

1856 map shows heart of industry

Part one of
two

E. M. Woodford's colorful and detailed "Map of Windham County," published in



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1856, provides a unique window through which to view the early days of industrializing, northeastern Connecticut. The map's lower section features street maps of the county's industrial communities, including Putnam, Dayville, East Killingly, Danielsonville, Almyville and Central Village. However, the borough of Willimantic is the map's most extensive manufacturing village.

The urban map of Willimantic shows how the entire village as it then existed clung to the Willimantic River's north bank and how the dwellings and businesses were crowded along the north side of Main and Union streets from the Horseshoe Bridge in the east to just beyond "West Street" at the borough's west end.

This thoroughfare ran south of Main to the twin railroad tracks of the New London Willimantic and Palmer, and the Hartford Providence and Fishkill companies. This "West Street" is better known today as Wilson Street.

Heading east from Wilson Street, the next road off Main was

an unnamed street, today called Vermont Drive. The Windham Manufacturing Co.'s store, which housed the Willimantic Savings Institute, stood on this junction.

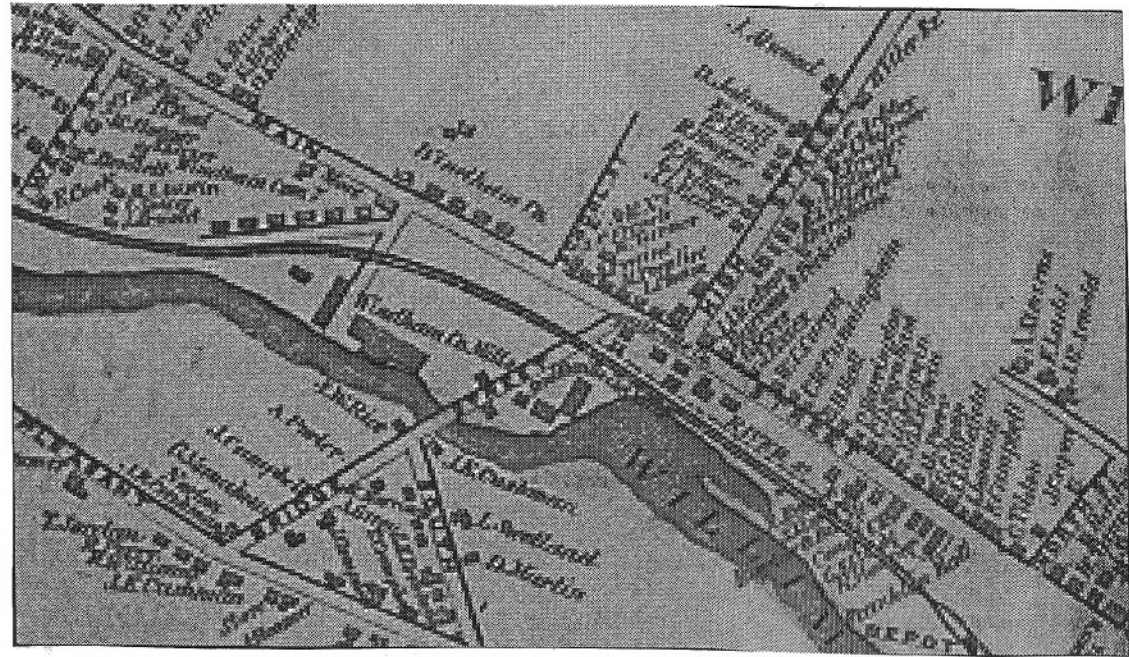
Schiller's Sewing Circle today occupies this same building. Two hundred yards to the east, the first major lane heading north began,

known then as now as High Street. There was no town hall at this junction then. Instead the area was crowded with the dwelling houses of the borough's leading citizens, such as cotton manufacturers Robert Wilcox Hooper (1817-1906) and Edwin Harrison Hall (1821-84) and of builder

Don Johnson (1816-88).

Hooper manufactured cotton thread in the Bridge Street mills in the 1830s, but he had broken the Coats Co. international patent and the Scottish cotton giant ordered him to suspend operations. He subsequently made a fortune in designing water pumps and in

supplying groceries to mill workers. Hooper is credited with naming High Street. Hall was an overseer in the Smithville Mills on Bridge Street, but after the Civil War, he established cotton thread mills in South Windham. His elder brother, Gardiner Hall, established the cotton mills in Willington. Johnson built the first house on High Street and was one of the founders of the borough's water works.



Just to the west of the Main-High junction, on Main Street's south side, Bridge Street crossed the Willimantic River and connected to the turnpike, better known today as Pleasant Street. This was the industrial heart.

The Windham Manufacturing Co.'s mills stood on Bridge Street's west side, and the Smithville mills stood on the east side. Adjacent to the railroad and paral-

lel to Main Street, a thoroughfare called River Street housed the Smithville Companies' tenement houses. This is today's Riverside Drive.

The borough's commercial center began on Main, west of High Street to North and Church streets. Construction on the Southside of Main Street ended at the Franklin Hall, a wooden structure that stood on the site of the business block that today houses Curtiss Coins.

Built in 1847, Franklin Hall housed the borough's first vaudeville theatre. It burnt in 1876, and was rebuilt the following year. From this site in 1856, there was a

clear view down to the railroad depot, before Railroad Street was laid. On the opposite side of Main, North and Church streets were cul de sacs, but the first evidence of what would become Valley Street appears at the end of North with an unnamed dead end thoroughfare heading westward, containing three dwelling houses. There is no construction or streets north of this short road. The Hill District would not be developed for another 20 years.

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