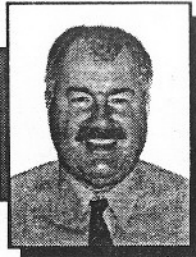


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History

The Jillson family: a Willimantic original



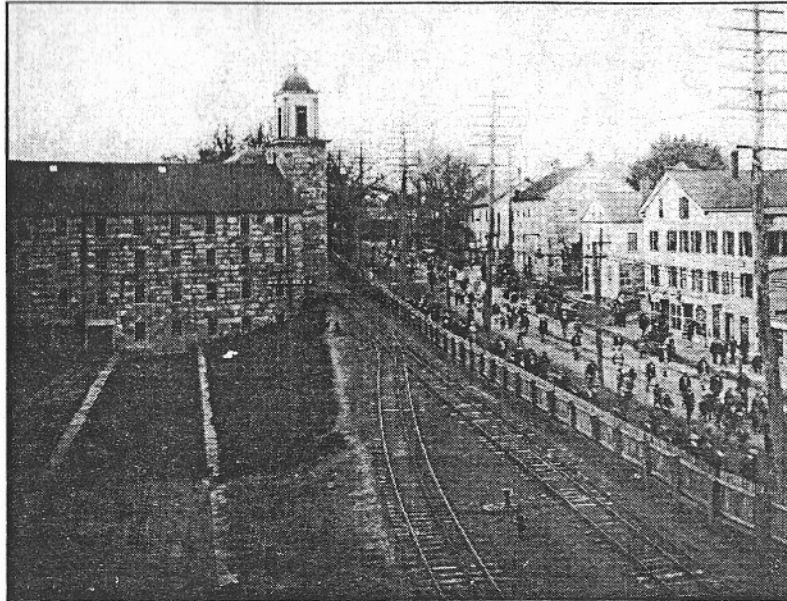
Tom Beardsley

Part one of two

The Jillson family played an important role in the industrial development that led to the formation of the borough of Willimantic (1833) in the ancient colonial Connecticut town of Windham.

In 1822, Perez O. Richmond (1786-1838) became the first entrepreneur to utilize the fast running water of the Willimantic River to spin cotton thread. He was born into a wealthy Seekonk, R.I., family, and trained as a physician.

Richmond abandoned medical pursuits, and hired Hosea Ballou to build a cotton mill in Windham, Richmond's experiment failed, mainly because of the difficulties of obtaining suitable labor. Historian Ellen Larned called him "Poor Old Richmond." He died in Barrington, R.I. Richmond's mill builder went on to



Asa and Seth Jillson's second mill, built in 1825, can be seen in this 1916 photograph of a baseball parade. The Thread City Crossing was built just to the west of this mill.

develop a mill and village in Killingly that bears his name. Ballouville.

Richmond and Ballou laid industrial foundations for the Jillson family of Cumberland, R. I. to build upon. Asa Jillson (1783-1848) arrived in Willimantic Falls in 1826, after purchas-

ing Richmond's mill privileges. Asa's industrial pedigree was excellent. His father, Luke Jillson (1754-1825), had become the first American-born mechanic to design successful water-driven satinet looms. Upon their father's death, Asa and his brother Seth Jillson (1796-1876)

retooled Richmond's old mill, and built a stone mill, a wooden mill and a stone dwelling house, further upstream.

In 1845, Asa's son, "Colonel" William Lawrence Jillson (1807-1861) collaborated with Austin Dunham and J. H. Capen to form the Welles Co. and built a three-story mill and accompanying housing on the site of Perez O. Richmond's 1822 cotton mill. Asa and Seth's wooden mill was demolished in 1864 when the Willimantic Linen Co. built its mill number two.

In 1854 their old stone mill became the headquarters of Austin Dunham and Lawson Ives' Willimantic Linen Co.

In 1857, after the erection of mill number one, the old Jillson stone mill became the Linen Company's spool shop, and in 1876 the Welles Co. mill became the Linen Co.'s mill number three.

The 1826 Jillson dwelling house eventually became the home of the Windham Historical Society. It was originally slated for demolition during 1970s redevelopment, but was saved by the Windham Historical Society.

"Colonel" William Lawrence Jillson came to Willimantic in 1826 with his father and started

work as a machinist, and benefited greatly from the skills of a local machinist, Ames Burr Palmer (1820-1887). Jillson and Palmer would develop a machine that revolutionized the cotton industry.

Jillson became the agent of the firm began by his father and Uncle, the A. & S. Jillson Co., which manufactured the renowned Jillson and Palmer cotton opener, a machine invented and manufactured in Willimantic and employed in cotton mills across the United States.

It greatly increased the speed at which the seeds and impurities were removed from raw cotton.

The "Colonel" also controlled three other local textile manufacturing in the 1840s and 1850s, The Willimantic Duck Co., the Eagle Warp Co., and the Dunham Manufacturing Co.

The "Colonel" died in 1861, and his two sons, William Curtis Jillson (1833-1898) and Asa W. Jillson (1826-1893) took control of their father's companies. In 1851, 18-year-old William Curtis Jillson had entered his father's mills to "learn the trade," and in 1865 he organized the Hop River Warp Co. in nearby Columbia.

Continued next week