

MURALS OF A MILL TOWN: THE PUBLIC ART MURALS OF WILLIMANTIC, CONNECTICUT — A VIRTUAL EXHIBIT

Curated by Jamie Eves

Many Connecticut towns boast impressive outdoor public art murals. New London, Norwalk, Middletown, and other communities have undertaken projects to decorate older structures with murals depicting the history of the community. Willimantic, CT, a former textile mill community located within the larger town of Windham, has several dozen public art murals, painted from the 1990s through to the present. Willimantic has been lucky to have several talented muralists as residents: Gordon MacDonald, Ben Keller, Mellica Bloom (Keller's former partner in MBK), Nicholas Khan, and the late Arnold Prince — all of whom have created numerous murals decorating both commercial and public structures in the Thread City. Because the muralists lived in Willimantic, their work reflects the history and culture of the community: a former textile mill town, blue collar, and ethnic.

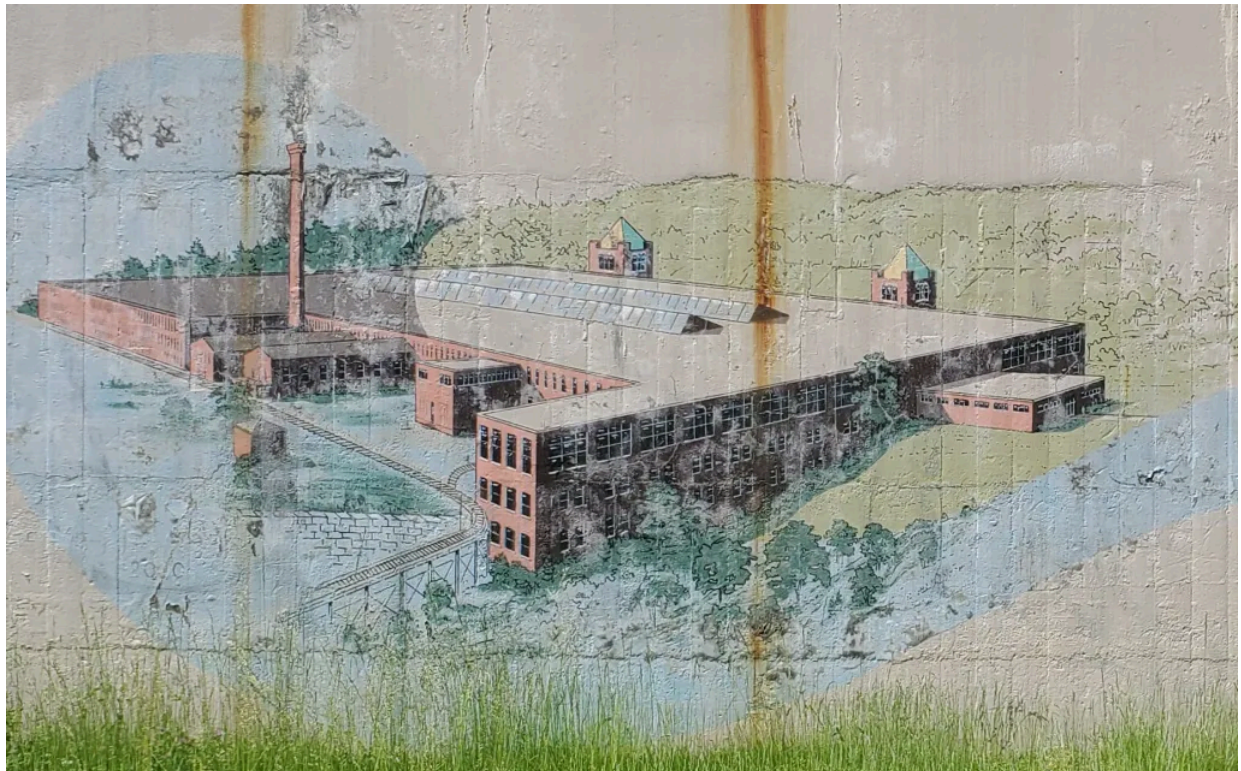
This was the Mill Museum's first virtual exhibit. We created it in 2020 during the Coronavirus pandemic, when the Museum was closed to the public. We photographed many of Willimantic's historic murals and placed the images on our website. We will continue to update this virtual as new murals are created.

Gordon MacDonald

When the American Thread Company, Willimantic's largest industry, closed in 1985, it left behind a sprawling factory complex, memories of its days as one of the United States' premier manufacturers of cotton and synthetic thread, hundreds of unemployed workers, and a community that felt bereft of its identity. The Thread City no longer made thread. Subsequent owners of the ATCO mills discovered that they were unable to utilize or even maintain the entire complex, which began to deteriorate. In the early 1990s, in an effort to save the soundest and most historic structures, many of the former factory buildings were demolished. The granite mills were saved, but four large brick brick — Mill No. 5, Mill No. 6, the Boiler House, and the Dye House — were torn down and replaced with the Windham Mill Heritage State Park and a parking lot. Where the thick brick walls of the Mill No. 6 once had held back high banks of earth, new concrete retaining walls were installed along the western and northern edges of the parking lot. Gordon MacDonald, a professional muralist and Willimantic resident, organized a public art project where community volunteers assisted him in painting eighteen interconnected murals on the concrete wall. The murals depicted both the history thread mill complex that had once occupied the site, and the different kinds of tasks that workers had done in the mill. The murals were based on historic photographs in the collection of the Windham Textile and History Museum.



Above: The brick No. 5 Mill (right, demolished), granite No. 1 Mill (center, still standing and converted into apartments), and Concrete Warehouse (left, still standing and converted into apartments). The ornate, upper-story walkway connecting Mill No. 5 and Mill No. 1, called a “bridge” was a local landmark, but sadly was also demolished. The railroad trestle in the foreground is still used.



