

Thomas Cunningham and his Willimantic life

Part one of two

Thomas W. Cunningham (1798-1872) arrived at Willimantic Falls in 1822 to operate the company store at Samuel Lee's cotton mill. Located on Bridge Street's eastern side, Lee's small mill expanded rapidly, and Cunningham took advantage by supplying groceries to Willimantic's increasing population.

He also built Willimantic's first saloon, which was located on the eastern corner of Main and Walnut Streets. Cunningham rapidly accumulated a fortune and began purchasing large tracts of land in the village. He represented Windham in the state House of Representatives, was a central figure in the creation of the borough of Willimantic in 1833 and served on the inaugural board of burgesses.

Cunningham was considered an eccentric figure, particularly when he purchased outlying sections of forest and swamps. In 1839 he acquired a large tract of wet and swampy land located between High and Jackson streets, which was considered valueless. It was clogged with black mud, and virtually impassable. Willimantic's oldest residents recalled that it was once the bed of a fast-flowing stream, located in the valley between the Willimantic River and "Hogback Hill." However, Cunningham believed that this quagmire could be developed into arable land.

In 1840 Cunningham hired gangs of laborers, who commenced draining, ditching, digging, plowing, and harrowing this marshy bog. They manually dug out rocks, snags, and roots, and transformed the area into mowing and haying lots. The vicinity took on the appearance of a bucolic country meadow, and Cunningham was reluctant to see it built over. He left provision in his will that if the borough agreed to develop a section of it as a city park, the town fathers could purchase it from his estate at a reduced rate. However, taxpayers were enraged when the borough announced plans to build this park, and the project was abandoned. Meadow Street marks this location today.

An east-west path provided access across Cunningham's meadow and thanks to its proximity to the village's business center, a dozen dwellings and a manufac-

tory were erected along its route in the 1850s. In 1863, the borough authorities announced plans to lay a new street along this meadow path, which would connect High and Jackson streets. It was named Valley Street.

In December 1863, the Willimantic Journal editor William Weaver rode around this developing section of Willimantic with an old resident, Ona Carpenter. Weaver and Carpenter began their buggy journey at the junction of Tanner's Lane, now North Street, and Main Street. Carpenter recalled that in the 1840s Samuel Barrows and Jesse Crane arrived from Mansfield, and built a slaughterhouse at this location. Carter and Weaver fondly remembered how little it cost back then to get the choicest steaks and finest roasts.

Barrows and Crane cleared the swampy land to the rear and to the east of the slaughter house and built a livery stable. In 1853 the slaughterhouse and stables were purchased by Warren Tanner (1808-83), and developed the slaughterhouse into a commercial block. The "Tanner Block" at 733 Main St. stood on the eastern corner of Main and North for almost a century until it was demolished to make way for Todd's department store.

Warren Tanner was one of eastern Connecticut's best known horse breeders, and became one of Willimantic's wealthiest citizens. However, on Feb. 12, 1883, he climbed onto the parapet of his house and hung himself from a knotted sheet. Tanner had suffered several tragedies in his life having lost two infant sons in the 1840s. Moreover his 26-year-old son, Oscar F. Tanner, was tragically killed on the Hartford, Providence and Fishkill Railroad in 1858, and Tanner adopted his infant son, Oscar, shortly afterwards. Tanner's grandson was Oscar Tanner (1858-1933), a colorful Willimantic mayor who served in the post during the 1890s.

(Continue the 1863 journey down Valley Street next week)



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Tuesday Jan 8 2003