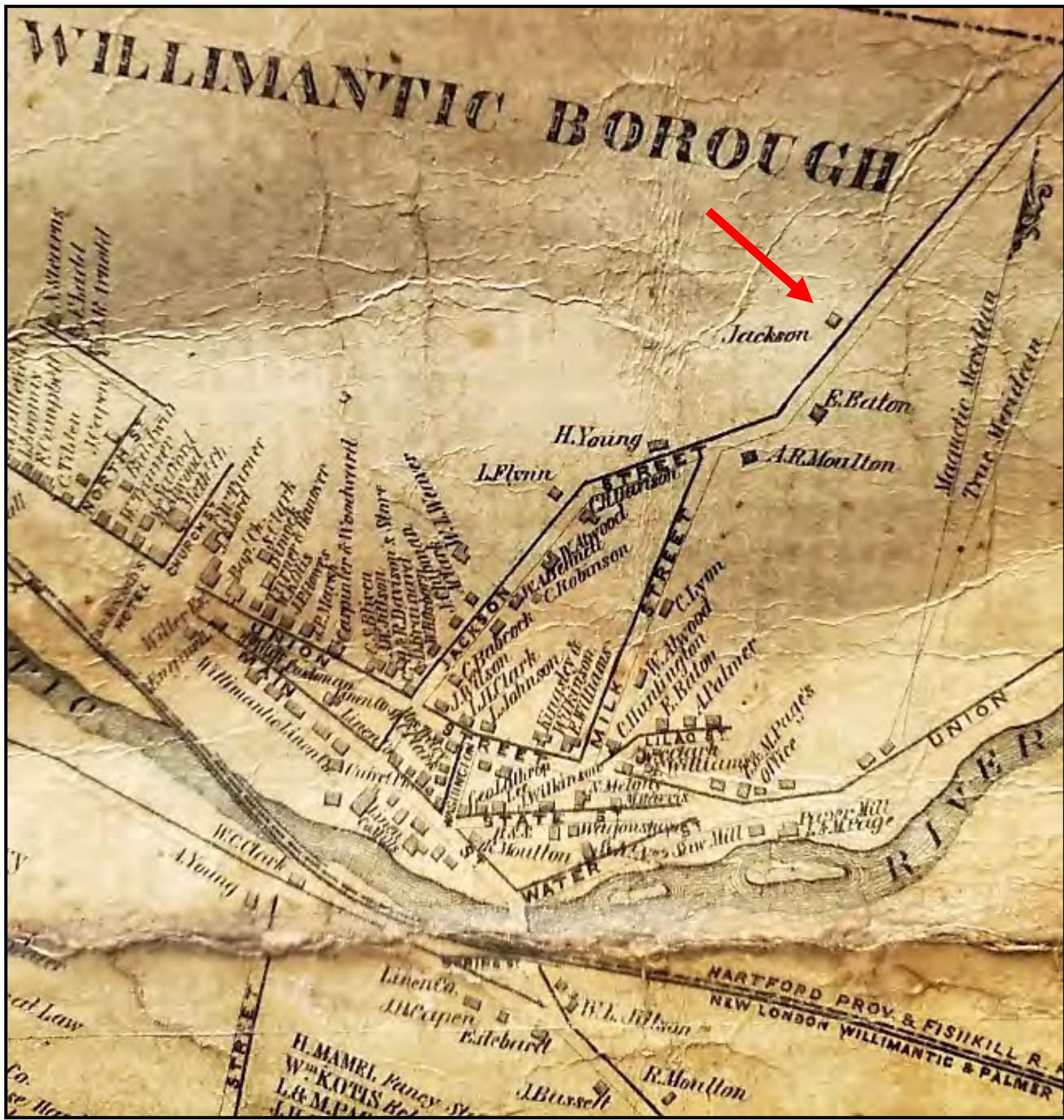




RECONSTRUCTING LIVES



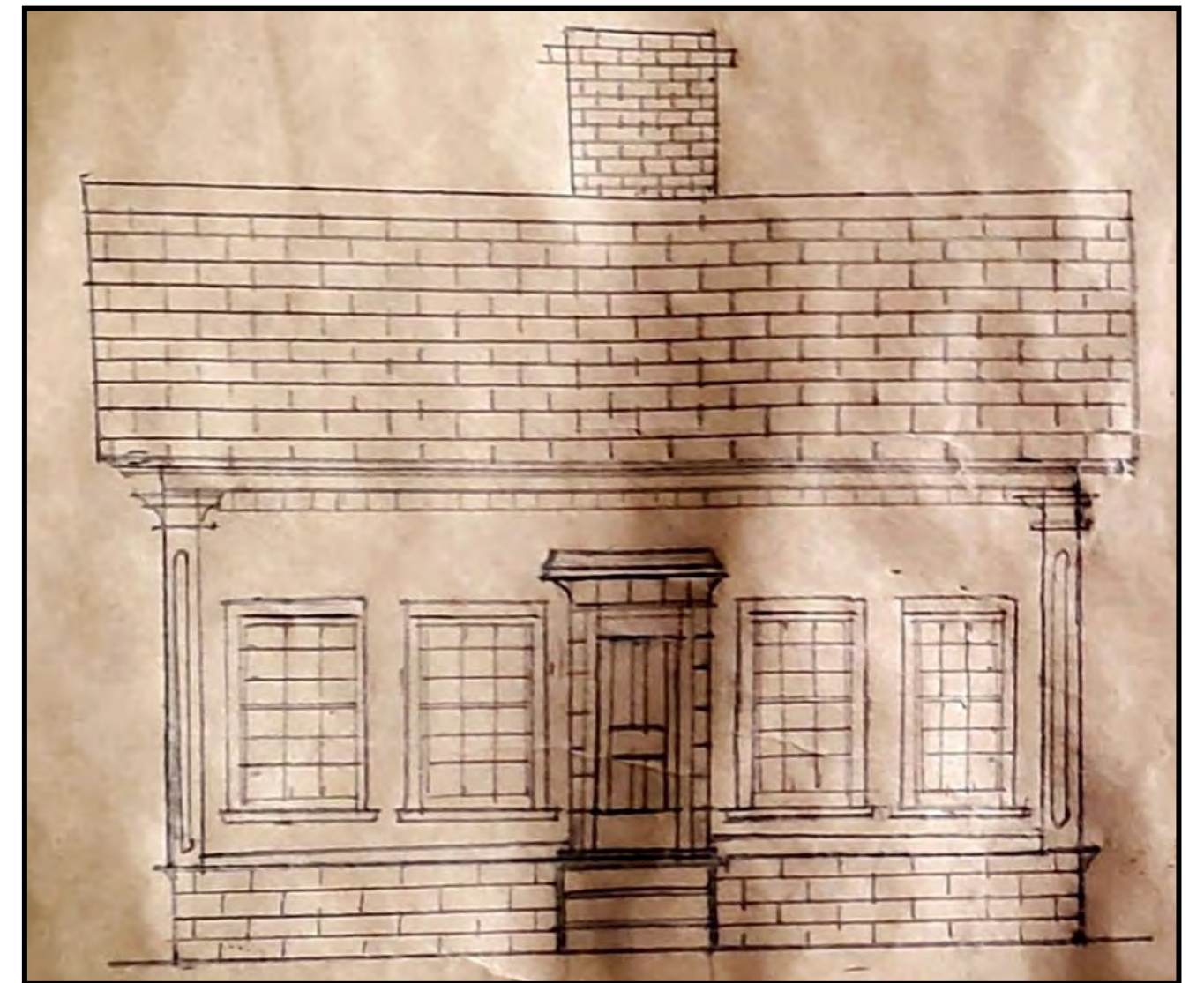
WILLIMANTIC'S JACKSON FAMILY

The extent and limits of Reconstruction in Connecticut can be illustrated by the Jackson family of Columbia and Willimantic. The Jacksons became visible enough that one of Willimantic's main streets was named after them. They were liked and respected by their white neighbors. Yet, they lived on the edge of the city, both literally and figuratively. Residents of an industrial center, they found no place in the factories and shops of the Thread City. Although moderately successful, they did not achieve wealth. They contributed to Willimantic's permanent landscape – the name of a street that is still a major thoroughfare, a house that still stands, gravestones in the city cemetery – but eventually moved away, no longer able to find a place in an industrializing community.

Left: Detail from an 1855 wall map of Windham County, CT, showing both Jackson Street and the Jackson home in Willimantic. (E. P. Gerrish, W.C. Eaton, D. S. Osborn, and H. C. Osborn, surveyors, "Map of Windham County, Connecticut" [Philadelphia: E. M. Woodford, 1856]. The survey was conducted in 1855.)

Right: Pencil sketch of the Jackson house as it appeared in the 1860s. Drawn by John Little Leonard, a Willimantic druggist and florist, in the late 1800s. (Lucy Crosbie Collection, Windham Textile and History Museum.)

Lower Right: The Jackson House as it appears today.



One of the main streets in Willimantic, CT, is named Jackson Street, for Lyman Jackson and his family, who lived in a house on the street. The name was applied sometime between the mid-1830s, when the Jacksons moved to Willimantic from nearby rural Columbia, and 1855, when the name appeared on a wall map of Windham County. The name is remarkable for two reasons. First, Jackson Street was one of only two streets in antebellum Willimantic to be named for a person or persons; the other was Washington Street, a minor street named for the country's first President. Willimantic's other streets had generic early 19th-century names: Main, High, Union, Pleasant, Water, State, North, South, Milk, Church, River, Spring, etc. And second, Lyman Jackson was a quiet, humble, African American cabinet maker who by law held no political office, cast no votes, and paid no direct taxes, not the sort of person that normally has a street named for him. Later, in the Gilded Age, Willimantic's residents would name several streets after people, but usually they were land developers or factory owners. We know that Jackson Street was named for Lyman Jackson because two well-connected, politically potent, 19th-century residents who knew Jackson and who lived in Willimantic when the street was named said so: Lloyd Baldwin, a Democrat, successful contractor, Mason, and Odd Fellow, and William Weaver, a Whig, school teacher, newspaper publisher, and town clerk. Who was Lyman Jackson, and why would a street be named for him?

