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Lawson Ives: A man and his village

When the Willimantic Linen Co. built its vast Mill No. 2 in 1863-64, the progressive cotton company also built a worker village that it named "Iverton."



Tom Beardsley

The community consisted of two-family houses built along roads named Ives Street, Pine Street, Beech Street, Linden Street and on lower Main Street directly across from the new mill. It was common practice to use bucolic names for streets in worker villages, but the company named this hamlet and its main thoroughfare for Lawson Ives (1804-67), the company's founding partner.

Between 1822 and 1854, Rhode Island-based industrialists and capitalists had established Willimantic's first textile companies. However, the arrival of the railroad in 1849 attracted money from Hartford and the United Kingdom. In 1854, with the aid of British-based capital, Hartford's Lawson Ives and Austin Dunham (1805-77) established a linen factory at Willimantic in one of the old Jillson family mills. However, this was merely a distraction. Ives' and Dunham's true intent was to enable Britain's Coats Cotton Co. to gain a foothold in the early American cotton thread manufacturing industries, now that British patents were ending. These Hartford-based partners proved to be trusty allies in this early example of industrial globalization.

Fifty-year-old Lawson Ives was an ideal candidate for the transatlantic project. Born in Bristol into one of the state's founding families, Ives became one of Connecticut's leading industrialists. He made a fortune mass-producing brass clocks and then expanded into the woolen manufacturing business with his brother, Theron Ives. His experience and successes in these fields brought him to the attention of the Coats Co., which subsequently provided him and Dunham with the funds to establish the Willimantic Linen Co. Although production took place in Willimantic, the new company's main offices were located in Hartford and New York City.

In 1857, shortly after the Willimantic Linen Co. changed over to producing cotton thread, the nation was hit by a crippling financial depression. Prices plummeted, but the economic collapse did not affect the immensely wealthy Ives and his British backers. Accordingly, Ives began construction of what was then Connecticut's largest cotton mill, which became known as the Willimantic Linen Co.'s No. 1 Mill. ArtSpace has developed this historic mill structure.

When construction commenced, Ives requested of the borough authorities that they rebuild the old wooden bridge, known as the Ironworks Bridge, which stood adjacent to the new mill, in order to improve transportation. The borough burgesses balked at the cost, so the company side-stepped local laws and hired local mason Lyman Jordan to build a stone bridge, which is today the defunct crossing shortly to be developed into garden space to complement the Windham Mills State Heritage Park.

Once the brand-new thread factory in Willimantic was in production, Ives turned his attention to the manufacture of sewing machines, a business then in its infancy. He invested heavily in the Wheeler & Wilson Manufacturing Co. and became a director

in the company founded by Bridgeport's Nathan Wheeler. Ives was a busy man during this period. In addition to this position, he was president and treasurer of the Willimantic Linen Co., the owner of a copper mine and of a stockinet factory at Newington.

The new worker village, which would be ultimately named for Ives, neared completion as August 1866 ended. The company's Irish employees had moved in, with strict instructions not to keep sheep and chickens inside their new homes. Local residents began to refer to the recently built community as the "new village." However, the editor of the Willimantic Journal thought the name was too "common," so he launched a campaign to rename Willimantic's latest suburb. He wrote:

"We suggest that 'Iverton' is an appropriate name. It will contain three fourths of the name of Mr. Ives, the treasurer of the company, and one of the largest stockholders of the new concern. This gentleman has been most prominently identified with this enterprising, important and flourishing manufacturing business which has just built up the new village connected with it... this is a far more preferable name than 'New Village' or 'Threadville.' Neither do we need 'Ivesville,' because we have 'Wellsville,' and 'Smithville' and they are all the viles we can stand!"

The paper's editor stressed that the new name should be pronounced with the accent on the first syllable, I-ver-ton, making the "I" long. After checking, he found that the name was not applied to any village or post office in the United States. "Iverson" in Louisiana came the nearest to it. The Willimantic Co.'s directors and post office agreed with the Journal editor, and friends and families sent mail to "Iverton, near Willimantic."

Unfortunately, Ives had little time to appreciate the Willimantic village named for him, as he died in Hartford on July 2, 1867, leaving Dunham in control of the company and its new village.

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