

June 1, 2006

# Tour adds two homes

Two homes included for the first time in this weekend's Victorian Days in Willimantic house tours are at 71 Chestnut St. and 208 Summit St. Both are Hill District properties that were built at the end of the 19th century when landowners sold house plots to take advantage of the city's rapid suburban growth.



Tom Beardsley

Summit Street stood at the high point of Chestnut Hill overlooking Willimantic and Chestnut Street headed north to that pinnacle. The two homes are in close proximity and stand on land originally owned by local silk manufacturing magnate John Asbel Conant (1829 to 1918).

Conant was born in Chaffeeville in 1829, a village at the heart of Mansfield's historic silk industry. He began an apprenticeship in the Gurleyville silk mill in 1844 and later worked for silk manufacturers Chaffee, Hanks, Atwood and the Cheney's. In 1864, Conant went into partnership with Goodrich and James Holland who owned and operated the Conantville silk mill, built in 1853 by Conant's uncle, Joseph Conant.

In 1865, the Hollands built a brick, steam-powered mill on Valley Street and put Conant in charge of their new Willimantic venture. Conant subsequently worked and partially owned the Holland Manufacturing Co. for the next 41 years until his retirement in 1907. During this period,

the Holland Manufacturing Co. was one of the nation's leading suppliers and manufacturers of fine dress silk thread, which it exported around the world.

The company's success enabled Conant to buy up large tracts of land in the expanding borough of Willimantic, which he later profited from by selling them off as home plots. His son, Julius Deloraine Conant, who preferred the first name John, inherited his father's business and property interests and oversaw many land deals.

In 1894, father and son, who lived at 49 Chestnut St., built the fine brick house at 71 Chestnut St. The Conants lived there until 1897, the year that local dentist George Wilcox purchased it. This was Wilcox's home until 1917, the year he sold it to Herman Prag, a local shoe dealer. Prag sold it on April 20, 1920 to William and Catherine Hirczycia.

The Hirczycias lived at 71 Chestnut St. for more than 50 years. William Hirczycia (1892 to 1976) was born in Ukraine. He came to Willimantic in 1913 and founded the Willimantic Window Cleaning Co., which he operated until he retired in 1959. He was a member of St Mary's Ukrainian Catholic Church and the Ukrainian Club.

The home located around the corner from the Conant House, at 208 Summit St., has been known historically as Dr. Shea's home. On June 12, 1916, just two years before his death, Conant, then 87

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years old, sold a then vacant house plot on Summit Street to Albert French, a butcher and part-time realtor. On Aug. 13, 1918, French sold that same plot, now occupied by a house, to a well-known local lawyer.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the lawyer's home had originally been a button factory standing on Lewiston Avenue and that French moved it to the Summit Street location sometime between 1916 and 1918. There is no documentary evidence to support this.

French sold the Summit Street plot and house to Frank and May Foss on Aug. 13, 1918. Frank Foss was a member of the local law firm of Hinman and Foss and he would later become the judge of Willimantic's Police Court. On

May 1, 1923, the Foss family sold the house to Mary Shea, the wife of local barber, Dennis P. Shea, who was born in Ireland in 1869. Shea and his wife, Margaret Looney Shea, lived at 208 Summit St. until 1952. Dennis, who had worked in the old Windham Silk Mill on North Street, died in 1951 and after Margaret's death the following year, the family sold the house to Eugene Claussen.

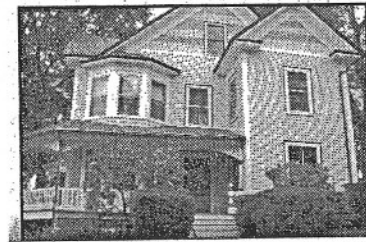
Those who have grown up in this area of Willimantic refer to 208 Summit St. as Dr. Shea's house. Dr. Shea was in fact Dennis and Margaret's son, Richard Shea.

The city directory first records his residence there in 1927, as a student. After graduating from medical school, Dr. Shea prac-

ticed briefly in New Haven but from 1932 until 1943, he practiced medicine from his office at 854 Main St. in Willimantic. Dr. Shea left Willimantic for military service during World War II and died in 1947 after his return to the Thread City.

Eugene W. Claussen, who had purchased Dr. Shea's House in 1955, was the local manager of the Metropolitan Life Assurance Co. which had offices at 972 Main St.

He lived there until 1962, when Richard and Linda Kelley purchased the home. This returned 208 Summit St. to its law and Irish roots, laid down by Foss and Dennis Shea, because Richard Kelley, an Irish-American, practiced law locally and served as a judge.



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