

John Ashbel Conant: Mill Worker, Abolitionist, Prohibitionist, & Conductor On The Underground Railroad

By Jamie Eves • July 27, 2020



John A. Conant, one of three Willimantic/Mansfield-based conductors on the Underground Railroad identified by Horatio Strother in his seminal *The Underground Railroad in Connecticut*, was in many ways a typical New England abolitionist. Of humble origins and old Yankee stock, he was born in 1829 in the rural hamlet of Chaffeeville, in the town of Mansfield, a hilly agricultural community bordering Willimantic on the north. His father, Lucius, was a small farmer who, just a few years later, moved the family to the village of Gurleyville, also in Mansfield, to take a job as overseer in a small silk mill. The Conants had lived in Mansfield for generations. In later years, after he became a successful businessman, Conant (or his children, for he died two years before the book was published in 1920) gave his biography to Allen B. Lincoln (1858-1941), a Willimantic businessman, attorney, and amateur historian, for inclusion in Lincoln's two-volume *Modern History of Windham County, Connecticut*. He provided detailed information about his family history, tracing his roots all the way back to 1620s colonists at Plymouth and Salem, Massachusetts. The deeply religious and highly principled Conant seems to have identified strongly with his Calvinist forebears, whom he likely saw as role models, dedicated zealots who had risked everything for their cause. That's the kind of person that he wanted to be, too.

Despite his traditional Protestant Yankee background, Conant grew up during an age of great change and upheaval, a time when challenges to social and political norms were becoming commonplace. It was the 1830s and 1840s, the early years of the Industrial Revolution and the age of Jacksonian democracy. While some New England farmers still struggled to wrest their living from the thin, worn-out soil of hillside farms that had been worked for too many generations, enterprising men with surplus capital to invest were building the nation's first textile factories. Conant's hometown of Mansfield figured prominently in these changes as the birthplace of America's silk industry. Modernizing farmers planted mulberry trees and raised silk worms, and forward-thinking millers spun silk thread in several small, inexpensive-but-innovative, one-room millhouses. People Conant knew well — his father, his uncle Joseph Conant, several of his Gurleyville neighbors, and other members of his extended family — moved from traditional semi-subsistence farming to silk, including the related Hanks family that built America's first silk mill. It was only natural that Conant would join them. As he moved haltingly towards adulthood, it would be silk, not farming, that became his career.

Like many other marginal Yankees, Conant moved around a lot, living in several locations and with a number of different people. In 1839, when he was 10, and two years after Orrin Robinson took part in the Methodist Melee on Main Street, Conant was sent to live with his mother's brother, a farmer in Tolland, CT, probably as an informal apprentice, a common arrangement. In 1843, when he was 14, he returned to his father's house in Gurleyville, and the next year he went to work as a laborer in the silk mill where his father Lucius was overseer. In 1845 Conant left Gurleyville to work for O. S. Chaffee, a prosperous Mansfield farmer who also owned a silk mill, in Chaffeeville, where Conant had been born. Then, two years later, in 1847, he switched employers again, taking a job as a jack spinner in another small Mansfield silk mill. He didn't stay long, returning to Chaffee's mill in 1848. Then he moved again, later that year, to work in a small silk mill in Atwoodville, another Mansfield hamlet.

Working in textile mills, even small ones like those in Mansfield, was physically demanding and potentially incapacitating, and in time the work caught up with Conant. He became chronically ill. In 1849, at the age of 20, he left Mansfield, a world of poor hilltop farms, extended Yankee families, and small mills, and traveled to the growing textile city of Rockville, to take work as a jack spinner at the large American Mill. For the first time in his life, Conant was exposed both to urban life and to the dangers of the larger mills. The silk industry was in depression, many of the small Mansfield mills that had opened two decades earlier were now closed, and Conant probably felt lucky just to have a job. But in 1851 he became sick. Nothing in the historical record identifies the illness, but it seems to have recurred several times during his life, on each occasion forcing him temporarily to quit mill work. Considering the era, his need for extended recuperation, and the fact that nineteenth-century textile mills were notorious for their choking clouds of lint and fabric dust, a good guess is that he had developed some sort of lung ailment. As Conant lived to the age of 89, it probably wasn't tuberculosis. But it might have been brown lung, a typical disease for industrial spinners. Perhaps it was his recurring bouts of illness and convalescence that inclined Conant to deepen his religious faith, which became increasingly fervent with time.

