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Illegal rum and a murder most foul

Part three of three

The *Chronicle's* microfilmed records of its past issues provide a means to explore local history beyond living memory. Over the last two weeks, this column has looked at events in 1879 as recorded in the newspaper at the time.

This concluding article recalls the Scotland railroad station, a New York journalist's view of northeastern Connecticut, the opening of an oyster store on Main Street,



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a murder committed by a Willimantic resident and the discovery of an illegal rum distillery in Scotland.

Built in 1855, the Scotland railroad depot on the Hartford, Providence and Fishkill railroad received and posted mail, took delivery of manufactured goods and exported Scotland's agricultural produce across the wider region. However, the rapid growth of Willimantic in post-Civil War years and an improved highway between Scotland and Windham convinced the railroad authorities to close the depot and concentrate the service at Willimantic's Union Depot. This occurred in August 1879 and meant that the Scotland station agent, Dennis Murphy, was without a job. The newspaper noted his popularity: "He was one of the most accommodating officials on the line, and was always ready to take any amount of pains and trouble to please passengers." Murphy planned to purchase a farm in the rural town.

A visiting New York Times reporter noted northeastern Connecticut's rural and agricultural nature a few weeks after the Scotland station's closure. He explained how Windham County's rustic and pastoral environment

attracted summer visitors from across the Northeast and observed how "Brooklyn boasts of its elms and the distinction of being the county seat. Pomfret of its aristocracy and society privileges, for here summer boarders can dress and exchange ceremonious calls as punctiliously as at Newport or in the city. Woodstock prides itself upon its park and Fourth of July celebration. Thompson claims every advantage, natural and social, and all think the beauty of scenery, from their point of view, surpasses any found in New England."

Oysters were a staple diet for all New Englanders at the end of the 19th century, thanks to the rich oyster beds in the Long Island Sound and the Narragansett Bay. The Hartford, Providence and Fishkill railroad connected Willimantic directly with Rhode Island and the Thread City took advantage of the thousands of acres of oyster beds in Rhode Island. The oysters provided an inexpensive, nutritious food for Willimantic's mill workers.

In September 1879, the Briggs brothers opened a grand new "oyster saloon" on Willimantic's Main Street. They had installed an "oyster range" and promised to cook to order and in any style or quantity on short notice. Moreover, the brothers announced they would sell raw Narragansett Bay oysters by the quart or gallon.

Raw oyster consumption often caused serious infections and death, thus the "oyster range" cooked and destroyed harmful bacteria in the popular shellfish. However, the Willimantic Linen Co.'s paymaster, William Riddle, knew of other poisons and successfully used one to kill his wife.

The linen company had employed Riddle as a mechanic and he had lived in Willimantic for a decade. He was from the Lancashire cotton mills in England and was an expert in cotton spinning and winding machinery.

Riddle quickly rose through the ranks and was promoted to the post of paymaster. However, he embezzled funds and the Willimantic Linen Co. dismissed him.

Riddle left for Norwich, where he opened a small manufactory for spinning twine and yarn, employing 30 women. He fell in love with one of them and subsequently poisoned his wife with arsenic. Norwich authorities arrested Riddle and his lover as they boarded a steamer for New York City and everyone looked forward to a "steamy" trial discussing adultery and murder.

The Norwich authorities had a busy year. Shortly after apprehending Riddle and his paramour, a tax collector from the city traveled to Coventry, accompanied by a U.S. marshal, and destroyed an illicit distillery operated by Morton Lillibridge in the kitchen of his house. Lillibridge came clean and admitted that he had been making New England rum from molasses. The authorities then journeyed to Mansfield and Willimantic, where they arrested John Grant and A.H. Pearl, Lillibridge's partners in crime. The trio could not pay the \$1,000 bail and a judge sent them to jail in Hartford to await trial.