

**“A RESPECTABLE, QUIET COLORED CITIZEN”:
LYMAN JACKSON (1796-1858), AFRICAN AMERICAN
CABINET MAKER, AND CLARISSA BUCK JACKSON (1799-c.
1875), AFRICAN AMERICAN WIFE AND BARBER**

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Shortly after I moved to Willimantic, CT, in the summer of 1988, I learned that one of the former Thread City’s main streets was named Jackson Street. Each day, I rode the bus along Jackson Street between my apartment in Willimantic and the University of Connecticut campus in Storrs, where I was a graduate student. While walking one day with my five-year-old, teaching him the streets of his new home town, he asked if Jackson Street had been named for Jesse Jackson, an African American candidate for President that year. I told him no, the street doubtless had been named a long time ago, before Jesse Jackson had been born. Maybe, I guessed, it had been named after President Andrew Jackson. As it turns out, Jackson Street was named for neither Jesse Jackson or Andrew Jackson, but for Lyman Jackson, an African American cabinet maker who, in the 1830s, ’40s, and ’50s, had lived in a small house set back from the street with his wife Clarissa and children Cynthia, Rachel, Simeon, Hamina, Sarah, Andrew, Martha, and Mary, his father-in-law Gurdon Buck, his mother-in-law Martha Buck, his sister-in-law Abby Buck, and his nephew James Buck. The story of the Jackson family and Jackson Street is a story of agency in history, a reminder that even people with little power leave footprints. It is also a story about how precarious life was for people of color in 19th-century Connecticut, and a story about becoming visible.

It is extremely unusual that one of Willimantic’s main streets was named for an antebellum Black man and his family. Like all people of color in pre-Civil War Connecticut, Lyman Jackson was neither wealthy nor powerful. He was not a major land owner, a town founder, a military hero, or a political leader, the sort of men who most typically have had streets named for them. He led no revolution, established no records, and wrote no books. His white neighbors remembered him as living quietly — almost invisibly — at the margins of local society. On the surface, he was one of the least powerful and least influential people in town. He gave no speeches, sat on no juries, cast no votes, held no office, owned no land, and paid no direct taxes. Although a citizen, he had fewer rights than his white neighbors. The Connecticut State Constitution, approved in 1818, had reserved the right to vote for white men only. Although he lived in a cotton mill town, Jackson neither owned a mill nor worked in one. Indeed, for a century after his death in 1858, most of Connecticut’s textile mills employed only white workers. Jackson’s modest marble gravestone in the Old Willimantic Cemetery is small, weather-worn, and easy to miss. In the decade following his death, Jackson’s wife, children, and nephew all moved away.

Yet, three 19th-century primary sources agree that Jackson Street was named for Lyman Jackson. Lloyd Baldwin, writing in the 1890s but a resident of Willimantic from 1826 to 1895 and a contemporary of Jackson’s, noted the origin of the street name, adding: “Mr. Jackson was for

some years a resident on this property.... He was a respectable, quiet colored citizen, and with his family enjoyed the confidence and respect of the community in which they resided.” William Weaver, Willimantic’s first local historian as well as a school teacher, town clerk, and newspaper publisher, and whose own house was on Jackson Street only a few doors down from Lyman Jackson’s, wrote in an 1865 newspaper article that Jackson Street was named for Lyman Jackson, calling him a “worthy colored man.” John Little Leonard, a late-19th-century Willimantic florist and pharmacist, sketched in pencil on brown wrapping paper many of Willimantic’s houses and other buildings, including the “Mr. Jackson” house, with the annotation, “the street was named after him.”

