

[Eric Weber](#)
Admin · 19 hrs

In addition to the somber anniversary of the World Trade Center, Pentagon and Shanksville, PA terrorist attacks of 2001, September 11 is the birthday of a man with a somewhat infamous name in Williamsburg: Onslow Gross Spelman (1821-1905), born in Granville, MA. He came to Williamsburg before 1843 and married (1st) about 1850, Harriet B. **Sears** (1827-1887) of Goshen. She was the mother of his three children, the first and last dying in infancy. He m. (2nd) in 1889 in New Haven, CT, Mrs. Olive (**Merrill**) Guild (~1837-1923) of New Haven, born in Shelburne Falls. Olive bore no Spelman children.

After working briefly in Josiah Hayden's pen factory, Spelman went into the button business under Downing Warner Graves as general manager of the latter's factory. He built his North Main Street mansion in the French Empire style in 1864. Later he rented and then bought a button factory just above the East Main Street bridge, which was the first mill demolished in the Mill River Disaster of May 16, 1874. His reported incredulity about the dam's failure was widely believed to have delayed George Cheney by several minutes in spreading word of the flood before it reached Williamsburg, and he was subjected to a great deal of ill will by survivors who had lost loved ones and property. His obfuscations and dodges at the inquest after the flood further inflamed local sentiment against him.

The 1880 census of Wmsb. called him a "retired button manufacturer." He had rebuilt the mill in partnership with someone else, but he sold his interest in it in 1882 and became president and general manager of the Textile Manufacturing Co. of Westfield. His obituary called him "one of the wealthiest men in Williamsburg" when he died in 1905, at the age of 83. At left in the photo below is the roof structure of Spelman's button factory, where it came to rest in what is now the front yard of 3 Valley View Road. It had been carried several hundred feet by the flood. Triangulated of heavy timbers, it was by far the strongest part of the building, and it remained intact while the

walls beneath it were smashed and swept downstream as part of the flood's immense debris load.

The Society has no portrait of Onslow Spelman.