Far from affluent, in these years Conant lived on the margins of society. After recuperating for a few months, in 1852 Conant got married, and two years later his first child was born. Sick or not, he now had a family to support and he had to go back to work, first at a silk mill in Mansfield Hollow, then away from Mansfield as a spinner in Broad Brook. Once again his health failed, but after a short convalescence he was back at work in Gurleyville, this time as an overseer. After his son was born, Conant moved again, this time to Hartford, where he once more took up mill work. In 1865 he attempted to break away from the mills and purchased a farm in West Hartford, but he couldn't make a go of it. In 1857 Conant moved yet again, to Waterford, CT, where he took a job as the manager of a marginal silk mill. When this mill went out of business in 1859 — the same year that his mother died — Conant remained in Waterford, finding work as an overseer in a hoop skirt factory. That job didn't last long, either, and Conant soon moved on to mill jobs in Waterbury and Ellington.

For the young Conant, the years 1843-60 were years of spiritual and political development. Somehow, he found the time to become involved in antislavery activity in Willimantic, where according to Strother, he became a conductor on the Underground Railroad, guiding escaped slaves from one station to the next on their way to freedom in northern New England or Canada. Like other conductors, Conant kept quiet about his activities, even in later years. Yet his involvement seems to have been real. Although Conant did not reside in Willimantic until after the Civil War, for eight crucial years — from 1843 to 1849 (when he was aged 14 through 20) and 1852 through 1854 (when he was aged 23 through 25), he lived only a few miles away in next-door Mansfield. Especially during the tumultuous years of 1852-54 — when Conant was married, returned to Mansfield, and fathered a son; and when the Compromise of 1850, Fugitive Slave Act, Kansas-Nebraska Act, and publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by former Connecticutian Harriet Beecher Stowe roiled the nation and inflamed many New Englanders — Conant might easily have traveled the few miles from Mansfield Hollow or Atwoodville to Willimantic to join in antislavery activity. Tellingly, it was precisely then, in 1852, that the 23-year-old Conant voted in his first Presidential election, casting his ballot for Free Soil Party candidate John Parker Hale, an antislavery United States Senator from New Hampshire.

Conant continued to be associated with social and religious reform throughout the 1850s and the rest of his life. After voting for the Free Soil Party in 1852, he joined the fledgling Republican Party in the mid-1850s, attracted by its antislavery wing. But the Republicans, he thought, became increasingly hidebound as time went on, and he left the party in 1872, after the Civil War, to join the Prohibitionist Party. In 1884, although still a strong temperance advocate, he left the Prohibitionists for the reconstituted American Party, with its platform of nativism and opposition to Freemasonry and other secret organizations that, Conant believed, promoted “idolatry.” Although probably raised a Congregationalist, Conant was an early convert to Methodism, which was the antislavery church in Willimantic. Did he join the Willimantic Methodist church when he lived in Mansfield Hollow, only a few miles away? Perhaps. There was no Methodist church in Mansfield at the time, and the church in Willimantic was closest. He later reconverted to Congregationalism, and in 1881 helped found the First Berean Church of Willimantic, a radical Protestant church. Antislavery, temperance, nativism, antimasonry, and radical Protestantism were often linked in the tumultuous years before the Civil War. They seem to have been in Conant, too.



Few of Conant's friends and neighbors accepted his radical political and religious views. But many tolerated and respected him as a man of principle, even if his principles were sometimes a little hard to swallow. Allen Lincoln probably spoke for many when he eulogized Conant two years after his 1918 death: "He ever stood conspicuously for reform, progress and improvement, strongly opposing all those agencies or elements which he believed were detrimental to the best interests of the individual and of the country at large. Though men differed from him in opinion, they always respected his integrity and his loyalty to his honest convictions. Life was to him purposeful and earnest and every obligation was bravely met and faithfully performed." Like many abolitionists, Conant was an idealist, a hard man to like and an even harder man to vote for, but an easy man to respect.

Conant did not serve in the Union army when the Civil War began in 1861, probably because he was too busy supporting his family and possibly also because of his chronic illness. Instead, he continued to work a series of peripatetic jobs in silk mills — jobs that probably didn't pay very much. His second son was born in 1861, but tragically died the next year. In 1863 his wife Caroline also died. The wandering Conant and his son returned to Mansfield, where he joined his brother David (who did go off to fight) in owning and operating a small silk mill. He remarried in 1864, to Marietta French Brown, a widow with a child of her own. When his and David's mill failed, Conant took a job in yet another Mansfield silk mill. Then, in 1865, life changed forever for both Conant and the country. The Civil War ended, and Conant secured a job as an overseer with the large Holland Silk Company factory in Willimantic. He worked his way up in the company to superintendent. He fathered two more sons, in 1866 and 1869. No longer constantly inhaling the lint-filled air of the mill floor, his health stopped deteriorating. Conant retired from the Holland Company in 1907, when he was 78. He died in 1918, prosperous and respected.