Although not numerous, men and women of color did live in the mill towns and farming communities of northeastern Connecticut in the 18th and 19th centuries. Evidence of their existence can be hard to find, though, and takes some digging. Consequently, it is easy today to forget that they were here, contributing to the communities in which they lived, helping to build Connecticut. For too many years, Connecticutans of color were elbowed to the margins of society. Unless white writers wanted to talk about slavery, or provide some comic relief, they generally left Black Americans out of literature, movies, and television. A few years ago, when I taught an undergraduate course in African American History at Saint Joseph College in West Hartford, the class examined the absence of people of color in pre-1970s American movies and television. One student, an older African American woman, chuckled and told me sarcastically, “Professor, don’t you know that there *were* no Black people before 1960?” This article attempts to rectify that omission, to put people of color back into Connecticut history, where they were all along. This is Lyman and Clarissa Jackson’s story. It is also the story of Jackson Street in Willimantic, a story of agency, a story about becoming visible, and a story about remembering.

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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 a 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 mostly 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. Although Connecticut town clerks didn’t record the racial identities of white people in birth, death, and marriage records, they often noted them for people of color, describing them variously as “black,” “negro,” “colored,” “molatto,” “Indian,” or “mustee.” Both Lyman and Clarissa were recorded by the Lisbon town clerk as “black.” It was a world in which race mattered, and people of color were seen as “different.”



Lyman Jackson's weathered marble gravestone in the Old Willimantic Cemetery.

A lot more is known about Clarissa's side of the family than Lyman's. Her birth was duly recorded in the town records of Preston, CT, a town near Lisbon. She was born on Dec. 25 — Christmas day — in 1799, the eldest child of Gurdon and Martha Buck, who resided in Preston at the time. (Names like Lyman and Gurdon sound strange to us today, but they were fairly common for both white and Black men in Connecticut in the late 1700s and early 1800s.) Clarissa's birth record noted that she was Black, as were her parents.

Clarissa's father, Gurdon Buck, had been born around 1777 in Griswold, CT, during the tumultuous years of the American Revolution. (His gravestone in the Old Willimantic Cemetery gives his dates.) Her mother, Martha Moody (also buried in the Old Willimantic Cemetery), was three years older, having been born on Sept. 4, 1774. Martha was born in Preston, the daughter of Pico Moody (1745-1828) and Abigail Walley Moody (1745-1790). Pico and Abigail — Clarissa Jackson's grandparents — had had a hard time with their children, and death had been an all-too-frequent visitor: four of the eight Moody children had died before their 20th birthdays. The eldest, Clarissa, had died in 1789 at the age of 18. Johnson was only two when he died in 1775. Another Johnson was just eleven when he passed away in 1787. Jedediah was two when he died in 1785. And Marshall was two when he passed away in 1788. Only Martha, Thaddeas (1780-1853), and Nancy (1790-1832) made it to adulthood. Martha's mother, Abigail (Clarissa Jackson's grandmother), had herself died young, in 1790, only 45, probably from complications with the birth of her last child, Nancy. The loss of so many family members must have been felt keenly. 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. It was

a way to reinforce her family's historical identity, to remind future generations of Moodys and Bucks that their ancestors had been in Connecticut for a long time.

Unlike Martha Moody Buck, Gurdon Buck's parents are not known. Although he was born in Griswold, he may have been baptized on April 12, 1778, in Wethersfield, CT, so perhaps he had kin living there. Gurdon was living in Preston when he married his first wife, Rhoda (1776-98), in 1795. However, Rhoda died after only three years of marriage and Gurdon rewed — a common practice for the time — marrying Martha Moody in Plainfield, CT. The town clerk recorded that both Gurdon and Martha were Black. Like many propertyless people, Gurdon's life was peripatetic. He was born in Griswold, baptized in Wethersfield, married in Plainfield, and settled in Preston. He would continue to move — to Lisbon, then to Canterbury, and eventually to Willimantic, where he died in 1842.