Above: Mill No. 4. Constructed in 1880, Mill No. 4 was of great architectural importance, the first factory building in the world constructed both for steam power (not waterpower) and electric lights. All manufacturing occurred on the upper floor. The lower floors were basements that held the steam boilers and power train. Unfortunately, this building accidentally burned to the ground in 1995.



Above: The Jillson Mill, the first mill building constructed on the site. It was later converted to the Spool Shop, then demolished in the early 20th century to make room for the Concrete Warehouse.



Above: A 19th-century teamster drives a team of mules from the mill's granite Stable (background). Mules pulled thick ropes attached to block-and-tackle to hoist heavy materials up to and down from upper stories. The Stable is still standing.



Above: The Helen B., a narrow-gauge steam train, once hauled heavy material between buildings at the thread mill complex. It was named for Helen Boss, the general manager's daughter.



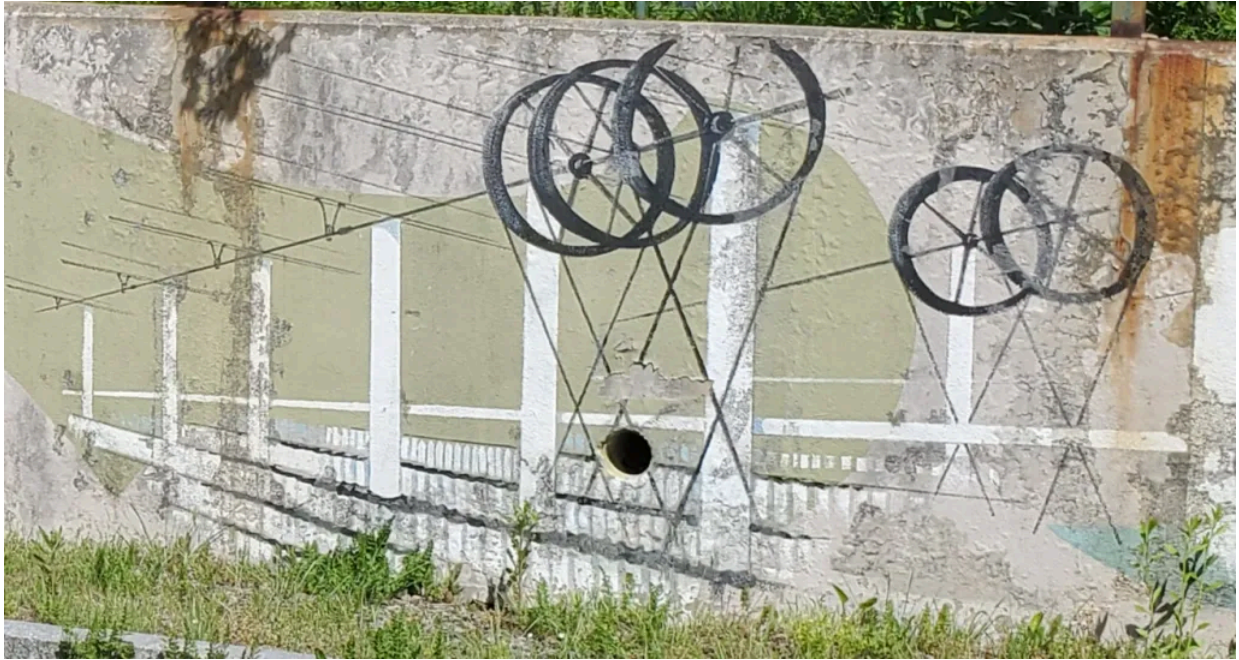
Above: The flying spool was the symbol of the American Thread Company and its predecessor, the Willimantic Linen Company.



Above: This weather vane once sat atop one of the towers of the No. 4 Mill. It's design symbolized steps in the thread manufacturing process. The Museum has the original.



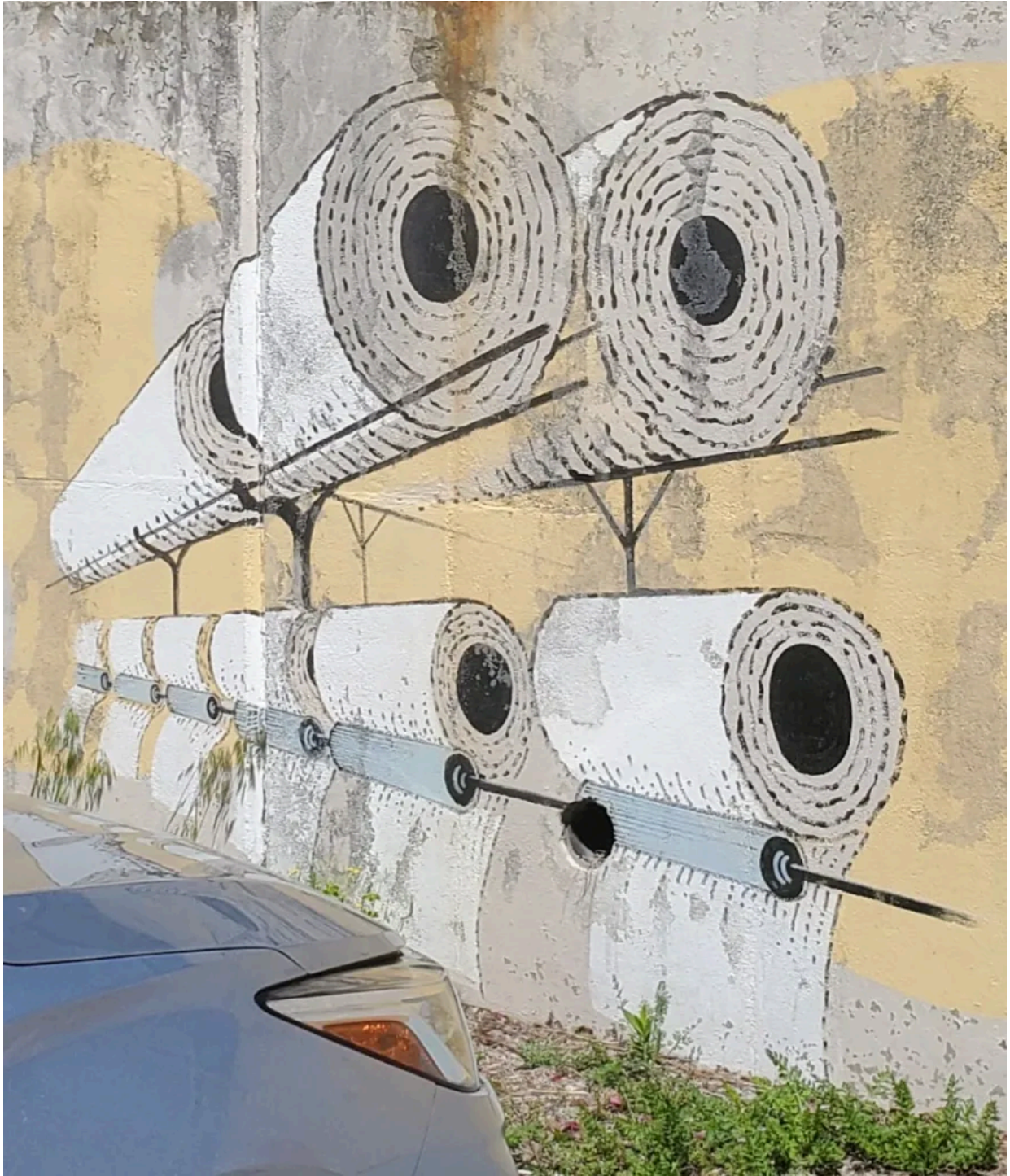
Above: Winding finished thread onto large spools.



