



*A quiet day on Main Street at the turn of the century.*

# MILLTOWN

## As the century starts, Willimantic is humming and the mood is expansive

The 19<sup>th</sup> century in Windham ended with little fanfare and there was little mention in the newspapers of the approaching new century.

The most contentious issue was a meeting organized by the Willimantic Board of Trade to discuss the issue of the city's municipal ownership of electric lights. Dr. George Wilcox, a proponent of municipal lighting, had researched the issue and believed if the city owned the lighting, it would cost only \$65 a night to light the streets instead of \$97 a night. Furthermore, the private company to increase dividends sacrificed lighting efficiency. Wilcox strongly believed that Willimantic should become one of more than 600 municipalities across the United States to own its own street lighting. George Hinman was against the idea. He argued that such municipal ownership gave the local political parties far too much political power.

The 1900s commenced with the city aldermen announcing that new sewers would be built in Carey Street to Lewiston Avenue, Milk and Jackson streets. Local quarryman John Lennon was given permission to build a marble works building on Valley Street, and James Tighe was appointed superintendent of sewers.

The most important Windham event that impacted the region during the first decade was the purchase of the Willimantic Linen

Co. by the British-based Coats Cotton Co. and English Sewing Co. under the name the American Thread Co. The deal was negotiated in 1898-99, and the corporate lawyer acting for ATCO was John Dos Passos Sr., father of the more well-known American writer, John Dos Passos (1896-1970) who penned such American classics as "Manhattan Transfer" (1925), "42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel" (1930), "Nineteen Nineteen" (1932), and "The Big Money" (1936). John Dos Passos Sr. was a feared and respected New York City lawyer who dealt in many high profile cases. He lunched at the Hotel Hooker as the deal was being negotiated.

ATCO purchased more than a dozen cotton companies in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maine and New Hampshire, and embarked upon a program of consolidation where the less profitable mills were closed down. Fortunately for the eastern Connecticut economy, ATCO decided to make Willimantic the center of its American venture. As 1900 dawned, ATCO's investment in Willimantic was taking shape. The brickwork to its new finishing mill, soon to be known as Mill No. 5, was completed and the first story floor was being laid. In 1907, Mill No. 6 was built adjacent to Mill No. 5. A dye house was erected in 1910. In 1916, the concrete warehouse and mills 5 and 6 were joined and the famous crossover was built. The future of textile manufacturing

was secured for three more generations.

The first decade of the century was a prosperous one for Willimantic. The trolley cars arrived in 1903, connecting Willimantic in an interurban network to Norwich and New London. In 1908, the line to Coventry was completed, but the projected interurban connection to Hartford did not materialize. The year 1906 saw the completion of the famous Willimantic footbridge, originally designed as a highway bridge to take the new trolley cars into the city. The road under the railroad bridge and over the stone bridge between Mills 1 and 6 became a dangerous bottleneck.

Other local industries also boomed in the century's first decade. The Windham Silk Co. the Holland Silk Co., the Willimantic Cotton Co. and the Windham Manufacturing Co. were all busy. The Smith and Winchester Co. in South Windham, which built paper manufacturing machines, gave secure employment to more than a thousand people.

Willimantic's expanding population had a professional baseball team to follow. Between 1901 and 1907, a group of local businessmen formed the Willimantic Baseball Association and the Willimantic Colts played professional ball at Windham Field Stadium, which was located on Memorial Park.