

— HISTORY —

# The eastern Connecticut businessmen band together

*Part two of two*

In order to take advantage of new roads being built into Windham and New London Counties just prior to World War I, businessmen's associations in Norwich, New London, Danielson, Putnam and Willimantic organized the Eastern Connecticut Development Committee. They published a pamphlet to promote the region, but the city of Willimantic described in this promotional piece bears little resemblance to the sadly neglected Windham Service District of 2003.

Willimantic is described as lying on a broad plateau at the base of a river valley, and that its picturesque hillsides were exceptionally beautiful sites for residential homes. Main Street was graced with bustling businesses, and fine public buildings. People from far and wide commented on the fine architecture of the town hall, the Gem Theatre, the Loomer Opera House and of the fine edifices that were home to the Windham National Bank and the Willimantic Savings Institute.

Moreover, no community had as many churches. The city was home to Baptist, Congregational, Methodist, Episcopal, Spiritualist, Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches, and the Southern New England Methodist Conference maintained a campground just south of the city limits on the trolley line.

Also, the Young Men's Christian Association, which had 400 members, exerted a wholesome and religious influence on the community's youth. The Willimantic YMCA was housed in a recently opened building costing \$40,000. It contained a gymnasium and a swimming pool, and if the YMCA's physically fit young men needed intellectual pursuits, they did not have far to travel along Main Street.

Willimantic had two fine libraries. One was located in the town hall building, and the



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American Thread Co.'s Dunham Library was in an old mill company store opposite the thread mill complex. The city also boasted excellent wire communication systems, consisting of two telegraph companies, and a local telephone exchange that enabled Willimantic's businessmen to converse daily with more than 30 villages at local exchange rates.

Furthermore, the city's businessmen had organized an efficient Board of Trade and Businessmen's Association, which ensured that everyone in the Thread City worked together with a high degree of mutual regard and confidence. In fact it was doubtful that any city of Willimantic's size had such good feelings of harmony and spirit. Relations between employers and workers were always very friendly, and there were virtually no members of 'the poorer classes' in the community, because the mills paid high wages, and employed only high grade workers.

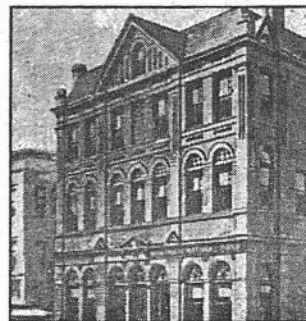
After praising the efficiency and intellect of the city's working classes, the pamphlet pointed out

that Willimantic was surrounded by fine farming country, and the farmers had a profitable market for their produce in the Thread City. Also the region's railroad network enabled the farmers to ship fancy vegetables and flowers to the largest cities, and the well-known creameries at Andover, Lebanon, Scotland and Merrow distributed their produce from the Willimantic rail depot.

If the local farmers needed advice, the Connecticut Agricultural College was just seven miles north of Willimantic. It offered courses in agriculture and home economics to high school graduates to more than 250 students. It was noted that the college's annual income was \$71,750 from the federal government, and \$34,500 annually from the state. Recent inventories of the college lands, buildings and equipment revealed a value of \$650,000.

Willimantic seemingly had it all in 1914, and the city's economy boomed when the local textile mills increased capacity to make up for production shortfalls caused by the War in Europe.

However, a depression in the textile trades during the 1920s culminated in the destructive strike of 1925 at American Thread, and during and after the Depression Willimantic's many mills closed one by one, until American Thread's demise in 1985. Nothing has filled the gap since. Perhaps the town of Windham should promote and encourage tourism. Hopefully those elected next November will take note.



The Windham National Bank building on Main Street in 1914.

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