Above: Belt-driven spinning machines. The power train was on the ceiling.



Above: Special scissors used by mill operatives to cut thread. The loop on the scissors fit over the thumb.



Above: Rolls of lap (sheets of raw cotton) waiting to be fed into a carding machine.



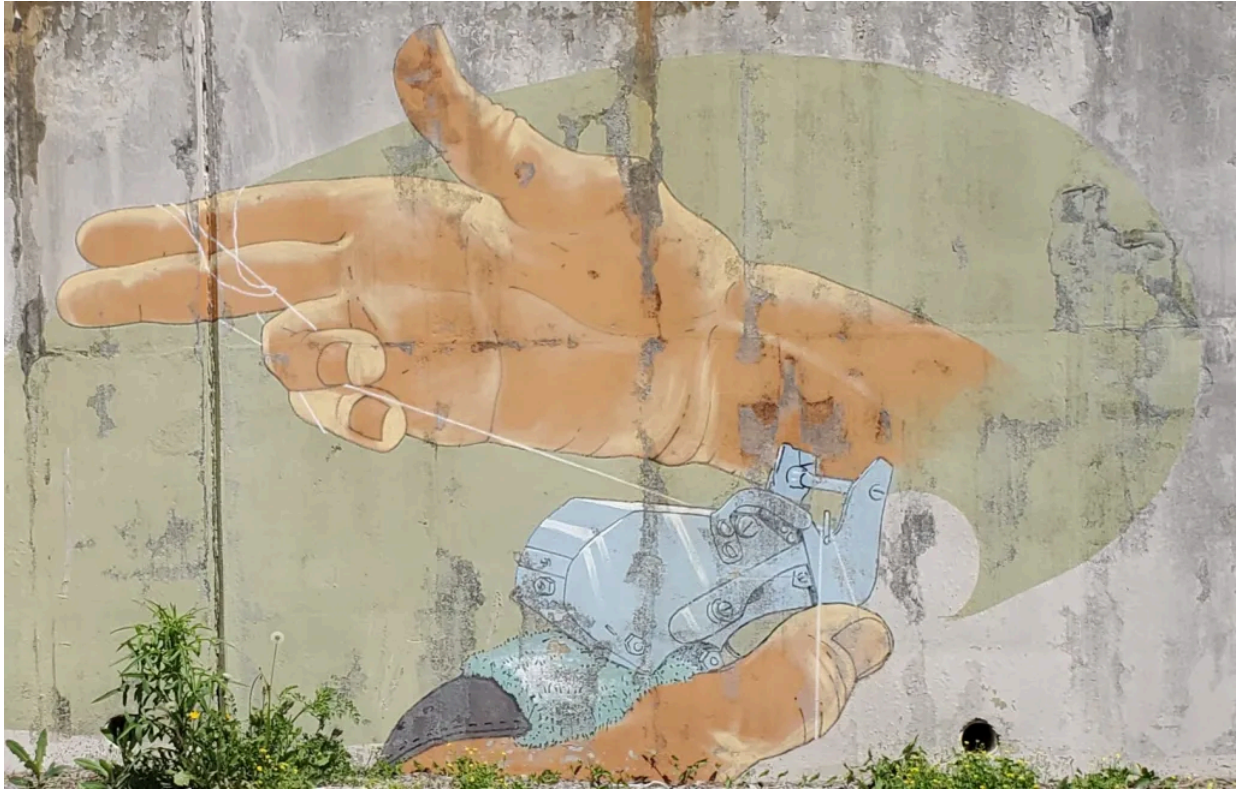
Above: Worker's hands holding sliver, strands of carded (combed/brushed) cotton produced by carding machines. Sliver was refined into roving, which in turn was spun into thread or yarn.



Above: A worker weighs a cart of bobbins holding roving, ready to be spun.



Above: Cartloads of bobbins of roving, waiting to be rolled to the spinning room.



Above: A worker “threads” thread onto a winding machine.