In addition to Clarissa, Gurdon and Martha Buck had two other children, a daughter Abby (1808-1850) and a son Alvan (b. 1813). When Gurdon Buck died in 1842, aged 72, he was in Willimantic, where he had probably come in his old age to live with his daughter and her family. Gurdon was buried in the old Willimantic Cemetery. His stone is near Lyman Jackson's, on the same grassy hillside. It has fallen over, and lies nearly flat on the ground, face up. Abby and son Alvan are buried nearby, their plain marble stones so weathered with time as to be mostly unreadable. Martha's name is carved onto Gurdon's headstone: although she died in 1851 in Andover, CT, it seems that she was brought to Willimantic for burial.

Although Martha Buck's mother 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? A number of African American men from Connecticut had fought on the patriot side in the Revolutionary War, enduring hardships in order to achieve freedom and equality for themselves and their country. Had Pico known any of them? Had he been a patriot himself? As is so often the case, there are more questions than answers.



Gravestone of Gurdon and Martha Buck,
Old Willimantic Cemetery.

While we know a fair amount about Clarissa's side of the family, Lyman's is more of a mystery. When Lyman and Clarissa recorded their marriage with the Lisbon town clerk in 1823, Lyman said he was a resident of Stonington, CT. Yet, he does not appear in the 1820 United States Census as living in Stonington — nor anywhere else, for that matter. The absence is not unusual. Until 1850, the federal Census recorded only the names of the heads of households, meaning that children, servants, enslaved people (and there were still slaves in Connecticut as late as 1848), boarders, lodgers, and most women appeared only as anonymous hash marks in various categories of age, gender, race, and servitude. Very likely, the young Lyman Jackson was one of those hash marks, living in someone else's household. No one with the surname Jackson was recorded as living in Stonington in 1790, 1800, 1810, or 1820, but if his parents were enslaved or free servants living with an owner or employer, they would not have been recorded by name. There were Jacksons living in New London at that time, but none of them was Black. There was a free Black family named Jackson living in Lisbon, headed by David Jackson, Sr. Could David Jackson have been related to Lyman? Was it through David that Lyman met Clarissa, who also lived in Lisbon?

There is another link to Lyman's origins. I met Carol Harris, who now lives in Willimantic — but who grew up in the nearby rural town of Lebanon — who was told as a child that she was related to Lyman Jackson. She knew the location of the Jackson house in Willimantic, which still stands, and told me where it is. One of Carol Harris's ancestors was Jane E. Jackson of Lebanon, a Black woman who married George Peckham, who was Narragansett, in 1854. Jane Jackson was born c. 1829 and died in 1861. Jane's father was Timothy Jackson, who was also Black. Timothy Jackson's gravestone in the Lebanon Center Cemetery records that he was born in North Stonington, CT, in 1804 and died in Lebanon in 1886. North Stonington separated from Stonington in 1807. As Lyman and Clarissa Jackson moved to Lebanon shortly after they married, and as Lyman said at the time of their marriage that he was from Stonington, there is a good chance that Lyman and Timothy

Jackson were related, perhaps brothers. If Lyman and Timothy were brothers, then Lyman's and Clarissa's children would have had cousins nearby in Lebanon to visit and to socialize with.

African Americans in early Connecticut sometimes had difficulty finding marriage partners. In 1820, they comprised only 2.9% of the state's population. Interracial marriages with whites, while they occurred, were not the norm. African Americans did marry Native Americans, but they were even less numerous. Lyman Jackson had to go far afield to find a wife. It is also notable that Black kinship networks spread across long distances in eastern Connecticut.

