

DOWN SODOM:

THE STORY OF A CONNECTICUT MILL NEIGHBORHOOD

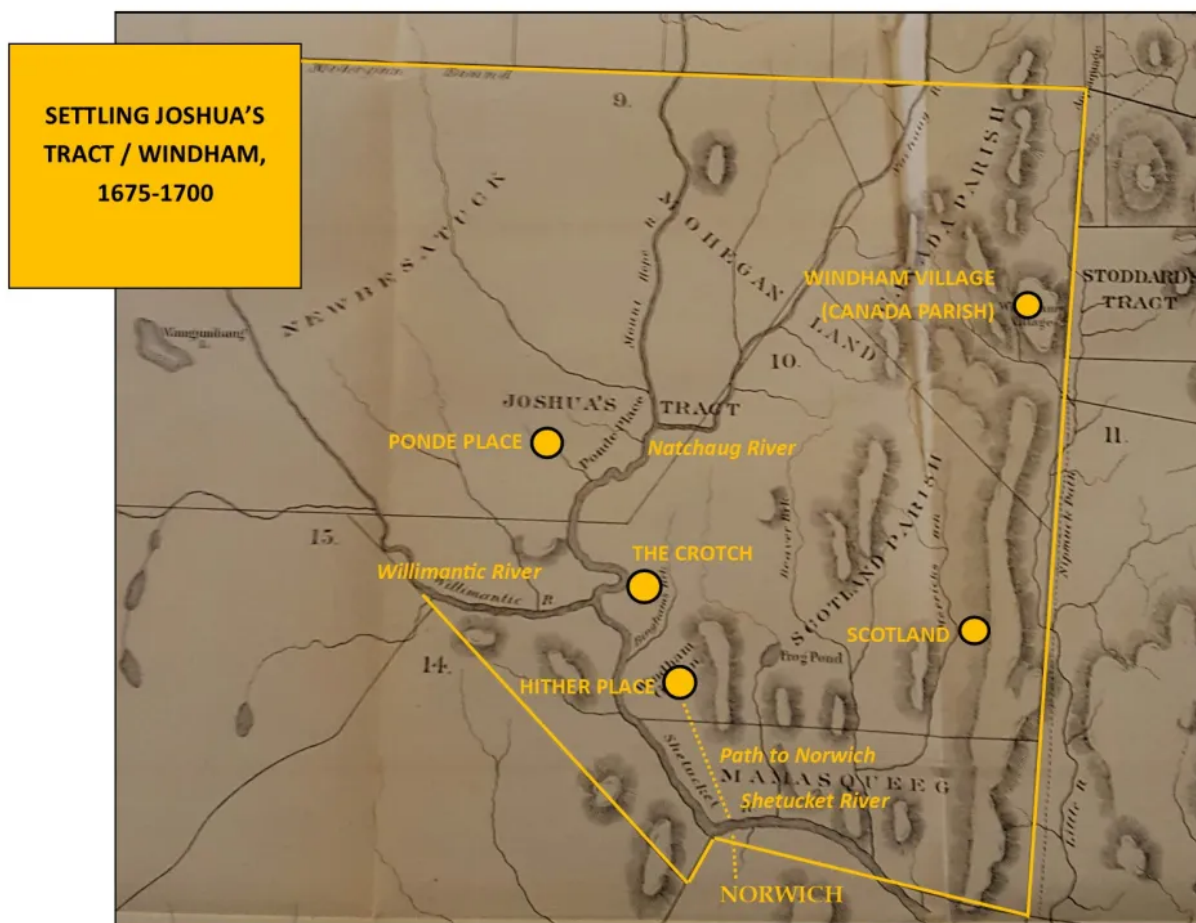
Jamie Eves

In 1866, the year after the Civil War ended, a well-heeled visitor from Providence, RI, visited the raw, young, boisterous mill city of Willimantic in eastern Connecticut. A potential investor in the city's expanding cotton mills, he wondered about the local geography: Willimantic was long and thin, straggling for two miles along the Willimantic River as it plunged through a narrow rocky gorge. "Too much warp and not enough weft," commented the visitor. The comment was picked up by a local newspaper, *The Willimantic Chronicle*, which explained that Willimantic was really an agglomeration of four different mill villages, strung out at intervals along the river. A long-time resident even remembered as a child learning a jingle to help him keep the names of the four villages straight: "Richmond Town, Jillson Hill, Leesburg, Tingleyville." The oldest of the four villages was Richmond Town, at the mouth of the gorge, where the Willimantic River met the Natchaug to form the larger Shetucket. Richmond Town was not an official name, though, and the village would go by other names over the years: the Crotch, Wellesville, and the one that would stick throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Sodom.

