaconry for Andrew Fuller, and next came John Tracy's fine mansion, built about a decade previously.

John Tracy, the Windham Manufacturing Co.'s local agent, and the founder of the Willimantic Savings Institute, lived in a "large, square, plain, but tasteful and imposing house."

Its surroundings were appropriate, and the ground suitably adorned and well cultivated. There were fine woods in the rear of Tracy's house, extending down to the Willimantic River, and in Weaver's opinion he had built one of the finest private residences the entire vicinity.

Next, on the corner of Pleasant Street and the Lebanon Road, came Whiting Hayden's residence, "a fine, substantial building, in modern style and good taste." His son, James E. Hayden, had also built a magnificent house nearby, and was growing tobacco plants and grape vines.

Weaver finally reached the old red tollhouse, and recalled the gate which extended across the highway to bar further passage west without payment. Before

he turned right off Pleasant Street to go over the Jordan stone bridge, he noted the little cottage west of Gen. Baldwin's residence, which had been altered into a fine two story dwelling.

It was now the Rev. Bradford's residence. For Weaver the "South Side" was one of the most pleasant locations in the village, and he hoped there would not be too much development there in the near future.



The old Baptist deaconry at 197 Pleasant St., pictured in the late 1930s.

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