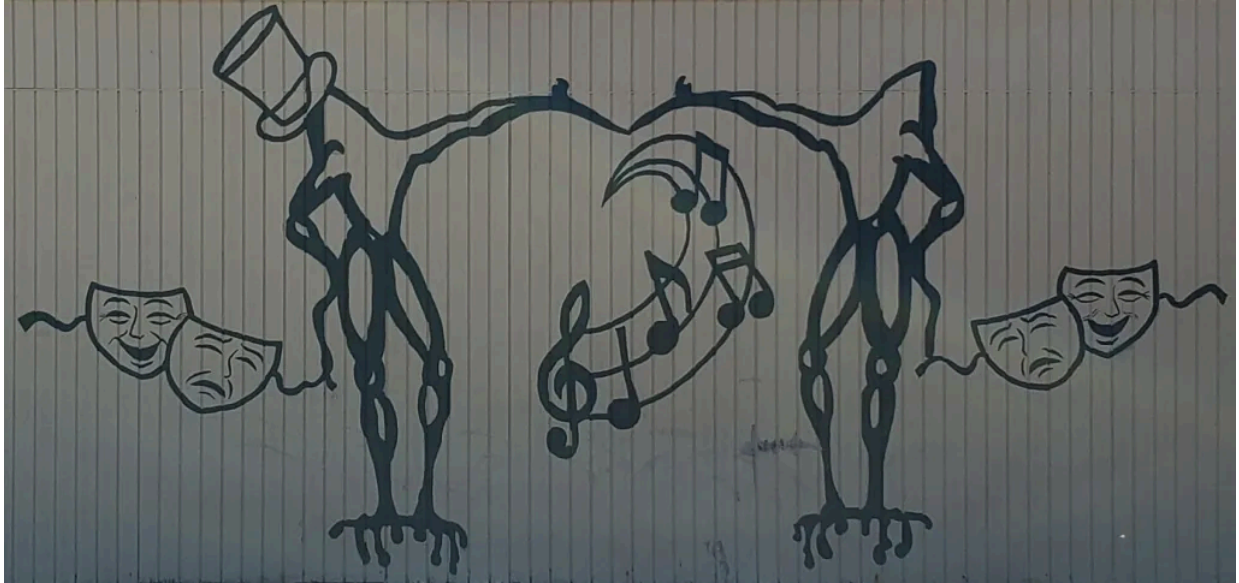
Above: A conveyor belt of loaded boxes.



Above: A worker readies spools of undyed thread for submersion in a dye vat, at bottom.



Above: Finished product, packaged and ready for market.



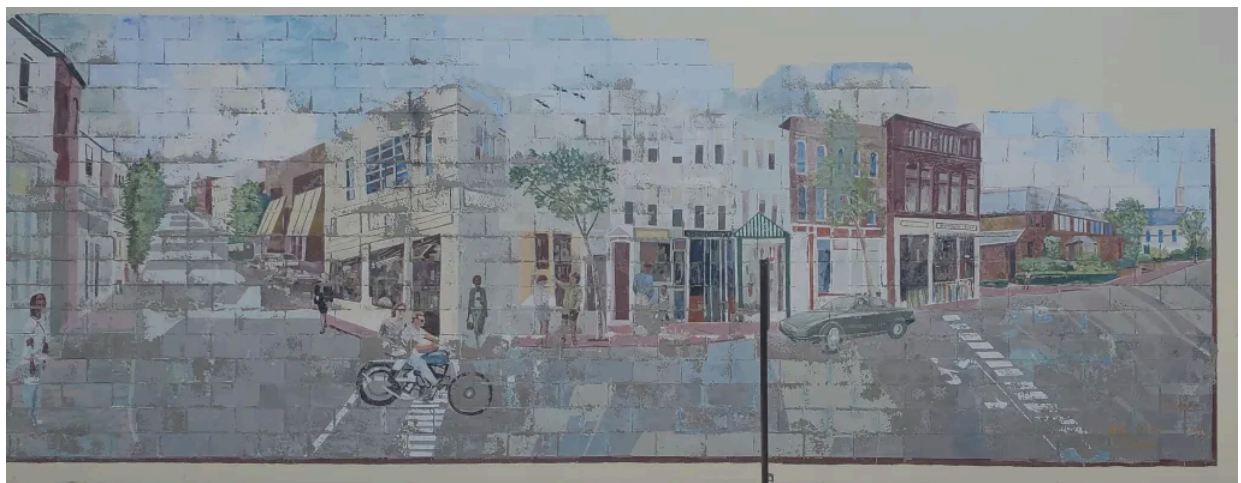
Above: This Gordon MacDonald mural is not at the site of the old American Thread mills, but rather adorns the Burton Leavitt Theater on Main Street.

Arnold Prince

In 1995-96, the late muralist Arnold Prince painted eight murals on the Walnut Street wall of Willard's Hardware and Lumber, a blank, two-story wall made of a combination of brick, concrete blocks, and sheet metal. Prince's murals are a mixture of contemporary and historic views of Willimantic. The historic and even the contemporary scenes reflect a sense of loss: buildings that have been demolished, public squares that no longer exist, passenger trains service that has been discontinued, an Independence Day parade with boom boxes instead of marching bands. Prince's gritty style conveys an undercurrent of poverty and decline, but also a determination to make do and hold on. Prince was a resident of the neighboring town of Chaplin, and a retired professor from the Rhode Island School of Design. His son, Anderson Prince, assisted him on some of the murals. A 1996 article about the murals from the *Hartford Courant* can be found [here](#).