For generations people in Willimantic heading for the city's east end would say that they were going "down Sodom." By the middle of the 20th century, the phrase "Down Sodom" was used so commonly that it had metamorphosed into the name of the neighborhood itself. The history of Down Sodom – both the name and the neighborhood – is the subject of this essay. The essay will make two main arguments: First, early New England cotton mills and the residences and shops that grew up around them formed distinct local neighborhoods existing within larger towns and cities, and they maintained their identities over time. Second, names like Down Sodom signified the disapproval of the towns' farm and middle-class populations for the newly arrived working class people who resided in these neighborhoods.

Down Sodom is located on the north bank of the Willimantic River, beginning at its junction with the Natchaug and Shetucket Rivers on the east end and stretching westerly upriver about a quarter of a mile. Before 1820, the area was known as the Crotch, a reference to the confluence of the rivers, and was sparsely populated, mostly low-lying, prone to seasonal flooding, with thick clay soil. The Crotch lay at the bases of three hills, separated by the rivers. The hills were comparatively well drained, with light if stony soils that generally made for better farmland than the bottom land. The area was part of the town of Windham. When it was incorporated in 1692, Windham — like most 17th-century Connecticut towns — was sprawling, and included not only the present town but also what are now Mansfield, Chaplin, Hampton, and Scotland. Two principal nodes of settlement existed in 1690s Windham: Hither Place (named for its proximity to Norwich, to the south, from whence most of the early settlers had come, and today known as Windham Center), and Ponde Place (today's Mansfield Center in the town of Mansfield). The two settlements, Hither Place and Ponde Place, were separated by the Natchaug River, which was just

wide and deep enough to be difficult to ford. Townspeople thus authorized first a ferry and later a bridge at the Crotch. Because the Natchaug River formed a horseshoe-shaped, eastward loop, the bridge was called the Horseshoe Bridge. A few colonial families took up lots near the bridge, but the flooding and poor soil discouraged settlement. The Carey family owned a prosperous farm on the south-facing slope of one of the hills, and owned much of the bottom land as well.



Map of Joshua's Tract, which was incorporated as Windham in 1692. The Crotch was the area near the confluence of the Willimantic, Natchaug, and Shetucket Rivers. First a ferry and then the Horseshoe Bridge transported early residents across the Natchaug, connecting the early settlements of Hither Place and Ponde Place. Base map from Ellen Larned, *History of Windham County*, vol. I.