We do know that there were African Americans named Jackson living in southeastern Connecticut during the 1600s and 1700s, any of whom could have been kin to Lyman. The best known is John Jackson (c. 1668-1737), enslaved in the West Indies and transported to New London in the late 1600s. John Jackson was born either in Africa or the West Indies, and English was not his first language. He was known for his determination to free himself, his wife, and his children. Part of his campaign to make himself free was his insistence on selecting his own name. Unlike most enslaved people in 17th-century Connecticut, whose names were given to them by their enslavers (and hence were considered "slave names"), John Jackson chose that name himself. He married Joan, a Connecticut-born enslaved woman whose mother had been brought to New London from the West Indies a generation earlier, and whose father had been an anonymous English colonist. John and Joan Jackson had many children, the best known of whom was Adam Jackson, enslaved by Joshua Hempstead and mentioned repeatedly in Hempstead's well known (to historians) 18th-century diary. Although John Jackson succeeded in freeing himself and Joan, he was less successful with his children, most of whom remained enslaved into the 1700s. It is possible that Lyman Jackson was descended from John and Joan Jackson. It is also possible that he was not. To read more about John and Joan Jackson — and about race and slavery in southeastern Connecticut in the colonial era — I recommend the wonderful *For Adam's Sake: A Family Saga in Colonial New England* (2013) by Allegra di Bonaventura. See also James M. Rose and Barbra W. Brown, *Tapestry: A Living History of the Black Family in Southeastern Connecticut* (1979).

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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 known as North Crank, which later broke off and became Columbia, and which bordered on Willimantic. Their eldest daughter Cynthia was born in 1826, either in Lisbon or in Lebanon. Their second daughter Rachel was born in 1827 in Lebanon. Their third child, Simeon Chapman Jackson was born in 1829, followed by Sarah in 1830. The 1830 Census recorded the family as living in Columbia, then an almost totally rural community, where most likely they were farmers at least part of the time. 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 colored persons headed by Lyman. And the family continued to grow. Daughter Martha O. (named for her grandmother, Martha Moody Buck) was born in 1843, and their youngest child, Mary, came in 1845. Unlike Clarissa's parents, who had chosen family names for two of their three children, other than their

daughter Martha, Clarissa and Lyman preferred biblical names. Did this choice reflect deep religious feelings? Did they just like the sound of the names? Was it an attempt to fit in with the dominant white Yankee culture? Again, there are more questions than answers.