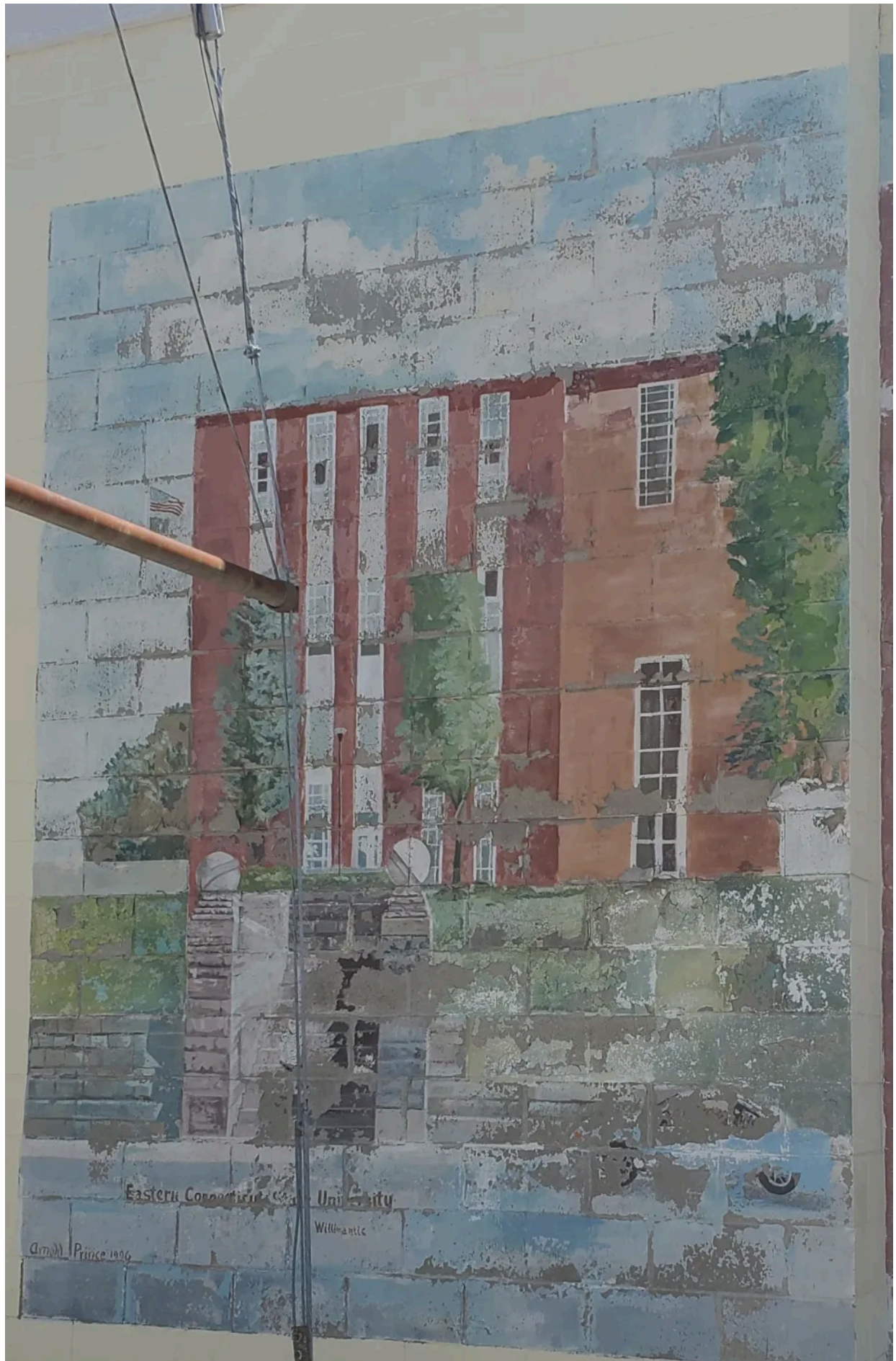
Above: "Willimantic River."



Above: "Main Street."



Above: "High Street."