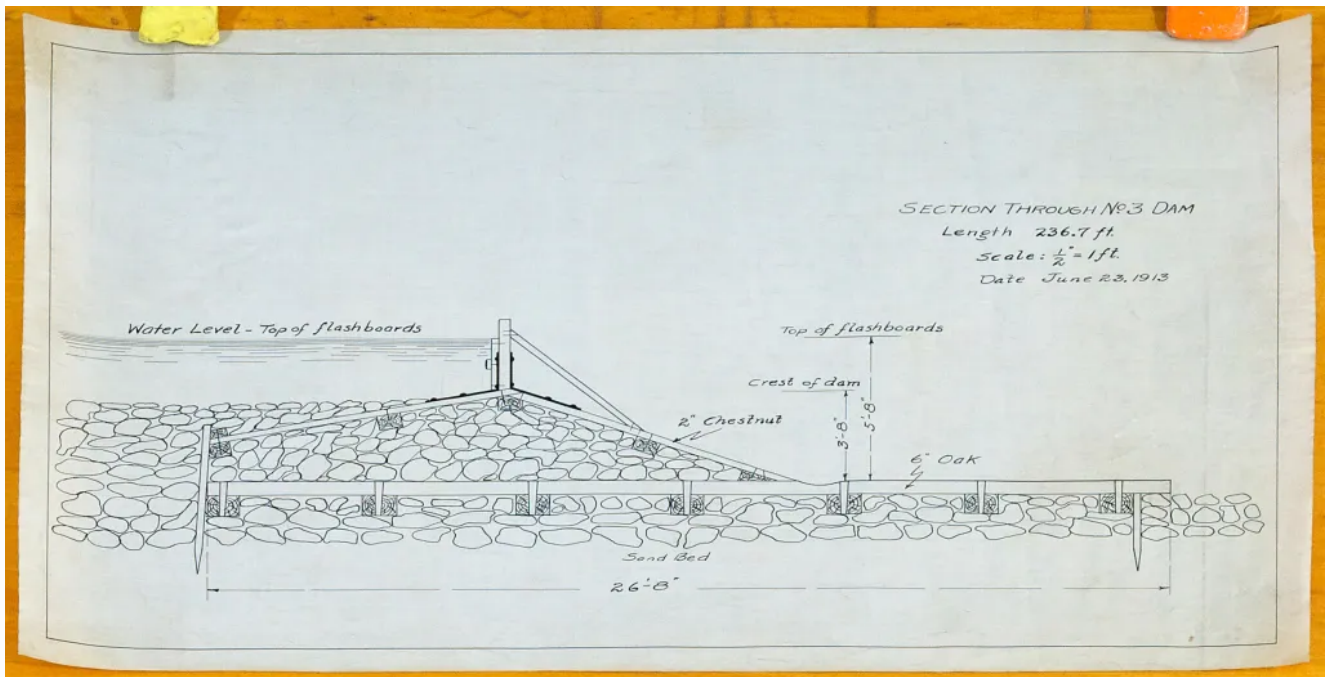
Junction of the Willimantic, Natchaug, and Shetucket Rivers, c. 1893. From The Willimantic Journal Souvenir Edition, 1893. From the collections of the Mill Museum.

In 1822 Perez O. Richmond, a Providence, RI entrepreneur, arrived at the Crotch to build a cotton mill. In February, Richmond purchased a small lot of land on the south side of the Willimantic River to anchor one end of a dam. In September, Waldo Carey sold Richmond five acres on the north side of the river for \$100. (Why Richmond waited seven months between the two purchases is unknown.) Richmond had a wood-and-stone dam built across the Willimantic to provide



waterpower. Years later in 1913, the then-owner of the dam, the American Thread Company, had it repaired. As part of the job, one of the Thread Company's engineers drafted a large, cutaway drawing of the dam. Based on the design, the Thread Company seems not to have rebuilt the dam to 20th-century standards, which would have meant using large, chiseled granite blocks and concrete. Rather, the drawing shows a wooden crib made of oak beams and planks filled with local stones and rocks, with a down slope made of

chestnut boards and chestnut flash boards on the crest – a design that was typical of 18th and early 19th-century dams. The dam was not high, less than six feet, with the crest rising only 3.8 feet from the bottom and the flash boards adding just another two feet. It was 236.7 feet long. It is likely that Richmond's dam had been of the same size and construction.



Engineer's diagram of Richmond mill dam in 1913, when it was part of the hydraulic power system for Mill #3. From the Mill Museum collection. Digital photo by Harrison Judd.

Richmond added a raceway connecting the mill pond to the mill, a wheel pit, a factory, and six "small tenements, all connected," according to Lloyd Baldwin, who arrived in Willimantic only a few years later and would have seen the layout firsthand. Today the ruins of the head race and sluice gates remain at the site, although most of the dam has washed away. The raceway is 20 feet wide and ten feet deep, with the sides lined with stones to prevent erosion. It is possible that Richmond's raceway was narrower and shallower, and that it – and the sluice gates – were enlarged by a later owner. The mill itself was constructed of wood and probably was not very large. Still, the little settlement formed a village, and people began calling it Richmond Town.



Remnant of Richmond mill dam, south bank of the Willimantic River (opposite bank from the mill). The top layer of quarry stone may have been added later. Photo by Jamie Eves.

Remnant of head race that once carried water to the Richmond mill. It may have been enlarged to these dimensions (20 feet wide and 10 feet deep) later, when it serviced Mill #3. Photo by Stephanie Conforti.

