

Jan 20, 2005

Industrial Willimantic in 1856

Part two of two

E. M. Woodford's 1856 map of Windham County is an important historical document, as it depicts northeastern Connecticut 50 years after the first cotton mill wheels had turned in the region.

The maps of the industrial communities are particularly informative and the one of Willimantic reveals the industrial borough before it extended to the north of Main Street.

Mapped in 1855, the Willimantic view shows two clusters of mills centered on Bridge Street in the west and lower Main Street in the east. The Jillson family, the recently formed Willimantic Linen Co. and the Wells Co. operated the mills in the borough's east end. The latter mills were located on what is today Recreation Park, on the site of Willimantic's first cotton mill built by Perez Richmond in 1822.

Head east from Lincoln Square in 1855, the junction of Union and Main streets, and the basic urban landscape resembles that of today. Jackson Street heads north from Main bisecting Union as does Milk Street.

The most northerly house on Jackson belonged to Lyman Jackson, an African-

American farmer who gave his name to the street. This house still exists, although it stands behind the houses built by the "lace curtain Irish," the middle-class Irish professionals and business people who first populated this area in the 1880s.

After the Civil War, working class Irish immigrants settled in the area between Jackson and Milk streets. However, in 1856 Jackson Street's east side housed members of the old Yankee elite, such as Calvin H. Davison and Calvin Robinson.

Davison operated a furniture, coffin and grocery business in the borough. Robinson, a wealthy landowner, donated generously to build the Willimantic Congregational Church in 1869, and a window in the edifice is dedicated to him. Robinson was tragically killed in 1870 when his horses bolted and threw him from his carriage.

The map refers to today's Clark Street, the short connecting thoroughfare between Union and Main, as Washington Street. On closer examination, it can be seen that Lucian H. Clark, who managed the Willimantic Linen Co.'s store on its establishment in 1877, owned a house at the head of Washington Street on Union.

Clark's son, Edward H. Clark, later became the Willimantic Linen Co.'s secretary. Lucian Clark was an active member in the county's anti-slavery movement and in 1863 he arranged for famed black abolitionist Frederick Douglass to speak in the borough's Franklin Hall. Washington Street was probably renamed Clark Street in the Clark family's honor.

Heading east along Union

Street, a thoroughfare named Lilac Street bisected Milk and Union streets. This whole area, east of Washington Street, changed significantly when the Willimantic Linen Co. built its Mill No. 2 in 1864.

Before then, a street named State Street headed east of Washington Street. Moreover, Main Street then headed south over the Willimantic River, where it became South Main Street.

However, before crossing the new stone bridge built by the Willimantic Linen Co. during the previous year, a left turn took you onto a street heading east along the Willimantic River's north bank.

Known as Water Street, this

thoroughfare gave access to the second district school, a sawmill, and a paper mill.

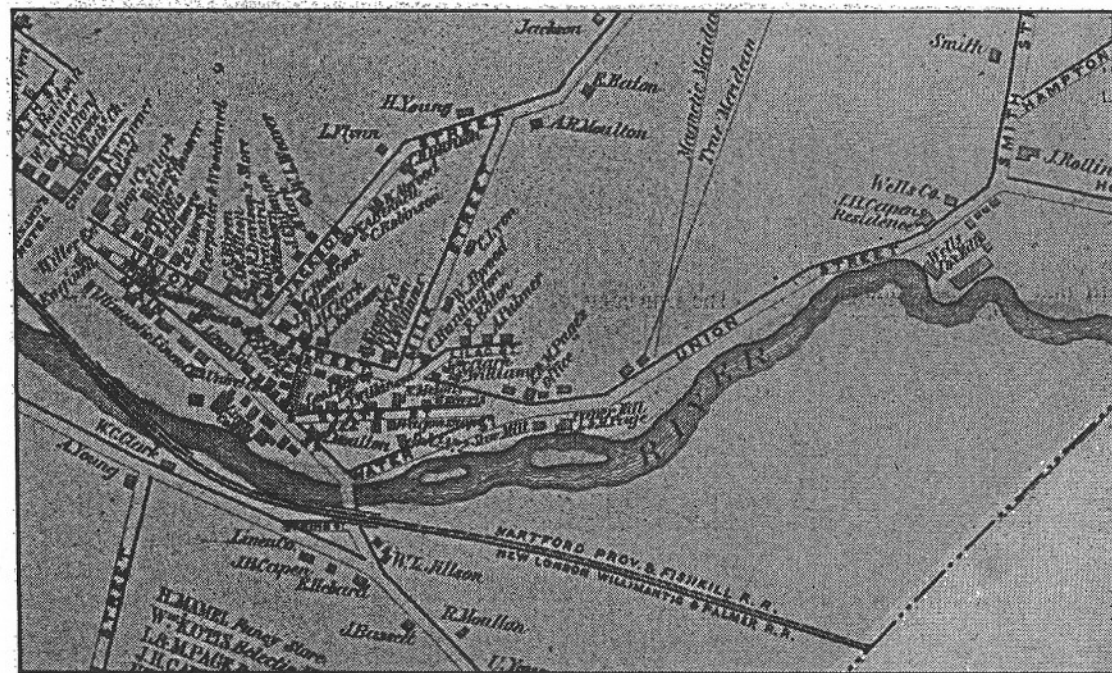
What is today lower Main Street, heading toward "Sodom," was named Union Street. However, the road heading north towards Mansfield at the junction of the Bricktop Road in Sodom, was not called Ash Street as today, but Smith Street.

Furthermore, the map refers to today's Natchaug Street, which heads east off Ash Street as Hampton Street.

This fascinating 1856 map of Windham County and Willimantic can be viewed in more detail on UConn's library web site at <http://magic.lib.uconn.edu/> in the map collection.



Tom Beardsley



Detail of Willimantic's eastern end from the 1856 map

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