Lyman Jackson was a free man, but not a powerful one. Connecticut's 1818 State Constitution had stripped Black men of the right to vote or hold office, even if they owned property. And Jackson did not own property. He rented his house, from which he conducted his small business, and where he likely did some farming.

Lyman Jackson died in Willimantic, CT, on Dec. 22, 1858, a few days before Christmas and a few years before the Civil War. He never knew an America that did not have slavery, nor a Connecticut where Black people had legal equality. His simple marble headstone on the side of shady, grassy slope in the Old Willimantic Cemetery says he was 62 years old when he died, which means that he was born around 1796, when George Washington was President. His childhood is a mystery: he doesn't appear in any official records until Jan. 23, 1823, when he was 27. On that day, in Lisbon, CT, he married Lisbon resident Clarissa Buck, who was 24. Both Lyman and Clarissa were recorded by the Lisbon town clerk as "Black."

Unlike Lyman, Clarissa's birth was officially recorded, in the town records of Preston, CT. She was born on Dec. 25 in 1799, the eldest child of Gurdon and Martha Buck, who resided in Preston at the time. Clarissa's father, Gurdon Buck, had been born around 1777 in Griswold, CT, during the tumultuous years of the American Revolution. Her mother, Martha Moody was born in 1774. Martha was the daughter of Pico Moody (1745-1828) and Abigail Walley Moody (1745-1790). When Martha came to have children of her own, she named her elder daughter after her deceased older sister Clarissa, and her younger daughter for her departed mother Abigail. It was one of the few ways she would have had to make sure they were remembered, to make sure that her own children knew who their grandmother and aunt were, to leave a record of them, even if only within the family. Although Abigail Moody had died before Clarissa Jackson was born, Pico Moody lived until 1828, when he was 83. Did Clarissa spend time with her grandfather? Did he tell her stories of the days of the American Revolution?

Shortly after Lyman Jackson and Clarissa Buck married, they moved away from Preston and to the northern part of the town of Lebanon, CT – a neighborhood know as North Crank, which later broke off and became Columbia, and which bordered on Willimantic. Their eldest daughter Cynthia was born in 1826, Rachel in 1827, Simeon in 1829, and Sarah in 1830. The 1830 Census recorded the family as living in Columbia, where most likely they were farmers. Another daughter, Hanima, was born in 1832, and another son, Andrew, in 1843. The 1840 Census showed them living in Willimantic, a large, bustling household of nine free Black people headed by Lyman. The family continued to grow. Daughter Martha was born in 1843, and Mary came in 1845.

After Lyman died in 1858, Clarissa and the children remained in Willimantic only for a short while. The 1860 Census records her as the head of household, living in the family home in Willimantic, along with younger daughters Martha and Mary, and her nephew James Buck. Older daughter Rachel also still lived in Willimantic in 1860, at 32 a live-in servant in the large home of cotton mill owner John Tracy and his wife Delia. But by 1870 the entire family had left. Rachel moved to Norwich, a large river port city to the south. The 1870 Census records her as the wife of Lewis C. Willard, almost 40 years her senior, an African American gardener. Lewis died around 1880 from paralysis. The 1870 Census also recorded another person living in the Willard home: C. C. Jackson, 70 years old with no recorded occupation. This almost certainly was Clarissa. Clarissa was not present in the Willard household in 1880, most likely having passed away sometime between the two Censuses, well into her 70s. Rachel, widowed in 1880, remarried in 1890 to Loren Brooks, who was African American. She does not seem ever to have had any children. Simeon had moved out either before or shortly after his father died. In 1860 he was living in Norwich, a live-in servant in the home of three elderly white women surnamed Huntington. In 1865, Simeon married Nettie F. Scott, an African American woman. They continued to reside in Norwich. Simeon and Nettie would have three children, a son and two daughters. Simeon's occupation was recorded in 1860 as laborer. Clarissa, also living in Norwich at the time, thus would have had the chance to know her grandchildren, just as her grandfather Pico had known her.



Left: Gravestones in the Jackson family plot in the Old Willimantic Cemetery, Willimantic, CT. From left to right: Lyman Jackson; Lyman's father-in-law Gurdon Buck and mother-in-law Martha Buck; Lyman's sister-in-law Abby Buck; and Lyman's daughter Hamina Jackson. Lyman's wife Clarissa Buck Jackson, the other Jackson children, and Abby's son James Buck moved away and are buried elsewhere.