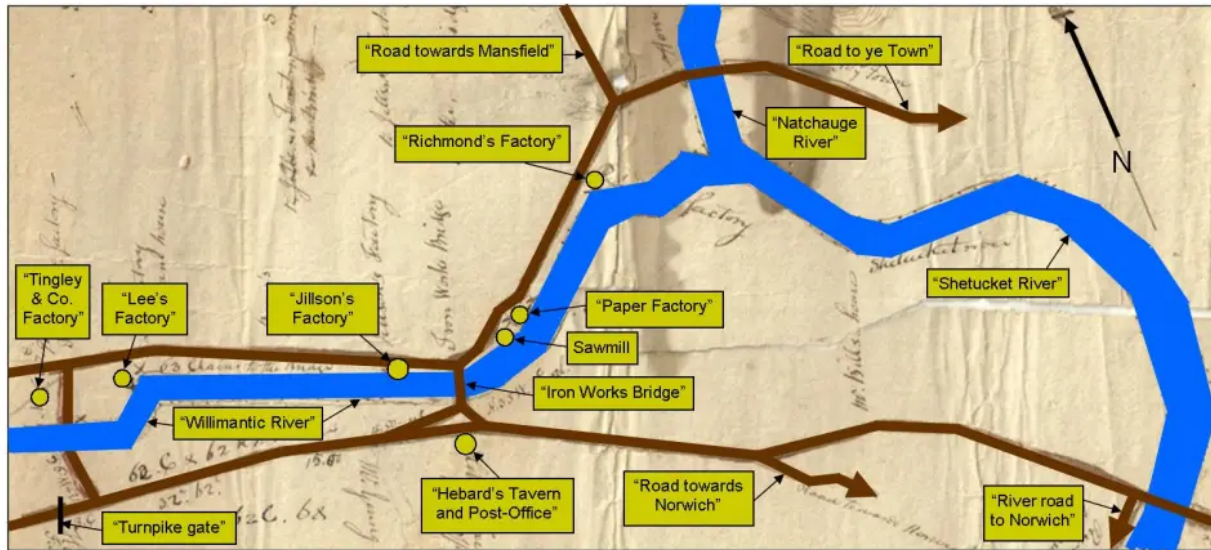


Raceway (canal) leading to Mill #3 (the former Richmond mill), c. 1905. From a postcard in the Mill Museum collection.

In 1827, Richmond sold the mill, tenements, and hydraulic system to Joseph Hawes, also from Providence. Hawes made extensive alterations, including repairs to the factory, additions to the six tenements, adding a large two-story boarding house for single workers (still in existence in 1895, according to Baldwin), and erecting a company store on the main road. Baldwin said that even then people in Windham had already started to call the little mill village Sodom. (Baldwin arrived in Willimantic in 1826, a 16-year-old journeyman carpenter hired to help construct another, much larger cotton mill at Willimantic, the granite Windham

Cotton Manufacturing at the other end of the gorge in Tingleyville. Tingleyville was named for one of the Windham Company's owners, who like Richmond came from Providence. Baldwin stayed on after the job was done, becoming an independent carpenter and contractor. In 1895, he wrote a detailed series of newspaper articles about early Willimantic for *The Willimantic Chronicle*.)

Not just Baldwin, but also Ellen Larned, a local historian writing in the 1870s and 1880s, agreed that the bustling little settlement had picked up the nickname Sodom by the end of the 1820s. Herself an old-stock Yankee, Larned empathized with the traditional middling New England farm population that dominated most of northeastern Connecticut in the early 1800s, and who were wary of the new working-class residents of mill villages like Sodom. "The few residents of the hitherto quiet valley were almost dazed by the onset," Larned wrote. "Chaos and confusion seemed to reign supreme for a time." Yet she also saw Sodom as a logical extension of the 18th-century business history of the Willimantic gorge, which had included a sawmill, gristmill, fulling mill, small gunpowder factory, and small paper mill – in addition to a tavern, which Larned termed a "grog shop" that "diffused a most lurid light."

