

June 2, 2005

A city of fine mills and lovely burial grounds

Willimantic has some of the most architecturally beautiful cotton mills in the United States. It also boasts one of New England's most scenic cemeteries.



Tom Beardsley

The Victorian Home Association and the Windham Textile and History Museum are hosting tours of both locations this coming weekend, so please join me at 10 a.m. on Saturday or Sunday to tour Windham Mills, site of the former American Thread Co.

On Sunday at 1 p.m. I will lead a tour through the historic Willimantic Cemetery, across from the Super Stop & Shop. Some well-known individuals will accompany us through the Thread City's picturesque graveyard.

As we tour the Windham Mills site, we will observe the renovations at the Willimantic Linen Co.'s Mill No. 1, erected in 1857, and explore the site where Mill No. 4, the world's largest cotton mill stood until fire destroyed it in 1995. We will also walk across the park where Mills No. 5 and 6 stood until their demolition in 1998 and we shall investigate the intriguing interior spaces of Mill No. 2, built in 1864.

Construction of Mill No. 1 began on the site of an ancient alder swamp in the fall of 1857. The walls of this distinctive 200-foot by 68-foot structure consist of granite-like gneiss stone quarried from the bed of the Willimantic River. Willington's Gardiner Hall supervised the construction of what was then the largest cotton mill in Connecticut.

The Linen Co. added a 50-foot by 87-foot extension to its west end in 1879 and in 1886, the company extended the mill's east end and re-roofed the entire structure with 70,000 wood shingles.

In 1888, the thaw that followed that year's famous blizzard washed away the mill's wooden dam and the company reconstructed it with gneiss stone. We will get an excellent view of this powerful waterfall as we walk across the old stone bridge adjacent to it. The American Thread Co.'s purchase of the site in 1898 led to the discontinuation of mule and ring spinning in Mill No. 1 and in 1900, the new owners moved out the machinery and installed a print shop, storage facility, and shipping department.

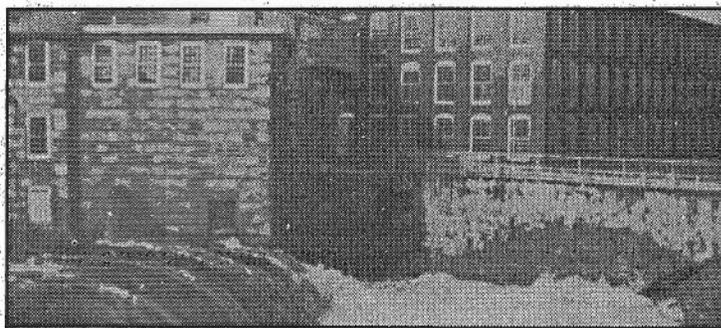
The Willimantic Linen Co. built Mill No. 2 between 1863 and 1864. It is one of the most striking industrial structures in the nation, from its gothic central tower to its self-supporting roof, so designed to allow the entire fourth story to be free of supporting pillars.

The company flooded 278 acres of Columbia meadowland in 1865 to ensure a consistent water supply to drive the vast new mill's water wheels and turbines. Thomas Edison visited it in 1877 to supervise experiments in electric arc lighting.

Also in 1877, the company purchased the Dunham Mill located at Recreation Park and made it into Mill No. 3. ATCO demolished it in 1928. Mill No. 4, built in 1880, owed its existence to the successful lighting experiments in Mill No. 2 and it became the first industrial building exclusively for electric light illumination.

After ATCO's purchase of the old Willimantic Linen Co. in 1898, it invested heavily in the site and built two new brick mills in 1899 and 1906. The new owners linked Mills No. 5 and 6 together in 1917 and constructed the famous walkover that welcomed visitors to the city for almost three generations.

As these developments took place in the city's east end, the community's rapidly expanding population created a critical need for more burial space. St Joseph Church laid out a new cemetery for the city's Roman Catholic



Floods resulted after the 1938 hurricane as shown in this photograph of the mills.

population about 2 miles east of the thread mills.

However, in the city's west end, the Protestant churches had repeatedly urged the town fathers to expand the Thread City's first cemetery, laid out on disused farmland in 1829. Expansions took place in 1858 and 1877, but by 1917 all space was gone and the city built a new cemetery on the road to Coventry.

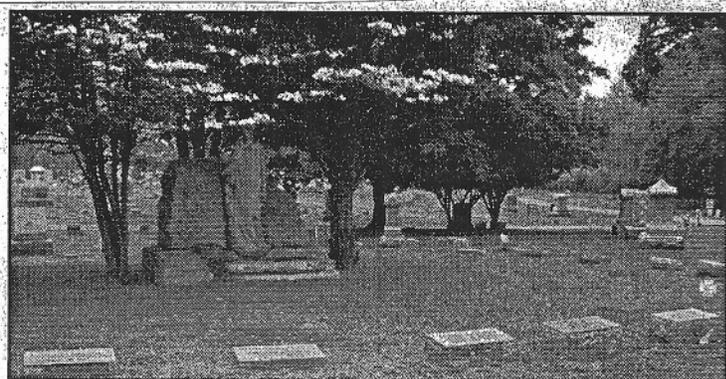
On May 5, 1858, the town fathers purchased 5 acres to the cemetery's east and landscaped it. By 1875, it was time to expand the cemetery again, so the selectmen acquired 12 acres of farmland to the west. They organized a cemetery committee, which raised funds to landscape the new acquisition and to make the plots more saleable. The Willimantic Cemetery Committee offered low rates to groups, such as the Masons, the GAR, the Oddfellows and to members of

temperance organizations.

During the summer of 1876, the landscaping and expansion project produced a vault to store bodies before burial, a fountain, the planting of exotic trees, topiary and the building of an artificial lake and curved carriage drives. The committee named the winding avenues for America's famous rural cemeteries, such as Mount

Auburn, Cedar Hill, Cypress Hills, Greenwood and Oakwood.

Come and walk along these beautiful thoroughfares with me on Sunday afternoon at 1 p.m. and view the extravagant monuments that mark the last resting places of Willimantic's late 19th century elite. And don't miss the tour of the Windham Mills site Saturday and Sunday morning.



The old Willimantic Cemetery

Fran Funk