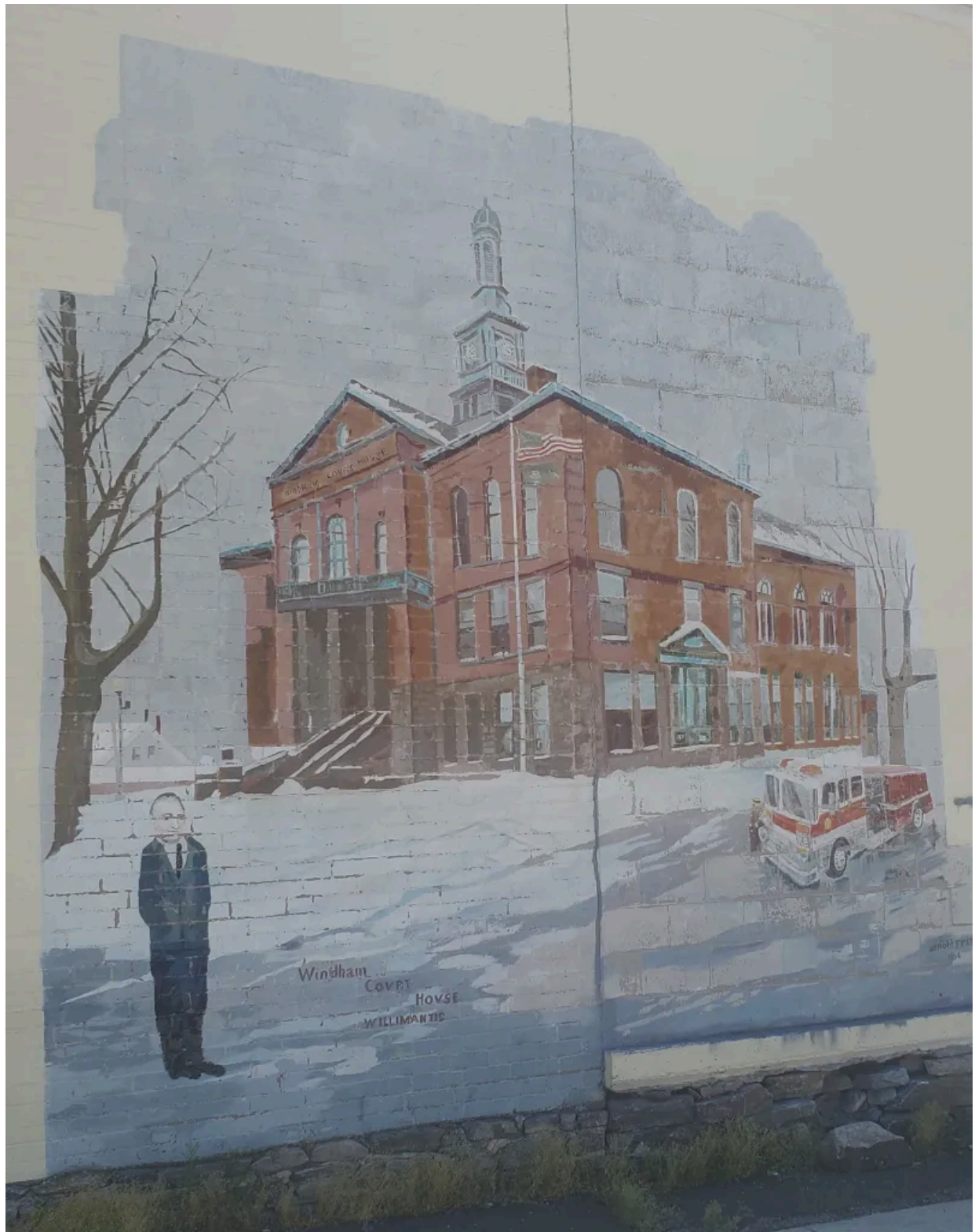




Above: "Eastern Connecticut State University."



Above: "Windham Mills." (In the foreground is Thread Mill Square, which no longer exists. On the left is the brick No. 6 Mill, with the brick No. 5 Mill behind it; neither of them exists any longer either. On the right is the granite No. 1 Mill, which still exists and has been converted into apartments. The street between the two mills is no longer a street, but the pedestrian Garden on the Bridge park. The white, elevated walkway connecting the two mills is now gone, but the railroad trestle beyond it still exists.



Above: "Windham Court House." Now the Windham Town Hall.



Above: "Boom Box Parade." Due to a lack of funds for marching bands, Willimantic's annual Independence Day parade became a "boom box" parade in the 1980s. Leading the parade dressed in the garb of a University of Connecticut basketball player is the grand marshal, Wayne Norman, a local radio personality.



Above: “Main Street.” This scene depicts Lincoln Square, which ceased to exist in the 1970s, a victim of “redevelopment,” or urban renewal. Passenger train service no longer comes to Willimantic. Freight trains pass through, but no longer stop at Union Station, which has been demolished.

Ben Keller / MBK

Ben Keller (sometimes working with his former MBK partner, Mellica Bloom) has painted numerous mural in Willimantic and elsewhere. Some of these murals — especially those done as half of MBK — feature scenes from Willimantic history. Others are commercial, advertising businesses. Some are primarily decorative. And some are more personal. The style varies, from work in the early 2010’s, to the historical murals in the mid-2010’s, to extremely sophisticated work today. Keller’s murals are at many different locations throughout Willimantic.

Below: The set of murals below are difficult to find. They are on the inside of a concrete wall that surrounds a courtyard accessible off Meadow Street. The courtyard is part of the same property as the brick building visible in the background of the second image below. When Keller created the murals, the building was the Lily Pad, an art supply store. It is now Bliss Marketplace.











Below: This next set of murals are on the east sidewall of the building that contains the Elm Package Store and the Willimantic Food Co-op on Valley Street. They face a parking lot.





ELM

DISCOUNT PACKAGE STORE









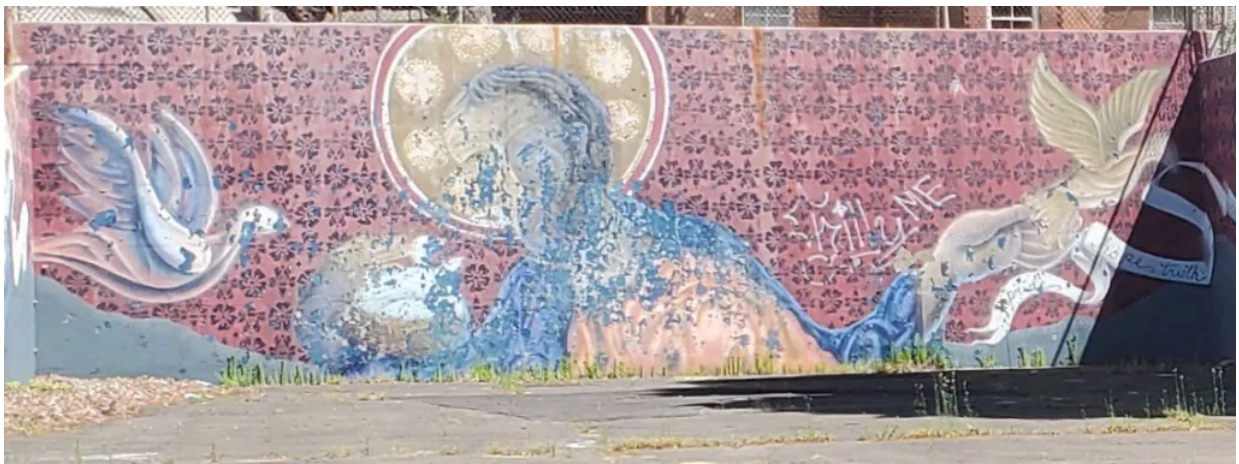
Below: This next set of murals are on three of the faces of an old pump house on Riverside Drive.