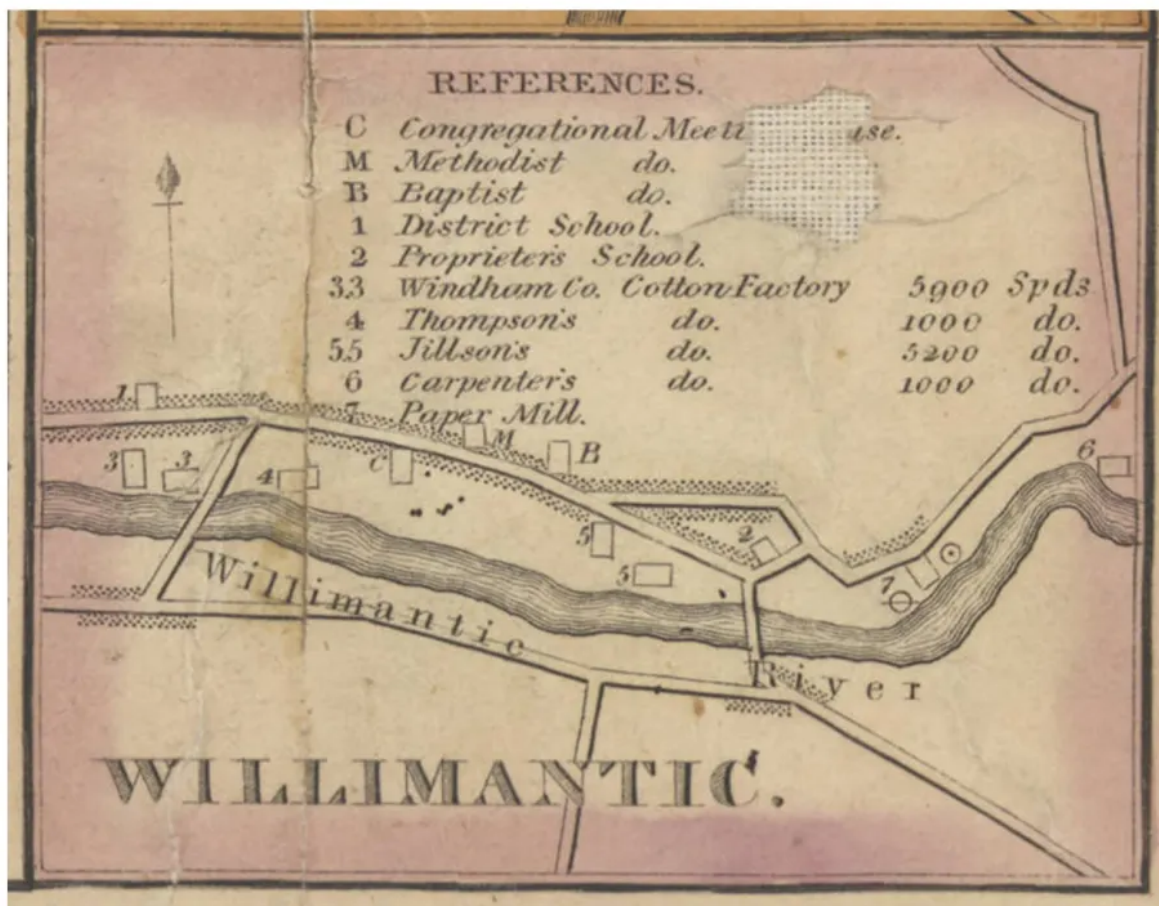


Willimantic c. 1830. From a hand-drawn map.

[Http://www.threadcity.com/gallery/thumbnails.php?album=55](http://www.threadcity.com/gallery/thumbnails.php?album=55). Appears to be a sketch preliminary to construction of the Bridge Street bridge over the Willimantic River. Enhanced for clarity.

This map was produced in 1833, the year Willimantic became a borough. It refers to the Richmond mill as the Carpenter mill. Perhaps Lorin Carpenter owned it at the time. That would explain why Carpenter, an entrepreneur from Providence, built himself a cottage near the mill. Map from the Mill Museum collection.

There are or were other places named Sodom in Connecticut. Arthur H. Hughes and Morse S. Allen, in *Connecticut Place Names* (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1976) list eight, although only one of them appears on 21st-century maps. One of those Sodoms was in Stamford, so named "because of the Sabbath-breaking mill-workers there." Another was in Windsor, which got its name "because 'Universalism' infidelity ... had so deteriorated the character of Poquonnoc that it was familiarly spoken of ... as Sodom." A third – the only one still on modern maps – was a crossroads in North Canaan; no one knows how it got its name. In addition to the eight Sodoms listed in *Connecticut Place Names*, there is also a Sodom Lane in Derby, another Sodom Lane in Orange, a Sodom Hill in the Flanders neighborhood in East Lyme, a Sodom Road in Stafford, a Sodom Brook in Meriden, and another Sodom Road on the Franklin/Norwich town line. The last once connected rural Franklin to the former mill village of Yantic in Norwich. Place names are notoriously idiosyncratic, their meanings almost always of local origin and reflecting local ideas and perceptions. Doubtless, not all of Connecticut's Sodoms were named by traditional Yankees alarmed at a sudden influx of industrial workers. But at least three of them probably were. In Willimantic today, local folks are divided about the origins of the name. People growing up in the 1960s recall being warned by their elders not to go "Down Sodom," because of the many bars and