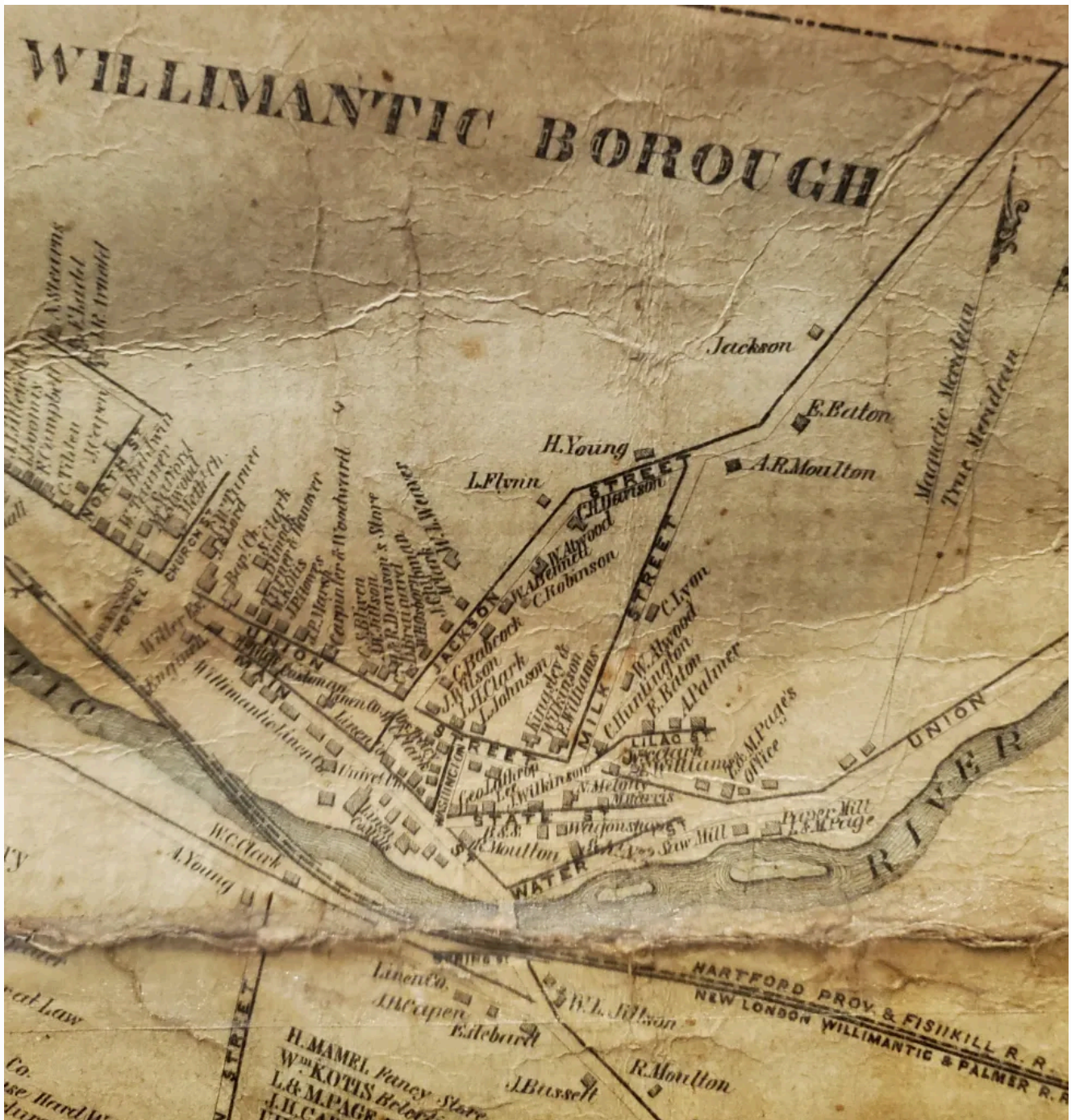
It was a large family in an era of large families. What was unusual is that none of the children died in infancy, and only one — Hanima — in their teens. Hanima died on May 11, 1848, at the age of 16. She was buried in the family plot in the Old Willimantic Cemetery, her headstone only a few feet from that of her grandfather Gurdon Buck, who had passed away just six years earlier. Altogether, Clarissa gave birth to seven children over 19 years — from 1826-45 — starting when she was 27 and continuing until she was 46, and survived each birthing.



Hamina Buck's gravestone in the Old Willimantic Cemetery.

The Jacksons seem to have prospered in Willimantic. The 1850 census listed Lyman as a cabinet maker, a skilled trade. He must have been a valuable member of his community, with wealth enough to afford a home of his own and several plots and headstones in the public cemetery. These were not paupers' graves: they were bought and paid for. Lyman also made enough money to be able to take in his sister-in-law and her small child, and probably his elderly father-in-law and mother-in-law as well. Clarissa contributed to the Jackson family economy in multiple ways: the 1850 Census recorded her occupation as barber. There is a question about whether or not the family owned their home. In the 1890s, Lloyd Baldwin, a local historian, scoured the Willimantic land records for their deed, eventually concluding that the Jacksons had been tenants of Deacon Samuel Hill, a major landowner. But according to Carol Harris, family tradition holds that Lyman Jackson owned their home, but was swindled out of by Deacon Hill. And Baldwin was clear that other people in Willimantic also thought that Lyman owned the house, backing up family tradition. If true, this was not the first time in northeastern Connecticut in which a person of color was cheated out of their property by powerful whites. Baldwin believed that the Jackson house sat on a thirty-acre lot, indicating that the family probably farmed in addition to making

cabinets and barbering. It would not have been the best farmland — the lot swept up the stony east slope of Prospect Hill — but it would have added to the family's competency.



