

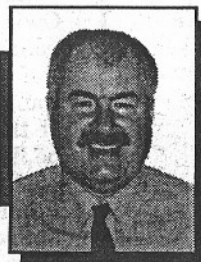
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14 ALBUM, the Chronicle, Saturday, October 7, 2000

## Laying down the tracks for expansion

### Part One of Three

The railroad arrived in Willimantic in 1849 and fired a rapid expansion of its textile mills, and the growth of the borough into a city. A charter was granted to the New London, Willimantic and Springfield Railroad in May 1847. The planned connection with Springfield was not achieved, and the following year the company was renamed the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Railroad. It was financed by a group of men who had made millions in New London's whaling industry. They were searching for ways to reinvest their fortunes as the whaling industry began to decline. Their leader, and the president of the railroad, was Thomas W. Williams (1789-1874). He was educated at Plainfield Academy and entered mercantile life in New York City, and conducted extensive trading with England and Russia. He removed to New London in 1818 and



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revived its whaling fleet, after its decline during the War of 1812.

The proposed railroad's engineer, James N. Palmer, surveyed the route in 1847 and convinced the New Londoners that the line would be as profitable as the

recently built Norwich & Worcester Railroad. The whaling millionaires were keen to go ahead as they saw many investment possibilities in central eastern Connecticut.

New London was the last of Connecticut's cities on the Long Island sound to be served by the railroad, and Williams and his fellow directors poured their whaling profits into the railroad venture. Ground was broken in New London in July 1848, and the first train ran to Willimantic on Nov. 15, 1849.

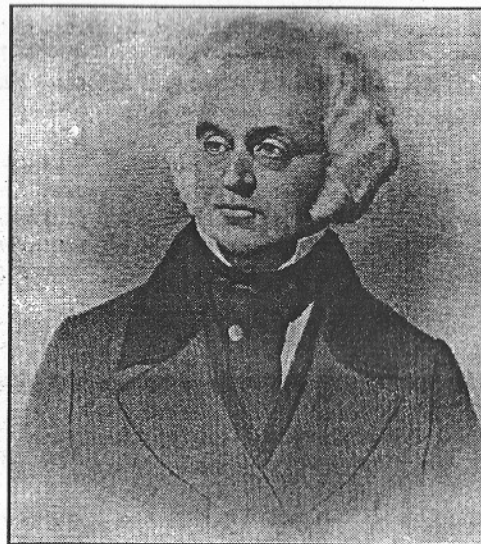
More than 5,000 tons of rolled iron rails were purchased from England, the majority coming from the famous Coalbrookdale

Co. at Telford, in the county of Shropshire, England. On Nov. 21, 1848, 2,500 tons of iron rails purchased from the Coalbrookdale Co. for \$3,000. The following month, more than 20,000 chestnut ties were purchased from a farmer in Stafford.

Contract preferences were given to those individuals who had bought stock in the road. Castings to fit the ties to the rolled iron rails were manufactured in seven foundries, including that of the Smith and Winchester Co.'s works in South Windham.

The Welsh iron rails were shipped directly to the Coalbrookdale agent in New York City, and then transported to New London by Long Island Sound steamships, and then up the Thames River to Norwich. The roads rolled iron rails, although manufactured in Shropshire, just over the border from Wales, were always referred to in reports and minutes as the "Welsh" rails. An 1855 engineering report noted that the Welsh iron was wearing badly on the curves.

*Continued Next Week*



Thomas W. Williams, the man who brought the railroad to Willimantic in 1849, was the owner of a fleet of whaling ships.

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