taverns in the neighborhood. A few others, including the author of this article, have hypothesized that the name originated earlier, among 19th-century Protestant Yankees who worried about a mid-1800s influx of Irish Catholic immigrants. But the earliest Irish arrived in the 1840s, and the bars, taverns, and saloons, came even later – and both Baldwin and Larned were pretty clear that the name Sodom was applied earlier, in the late 1820s or early 1830s. (The “grog shop” to which Larned referred was not in Sodom, but in another part of Willimantic.) Based on this evidence, the most logical interpretation is that it was the sudden influx of industrial workers into their community that accompanied the creation of Richmond Town that made people apprehensive. But whatever the object of local folks’ displeasure – industrial workers, immigrants, Catholics, or saloons – there was something about the neighborhood of which they did not approve.

Over the next eighteen years the old Richmond mill changed ownership several times. One of the owners was a man named Welles from New York, and the village came sometimes to be called Wellesville. At some point the mill was destroyed by fire and remained idle for a while. In 1845, according to Baldwin, a partnership led by Austin Dunham, a Hartford, CT merchant, acquired the mill property. Dunham had grown up nearby, in Coventry, CT, before moving to Hartford as a young man to seek his fortune. The partnership also included Col. William Jillson, the co-owner of another cotton mill elsewhere in the Willimantic gorge, in the village of Jillson Hill. Jillson had originally come from Dorchester, MA. The third partner was Capt. John H. Capen. Capen was a machinist, not as affluent as Dunham or Jillson, but skilled at his trade. Capen had come to

Willimantic from Dorchester in 1826, along with Jillson. When Jillson switched his own mill from manufacturing textiles to making textile machinery, Capen became the manager. Jillson's and Capen's military ranks were militia ranks; neither had served in the regular army or seen any combat. Unlike Dunham, who remained in Hartford, Jillson and Capen had settled in Willimantic and become local leaders. Capen bought a house in Sodom, the so-called "Carpenter cottage" built in 1833 by Lorin Carpenter, another Rhode Islander with "manufacturing interests." When Carpenter moved on to Illinois a few years later, Capen acquired the cottage and made it his home. The three partners hired Lloyd Baldwin, by then an experienced contractor who had built numerous homes, stores, churches, and other structures, to rebuild the Richmond mill. Baldwin oversaw the construction of a much larger factory, a three-story wooden building with an elegant mansard roof. Baldwin wrote that the partners had retained the business name Welles Manufacturing Company, and that the neighborhood continued to be known as Wellesville as well as Sodom. The company manufactured cotton warp, but was not financially successful.



Aerial photograph of part of Down Sodom c. 1960s, showing Main Street. The house at the top right is the Carpenter cottage, built in the early 1800s by Lorin Carpenter and owned for most of the 19th century by John Capen.

Sodom in 1860, after Austin Dunham had bought out his partners William Jillson and John Capen, and renamed the mill the Dunham manufacturing Company. With the mill cycling through so many



owners and names, calling the village Sodom provided a more permanent name for the area. Map from the Mill Museum collection. Photo by Harrison Judd.

In time Dunham bought out his partners Jillson and Capen and in 1860 sold the operation to the Willimantic Linen Company, which he owned with another partner, Lawson Ives. Despite its name, the Willimantic Linen Company (WLC) manufactured cotton thread. Dunham and Ives (who was also from Hartford) had formed the company in the 1850s, and at first manufactured thread in the old Jillson mill, which they had purchased. In 1857, the WLC erected a large, new granite mill next to the Jillson mill. Expanding rapidly, the WLC needed more manufacturing space. In 1863, it constructed an even larger thread mill nearby, also of granite. Acquiring the mill in Sodom gave the company even more factory space. The old Jillson mill became known as the Spool Shop, the two granite mills were called Mill #1 and Mill #2, and the wooden mill in Sodom was now dubbed Mill #3. By this time, the four little mill villages in the Willimantic gorge had long since fused together to form a single city, uniting politically in 1833 as the borough of Willimantic. Sodom was no longer a mill village, but a bustling mill neighborhood on the east end of a growing industrial city.



