

New column to explore Windham region's rich history

Editor's note: Today marks the return of Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian who served as scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum. "The History Column" will appear on Thursdays.

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By TOM BEARDSLEY
Special to the Chronicle

Welcome to the History Column. Each week we will be taking a look at everyday historic events in Andover, Ashford, Brooklyn, Canterbury, Chaplin, Columbia, Coventry, Eastford, Franklin, Hampton, Hebron, Lebanon, Mansfield, Scotland, Wellington and Windham.

The column will also take a closer look at the background stories relating to programs and events at historical societies, museums and libraries located in those towns. So, there will be plenty to hold the inter-

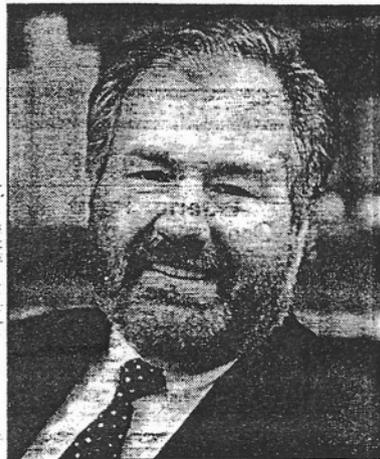
est of history buffs and the general reader alike.

If readers wish to contribute any interesting historical tidbits, call me at 450-1604. I'll be particularly interested in publishing old photographs from the area.

Several years ago I contributed a weekly column to *the Chronicle* called "That Was the Week That Was in Windham," which looked at local events 25, 50, 75 and 100 years ago. The response was excellent, revealing the deep interest local residents have in their rich history.

The History Column will spread its wings and include a much wider region. Next week we will take a closer look at the work of the Samuel Huntington Trust in Scotland, which is keen to develop an research center in the birthplace of America's first president.

Windham and Willimantic will not be overlooked. How-



Tom Beardsley served as the Windham Textile and History Museum's scholar-in-residence and co-director for five years.

could they be? They were at the center of most of the economic, cultural and social events in the area. For example, this year marks the 100th anniversary of the opening of Windham's town hall and the

90th anniversary of the Willimantic footbridge.

Despite the growing importance of Willimantic after the Civil War, its mayors, officers and selectmen had to meet in a wide range of buildings in rented offices and buildings ranging from silk mills to the Hayden Block — which is currently being remodeled by the Fleet Bank. So it was a great event when the state-of-the-art town hall was opened a century ago. We will take a closer look at the 1896 building and its opening later this year, around the actual anniversary.

The opening of the footbridge in November 1906 was the culmination of a long political struggle and a series of amusing events, which we will explore closer to the anniversary. The footbridge owes its existence to some highly skilled maneuvering from the city's Irish-American politicians.

I am originally from Yorkshire, England. Each year family and friends come and visit my wife and I here in the colonies. I give them a tour of the area, and everyone notices the names of the towns — because, back home, there's an Andover in Wiltshire, an Ashford and Canterbury in Kent, a Coventry in Warwickshire, a Hampton in Middlesex, a Mansfield in Nottinghamshire. Willington derives its name from Wellington in Somerset. And there's a small village in Sussex, called Windham, and a town in Norfolk called Wymondham. From time to time, I'll include some information about those ancient English towns, which have donated their names to this beautiful section of Connecticut.

Please remember that this is also your column. I'll be delighted to hear from you. See you next week.

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