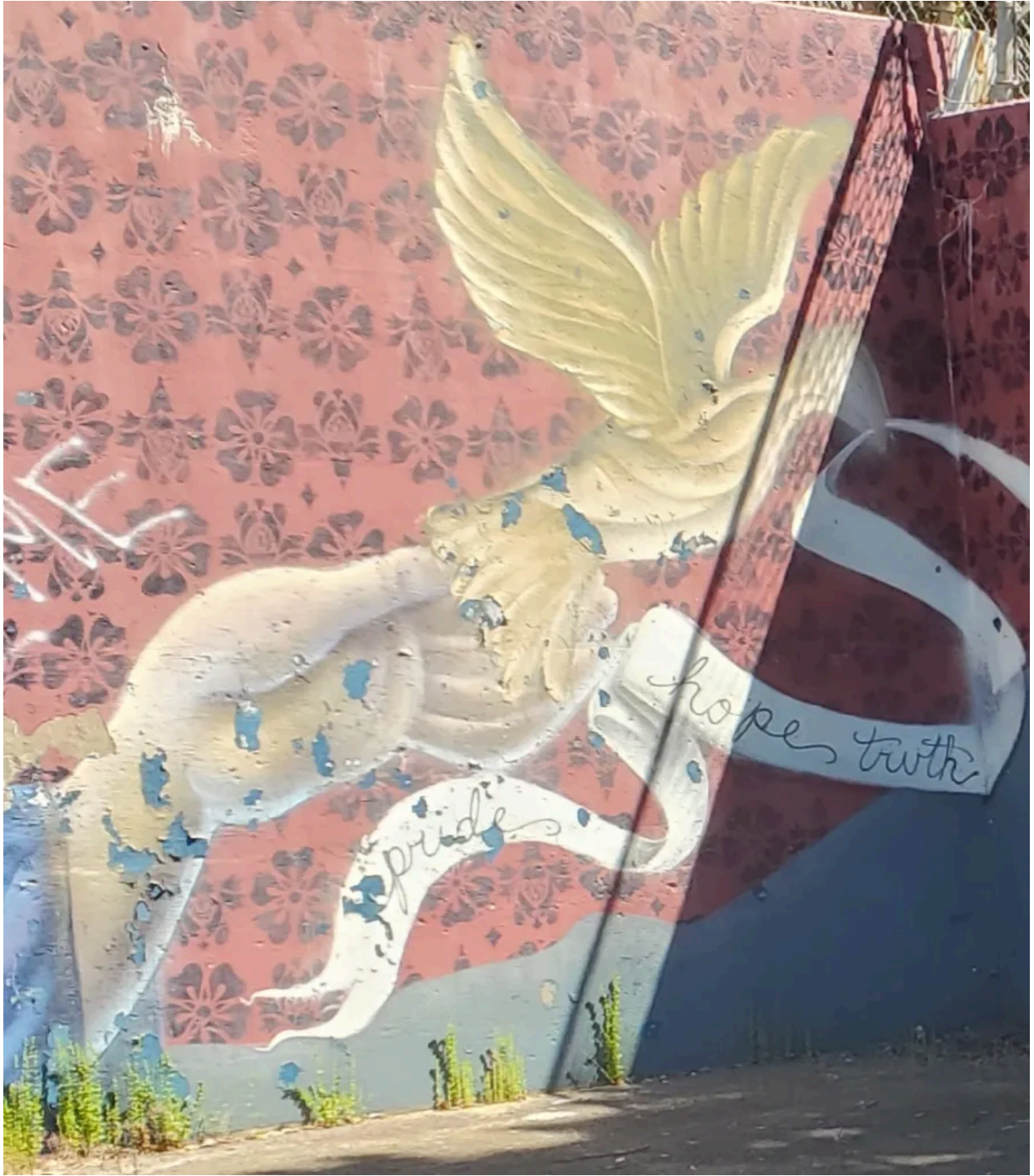






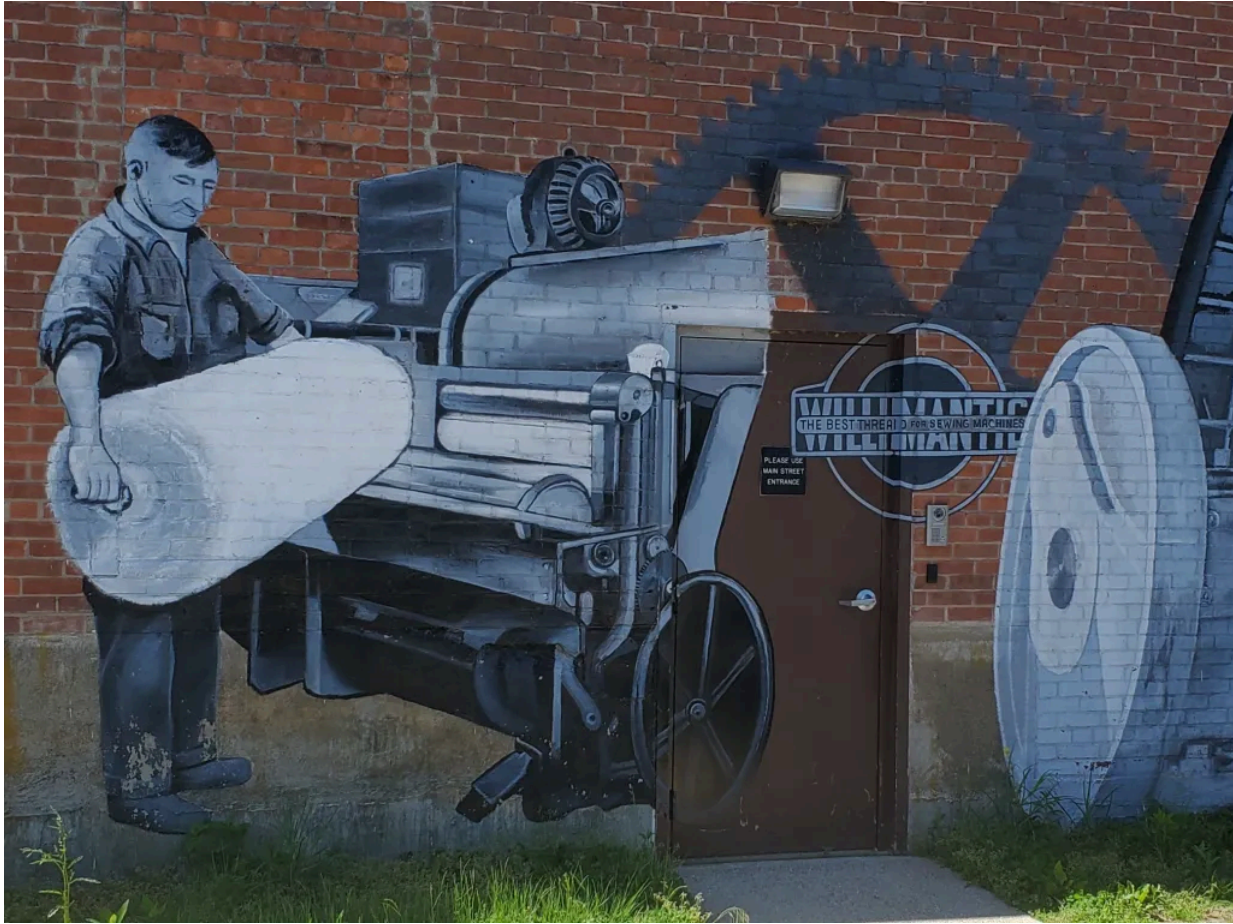
Below: This mural is on a concrete retaining wall behind St. Mary's – St. Joseph's School on Valley Street. The area is a playground.