The Welles or Dunham mill, built in 1845 by Lloyd Baldwin. It was renamed Mill #3 when the Willimantic Linen Company acquired it. Photo from the Mill Museum collection.

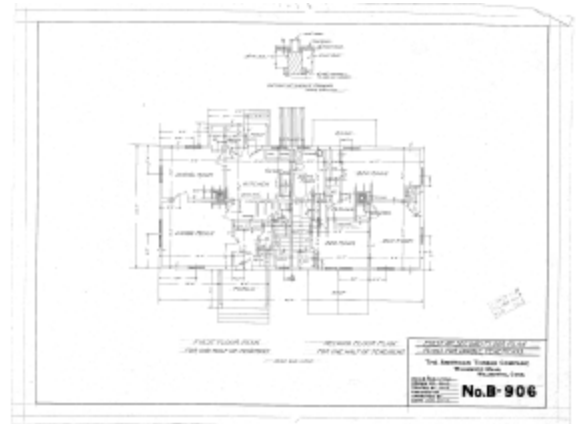
As Down Sodom grew, it gradually assumed a more urban geography and character. The earliest buildings were the mill itself, set back from the main road; six tenements; and a store on the main road. By the 1860s the main road had become the eastern extension of Willimantic's two-mile long Main Street. The Horseshoe Bridge marked the eastern end of both the borough of Willimantic and of Main Street. The old lane leading off Main Street and into Mill #3 had become Factory Street. The old country road that led north towards the town of Mansfield was renamed Ash Street. A new road, Natchaug Street, now branched off Ash Street and headed northeast over the Natchaug Bridge. At the corner of Main and Ash, Samuel Hill, a local entrepreneur, built the Hawthorne House, either a boarding house or a hotel. later, Giddings Keyes bought the Hawthorne House from Hill, and then even later sold it to Joseph Rollinson. Capen continued to reside in the old Carpenter cottage. Capen died in 1890. The house, with its distinctive gambrel roof, remained until only a few decades ago, when it was demolished. Just east of Capen was the residence Scott Smith, a carpenter and joiner who, back in the 1820s, had been a fellow apprentice of Lloyd Baldwin. Smith had purchased the one-story house from Andrew Baker. It had probably been there even before the mill, as Baldwin called it an "old landmark." An 1869 map shows three more houses at the corner of Main and Ash Streets, an office building near the mill, and tenements on both Factory and Main Streets. The map also shows an unnamed street running from Main Street to the mill along the raceway, which is now labeled a canal. The land between Sodom and the WLC's Mill #2 to the west was by 1869 filled in by the Model Village, also known as Iverton (named for Lawson Ives), several blocks of worker

row houses and a boarding house constructed in the 1860s to serve the now massive Willimantic Linen Company. In time, people began to think of Iverton as part of Down Sodom.



Floor plan of worker row house, Model Village (Iverton). From the Mill Museum collection.

A two-family row house today. Photo by Jamie Eves.



In back of worker row houses, Model Village (Iverton). From the Mill Museum collection.

Willimantic burgeoned in the Gilded Age, the last quarter of the 19th century, and Down Sodom continued to grow along with it, becoming even more urban in character. As 1897 map shows two new streets, Elm Street and Brook Street, branching off Main and leading north into a neighborhood of tightly packed houses occupied

mostly by mill workers. Willow Street now connected Main and Natchaug Streets, and Adelbert Street linked Ash and Willow. Mayo and Lafayette Streets were new, too, near the Horseshoe Bridge. Chapman Street ran parallel to Main, to the north, linking Iverton to Elm and Brook Streets. Several small shops and stores were on the north side of Main Street. Unlike the larger, grander commercial buildings in Willimantic's downtown, which by law were required to be constructed of fireproof brick or stone, these were mostly small wooden structures, crowded together. There was a big addition to the Down Sodom neighborhood, though: the Windham County Fairgrounds, located on the low, wet, marshy ground where the Willimantic, Natchaug, and Shetucket Rivers met. The Willimantic Linen Company had created the Fairground, with its oval racetrack and wooden grandstand, as an example of industrial paternalism, signaling its central role in the local economy. Altogether, Down Sodom was a tightly packed triangle of mostly low land on the east end of Willimantic, bounded by the Willimantic River to the south, the Natchaug River to the east, and the tracks of the New York and New England Railroad to the north. Crowded tenements, row houses, and cottages provided homes for the mostly working-class residents. The neighborhood was crisscrossed with a series of open ditches, which had once been intended to be canals carrying additional water from the Natchaug River to Mill #3, but those plans had never worked out. The ditches did help drain off some of the low area's excess