The Jackson house still stands, a modest one-and-a-half story wooden structure on a back lot, half hidden behind a larger, newer apartment house. What was the outskirts of Willimantic in the 1840s is now very much “in town,” a moderate-density residential neighborhood comprised primarily of rental units, close to the commercial center. That the building is the Jackson house there can be no doubt: not only is it in the same location as indicated on 19th-century maps, but it closely matches Leonard’s pencil sketch of the “Mr. Jackson” house, and furthermore was identified by Carol Harris.



John Little Leonard's pencil sketch of the "Mr. Jackson" house, as it looked in the 1860s. "The street was named after him," Leonard noted.



The Jackson house today.

Naming a Willimantic street after a person was unusual in the early 1800s. Naming one for an ordinary person was unique. There were plenty of new streets in Willimantic to name, but almost all of them were given generic names like Main Street, Church Street, Union Street, High Street, and Pleasant Street. When the Jacksons moved from rural Columbia to urban Willimantic in the 1830s, they moved into a growing young mill city on the rise. Willimantic was located in the northwestern part of the town of Windham, in the gorge of the Willimantic River. Steep, granite

hills rose on both sides. The river itself tumbled over several rapids and waterfalls, descending more than 90 feet in less than a mile, providing enough power to drive four cotton mills. The mills were new, having been built in the 1820s, when the Jacksons had been living in Columbia. As mill workers and others with urban crafts and skills flocked to the expanding city, the population burgeoned. In 1833 Willimantic was “citified” enough to incorporate under a new state law as an urban “borough” within the town of Windham. A former turnpike had metamorphosed into a wide Main Street, paralleling the Willimantic River on the north. A second turnpike, on the river’s south bank, became Pleasant Street. A panoply of new side streets branched off Main and Pleasant: Bridge Street, South Street, Water Street, State Street, Lebanon Street, Washington Street, West Street, School Street, High Street, River Street, North Street, Church Street, Union Street, Jackson Street, Milk Street, Hampton Street, and Lilac Street. Most of the street names were typical post-revolutionary New England street names. But Jackson Street stood out as different. The only other street in antebellum Willimantic named after a person was Washington Street. Jackson Street was laid out sometime after 1833 and before 1855, and quickly became the principal thoroughfare leading north out of the mill city to neighboring rural Mansfield. Shown on an 1855 county map, the Jackson home was not located downtown, but on the outskirts, on the slopes of Prospect Hill, on the 30 acres rented from Samuel Hill. One possibility is that Jackson Street was called Jackson Street because it was the road that led out to the Jackson home on the outskirts of the city, a visible landmark at a bend in the road. Naming roads for where they went was an old Connecticut custom, and Willimantic’s Lebanon and Hampton Streets are examples. But they carried the names of neighboring towns, not individuals or families. In Willimantic, Jackson Street was unique.

Why, then, name a street — and a major one — for Lyman Jackson and his family? For sure, Baldwin and Weaver had described him as being “quiet” and “respectable,” but there were lots of other quiet, respectable people in Willimantic that did not have streets named for them. Was it *because* they were Black, and Black people were becoming more visible in the antebellum period? The Jacksons were not the only African American family living in the town of Windham. But they did live very close to one of the most important, talked about events to occur in 1830s Willimantic, the decade the Jacksons moved there from Columbia. In Willimantic, as elsewhere in New England, abolitionism emerged as a powerful and controversial new force. In 1837, Willimantic’s newly organized Methodist Episcopal Church, which counted a number of abolitionists among its members, invited the Massachusetts abolitionist Amos Phelps to speak. An anti-abolitionist mob attached the Church and, in a spirited fistfight that spilled out onto Main Street, the Methodists fought back, an event I have called the Methodist Melee on Main Street. It is not known whether Lyman and Clarissa Jackson were associated with the Methodist Church (although, if they were church-goers, it would have been the logical one for them to attend), but they lived nearby, and some of their neighbors — Orrin and Jerusha Robinson and Calvin Robinson — were members. While it is not likely that the advent of abolitionism in Willimantic had a direct impact on the naming of Jackson Street, it may very well have contributed to making the Jackson family more visible in the community. Whatever the reason for the naming, it signaled that Black Connecticutans were becoming more visible.