Below: This three-part historical mural is on the rear wall of the former Quinebaug Valley Community College building, now the headquarters of LEAP, a private non-profit educational business. The building fronts on Main Street, but the murals can be seen from the Crosbie Parking Lot, which is off Church and North Streets. The murals are based of photographs of workers and machinery at the former Willimantic Linen Company / American Thread Company thread mill, and were supplied by the Windham Textile and History Museum. In the first image, Ignacy Pekarski, a Polish American worker carries a heavy roll of unprocessed cotton to a carding machine, c. 1950. The second image depicts a gigantic 19th-century flywheel only days before the steam engine to which it was attached malfunctioned, causing the wheel to spin so fast that the bolts holding it to its moorings sheared off and the wheel crashed through the mill's wall. The third image shows Alice LaFerriere, a Franco-American mill worker from Quebec, tending a carding machine c. 1950. This mural is one of MBK's earliest historical murals, and was made by projecting the image onto the brick wall. Because the photographs were black-and-white, so too is the mural.







Below: “Willimantic USA,” a historical scene of Willimantic’s Main Street business district as it appeared in the 20th century. The fire trucks are part of a parade. The historic Foot Bridge crossed streets, railroad tracks, and the Willimantic River to link the south side of the city to the downtown, and was used by generations of mill workers on they way to work. Almost all of the buildings shown in this mural were demolished in the 1970s as part of “redevelopment,” or urban renewal. The painting is meant to convey a sense of a more prosperous time before the mills closed when America’s Main Streets flourished. The mural is based on a black-and-white photograph and is on the east wall of That Breakfast Place restaurant on Boston Post Road.



Below: "Foot Bridge." This mural is on the west (North Street) sidewall of the LEAP building at the corner of North and Main Streets, across Main Street from the Foot Bridge.



Below: "New York and New England Railroad." In the early 20th century, Willimantic was a major rail center. This mural is on the west sidewall of A Cupcake for Later bakery on Main Street.



Below: “Gypsy Camp.” Based on a turn-of-the-century postcard. This mural is on the west sidewall of Swift Water Artisans’ Cooperative on Main Street.



Below: “Park Springs.” This mural is at People’s Park, a pocket park off Main Street next to Grounded, a coffee shop. Park Springs itself is on the north edge of Willimantic, off Jackson Street,

near the border with Mansfield, CT.



Below: Two decorative friezes. The first is on the Willimantic Public Library's Mary Lou DeVivo Building on Main Street. The second is on the LEAP building, also on Main Street.





Below: Keller painted this mural during the novel coronavirus – COVID 19 pandemic of 2020. It is meant to illustrate the importance of touching and physical contact (both human and divine) at a time when many were in quarantine. It is inspired by Michelangelo's famous mural on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel where God gives life to Adam. The white "noodles" were affixed to the building by a different artist as part of the "My Windham" street art project in 2017. The building is now empty. It was originally a company-owned worker row house, and later a small store. The owner (who also owns Cafemantic restaurant next door) is maintaining the building as a historic structure. The smaller murals below are on the rear of the building, visible only from Cafemantic's outdoor patio.







Other Willimantic Murals



Above: This decorative mural adorns the rear wall of a “back lot” social services building. The mural is visible from the Crosbie Parking Lot, between Church and North Streets.



Above: This mural is on the Elm Package Store on Valley Street.



Above and below: Local artist Nicholas Khan painted this mural in 2013 on the west sidewall of the Thread City Diner on Main Street.





Above: This colorful mural is at the rear entrance to the Windham Area Interfaith Ministry, and can be seen from Riverside Drive.



Above: This mural is also visible from Riverside Drive. Riverside Drive runs behind the storefronts that front on the south side of Main Street. This mural adorns the back of The Bench Shop, and was painted by Brian Trainer c. 2015.



Above: The Harp of Church restaurant and Irish pub, on Church Street.



Above: This mural by Kacee O'Brien is titled "Jeff DeLuca," and captures the spirit of a longtime Willimantic resident and retired educator. It was part of the 2017 My Windham street art project. It is on the east sidewall of a Main Street storefront.