water, but flooding also occasionally occurred, and the ditches probably were not sanitary. Low, wet, noisy, smelly, and adjacent to factories, a fairground, and a railroad – Sodom would not have been attractive to affluent middle-class residents, who instead built their homes in neighborhoods like Prospect Hill and Pleasant Street.



Down Sodom in 1897. The Model Village (Iverson) is on the left. Map from the Mill Museum collection.



Detail from a 1915 insurance map of properties owned by the American Thread Company, showing Down Sodom and the Model Village (Iverton). From the Mill Museum collection.



Willimantic Fairgrounds. Photo courtesy of Peter Zizka.

Willimantic Fairgrounds. Photo courtesy of Peter Zizka.



Willimantic Fairgrounds, 1907. Photo courtesy of Peter Zizka.

In 1898, the Willimantic Linen Company was purchased by an international conglomerate, the American Thread Company. ATCO continued expanding the factory complex. The WLC had already, in 1880, added Mill #4, a gigantic brick structure on the other side of the Willimantic River, designed for electric lights and steam power. ATCO added Mill #5, Mill #6, and several more

structures, belching coal smoke just upwind of Down Sodom — and dumping dyes and other industrial contaminants into the Willimantic River just upstream. In comparison to these new, large, modern structures, Mill #3 was small and inefficient, and — made of wood — too vulnerable to fire. ATCO demolished it shortly after World War I. By that time, the Windham County Fairgrounds, too, had closed, the result of a notorious betting scandal. Mill #3 was replaced by an electric generating plant, and the Fairground by Recreation Park, which ATCO deeded to the City of Willimantic. (Willimantic had transitioned from a borough to a city in 1896.) The new park featured a baseball diamond, a tennis court, and various playing fields, a center of activity for the working class residents of Down Sodom. ATCO sponsored mill baseball teams that vied against each other for local championships.



Ice skating at Recreation Park, early 20th century. From the Mill Museum collection.



Baseball game at Recreation Park, early 20th century. From the Mill Museum collection.



Swimming

hole on the Natchaug River, early 20th century. Postcard from the Mill Museum collection.



Despite its reputation, Down Sodom was not really a neighborhood of saloons, taverns, and bars. A survey of the 1903, 1920, and 1936 Willimantic city directories reveals that of the approximately 20 saloons, bars, and taverns located in the city in each of those years, very few were in Down Sodom. (Most were located in the more upscale downtown.) In 1903, there were only three saloons in Down Sodom, in 1920 again only three, and in 1936 there were five taverns — three on Main Street and two in Iverton. The largest of these establishments, located at the

corner of Ash and Main Streets, was for many years owned and operated by Salveni Cardinal. The central triangle where Main, Ash, and Willow Streets met came to be called Cardinal Square.



Cardinal's saloon at Cardinal Square in the center of Down Sodom. Contrary to its reputation, Down Sodom only had a few saloons, bars, and taverns, most of which were located instead in Willimantic's downtown. Photo courtesy of Peter Zizka.

Other businesses in Down Sodom in 1936 included two trucking companies, a bottling company, four grocers, two gas stations, a barber shop (owned by the Gamache family and still in business), and a shoe repair shop. Most of the business owners had “ethnic,” non-Anglo names: LaFrance, Obara, Rabinowitz, Bergeron, Cardinal, Klapik, Desrossiers, Gamache, Mathot, and Brettschneider. Down Sodom remained throughout the 20th century mostly a working-class residential neighborhood, as it still is today. Its reputation as a place of sin and debauchery, never an accurate depiction of life in Down Sodom, reflected more the prejudices of the local middle-class and farm populations than reality.

Flooding at Cardinal Square during the 1938 hurricane. Photo courtesy of Tony Clark.



Horseshoe Bridge, looking west into Down Sodom, c. 1970. Photo courtesy of Peter Zizka.



Flooding at Cardinal Square during the 1938 hurricane. Photo courtesy of Peter Zizka.

