

Willimantic footbridge has colorful history

Two weeks ago, the town officially re-opened Willimantic's historic footbridge, previously closed to allow for repairs and repainting. The borough of Willimantic originally planned to build this now unique structure just after the Civil War, but several, long and drawn out battles between certain local business and political fac-



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tions in town, allied with animated discussions between the town and the state of Connecticut's railroad commissioners, had delayed construction until 1905-06.

The building of the Thread City's historic landmark began 99 years ago, when on Nov. 3, 1905, stonemasons began preparing the foundations for the bridge's stone piers. Just over one year later, on Nov. 19, 1906, Willimantic mayor Danny Dunn proudly and ceremoniously opened Willimantic's new footbridge.

Planners and politicians had considered numerous locations

for the footbridge, but they eventually agreed to build it down the center of Railroad Street. This was mainly due to the influence of Scotsman Hugh C. Murray, who operated the region's largest dry-goods department store, the Boston Store, which was located directly opposite the new bridge's entrance.

The borough authorities had originally opened up Railroad Street in 1850 to provide access to a newly built railroad depot. The thoroughfare quickly became a busy, commercial center and in 1861, a group of local business-

men built a new hotel and business block at the western junction of Main and Railroad streets.

The European House hotel and block provided high-class accommodations for visitors to Willimantic and became the location for numerous businesses in a period spanning two generations.

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However, on April 7, 1905, fire seriously damaged the building. Dennis Shea, the European Block's owner, considered demolishing it, because he was keen to exploit this prime, downtown location, which would be adjacent to the proposed footbridge.

Shea hoped that an empty lot next to the new bridge would attract investors, but none were forthcoming, so he patched up the building and demolished the European Block's seriously damaged west wing.

In its place, Shea built a three-story high brick structure, 30 feet wide and 80 feet long. He fitted the first floor for stores, the second floor for offices and the third floor for a meeting hall.

However, Shea became worried as construction of his new business block was getting under way.

In September 1905, the Connecticut railroad commissioners met in Willimantic's Board of Trade rooms to discuss the new footbridge with the borough authorities and local tradesmen.

A railroad grade crossing, which took foot traffic across the lines, existed at the point of the proposed footbridge.

The railroads had built it so railroad employees could gain access to the railroad yards, but pedestrians aiming to cross the Willimantic River via the railroad bridge, regularly took advantage of it.

The railroads' attorneys maintained that persons crossing the tracks at this place were trespassers.

Moreover, the footbridge passed over an existing grade crossing, so the great part of the cost of constructing the footbridge would legally fall upon the railroad com-

panies.

In response, the borough's bridge committee assured the railroad commissioners that it would seek no funds from the railroads, and that the building of the footbridge would end the trespassing on the grade crossing.

The attorney for the Central Vermont intimated that he did not think that his company would raise any objection, and on Sept. 21, the railroad commissioners met in Hartford, and granted their consent for the building of the bridge.

Hugh C. Murray, Dennis Shea and a host of local businessmen, town selectmen and borough burgesses with commercial property close to the proposed footbridge sighed in relief.

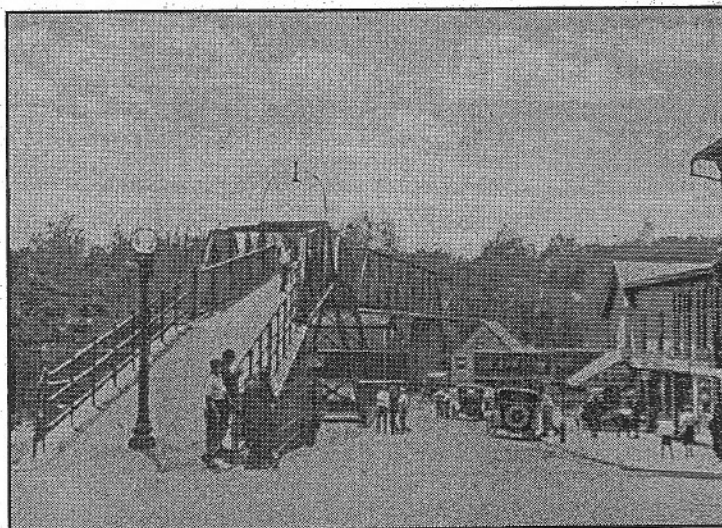
They were sure that the increased foot traffic in the location would greatly benefit their businesses. At Christmas 1906,

Murray had a model replica built of the new footbridge. He displayed it in his windows, and filled it full of Christmas presents. Nevertheless, criticisms from those who had opposed the building of the footbridge were rife.

They complained bitterly about the shocking state of the city's sidewalks and lack thereof. The snow, slush and mud kept customers away from their businesses located downtown, but not away from the footbridge.

Why, they asked, had the borough authorities wasted \$12,000 on the footbridge?

It would have been better spent building sidewalks along the full length of Main Street, instead of just in the new bridge's vicinity. There is little doubt that the recent renovations to the footbridge cost more than \$12,000.



Railroad Street's commercial activity can be seen in this 1920 post card view of Willimantic. The footbridge is clearly in view as is the eastern end of the European Block.