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Besides Lyman, Clarissa, and their children, the Jackson household also included Clarissa's younger sister Abby Buck, and Abby's small son James Buck. Abby had never married, and it may be that Clarissa took in her sister in 1846, either just before or after she became an unwed mother. Gurdon, their father, died in Willimantic in 1842, so it is likely that he and Martha had moved in with Clarissa and Lyman sometime shortly before he died. Perhaps Abby came with him, along with Clarissa and Abby's brother Alvan, who died in Willimantic in 1842, the same year as his father, and was also buried in the family's hillside plot in the Old Willimantic Cemetery. Abby died in 1850 and Martha in 1851, and they too are buried in the same plot. Abby's son was thus left motherless at the age of four. He continued to reside in the Jackson household, where undoubtedly he was raised by Clarissa and Lyman. Who was James Buck's father? Years later, in 1875, when James was living in Boston, he married Nellie Cunningham. He and Nellie had to give the names of their parents to the Boston City Clerk's office. Only the first names of the parents of the bride and groom were recorded, not their surnames. (The assumption at that time was that the parents of the bride and groom had the same last names as their children.) James gave his father's name as "Andrew." Could it have been Abby's nephew and Clarissa's younger son, Andrew Jackson? Perhaps. But Andrew was only eleven years old when James was conceived — possible, but not likely. Besides, Lloyd Baldwin had referred to the Jacksons as a "respectable" family, and incest would not have been considered respectable at all. And there is another piece of evidence to consider. Throughout his life, James was always recorded as "colored" (including during his service as a soldier in the Civil War), as was his wife Nellie. But James and Nellie's only child, James Buck, Jr., would as an adult be classified in the United States Census as "white," and he married a white woman. If James Buck, Jr., was "passing," he must have been very light complexioned. Was the "Andrew" who sired James, Sr., then, a white man? More questions thus arise without answers.



Gravestone of Abby Buck,
Old Willimantic Cemetery.

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After Lyman died in 1858 at what was for the time the ripe old age of 62, Clarissa and the children remained in Willimantic only for a short while. The 1860 Census, taken two years after Lyman's death, records her as the head of household, living in the family home in Willimantic, along with teen-aged younger daughters Martha and Mary, and young James Buck, who was 13. Older daughter Rachel also still lived in Willimantic in 1860, at 32 a live-in servant in the large, elegant home of cotton mill owner John Tracy and his wife Delia, wealthy white folks. But by 1870, during the tumultuous Civil War Era, 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, having moved in with her daughter. 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 also 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. The other children have been harder to find and have disappeared into the mists of history.

Except, that is, for Clarissa's nephew, James Buck, whom she raised. He left Willimantic around 1864, when he joined the 31st United States Volunteer Infantry (Colored) to fight in the Civil War. He seems never to have come back to Connecticut, moving first to Boston, and then eventually settling in Manhattan. But he is another story, to be told elsewhere.

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What can we conclude about the Jacksons and other people of color in early 19th-century Connecticut? First and foremost, they were there. They were marginal but not invisible — white folks in Willimantic knew who they were, where they lived, and even named a street after them. They became invisible later, erased from history. The name Jackson shows up on old maps, as the name of a street, and on gravestones in the Old Willimantic Cemetery. But unless one goes looking, digging into government records, there are few indications that they were people of color. It becomes easy to forget that people of color were here in Connecticut all along and helped build the mill towns, as farmers, laborers, cabinet makers, barbers, and good neighbors. Lloyd Baldwin would call them respectable and quiet. Perhaps it was safer that way, to be quiet. Racism was a powerful force, and people of color had few legal rights they could count on. The Jacksons had neither money nor power to protect them. They were part of the community, true, but also on its outskirts, both included and on the edge.