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## Mills, Mill Workers Brought Eagleville to Life

I'd like to dedicate this article to the memory of Dick Curry. He was taken away from us last week, far too soon at the age of 66. Dr. Richard O. Curry, emeritus professor of American history at UConn, loved Willimantic and this section of eastern Connecticut. When I arrived at UConn in the late 1980s from England, he was an important part of that college's dynamic department of history. Richard was a scholar known worldwide for his work on the Civil War and American civil liberties. He was fascinated about his adopted city's history, and lived in one of Willimantic's fine Victorian mansions, built by the Alford family in the late 1890s. Richard often phoned me to discuss specific articles. He also played an important part in the reopening of the Windham Textile & History Museum in 1995. His premature death is a sad loss for his large family and many friends, but it's also a sad loss for this town. I'll miss you Dick.



The Eagleville mills and the village of Eagleville are shown in this photograph from 1894.

Several weeks ago this column featured the obituary of Mansfield's Ebenezer Gurley (1809-1887). It referred to the first company in Connecticut to weave cotton cloth. Peleg Gardiner organized the Willimantic Cotton Manufacturing Company, in 1814 on the east bank of the Willimantic River in the "West Part of Town"(Mansfield). Gardiner sold the property in 1824. It changed hands several times during the next decade. In 1834 the Eagle Company purchased the mill complex. A few houses were built in the vicinity, and the community became known as Eagle Village. The mill was turned over to arms production in 1862. It was rebuilt and remodeled in 1865, and eventually came into the possession of John L. Ross of Providence, Rhode Island, who organized the Eagleville Cotton Manufacturing Company. Ross also was the proprietor of mills in Olneyville and Valley Falls, Rhode Island, and Killingly, Connecticut.

Ross made great investments in the mill and surrounding community, extending the manufacturing capacity, rebuilding the dam and erecting worker housing. The mills were powered by a 150 horse power water wheel, and a 100 horse power steam engine. The houses were very sophisticated for the time, being piped with water supplied by a nearby spring. The New London Division of the Central Vermont Railroad ran through

Eagleville, causing further prosperity and expansion in this "model manufacturing village."

Raw cotton bales arrived by rail, and were shipped out, by rail, as cotton sheeting. All the carding, spinning and weaving was carried out on the premises. At their peak in the 1890s, the mill's 11,000 spindles and 150 workers were manufacturing 8,000 pounds of cloth per week. John L. Ross retired to Pawtucket in 1889, and left the mills in charge of his son, James H. Ross, who lived in a large Victorian mansion on Church street, Willimantic. Ross was a councilman in Willimantic's first city form of government in 1893.

The Eagleville mills continued to manufacture cotton cloth up until the Depression. Production finally stopped in 1930 after more than a century. Fourteen tenement houses and the mill were auctioned in 1931 for \$12,265. The machine shop, boilers, storehouse and water rights were purchased for \$3,000 by a Willimantic realtor, William E. Clark, who is perhaps better known as the founder of the Hosmer Mountain Soda Company. (1915). Clark also purchased the superintendent's house and the boarding house for \$1,250.

The Sterling Fiber Company purchased the old Eagleville mills in 1932, and manufactured shoe supplies. They closed down after World War II, and the Eagleville mills were vacant for several years. On July 22, 1956, the historic mills were razed by the local Volunteer Fire Department, because of their hazardous condition. The next time you travel between Mansfield and Coventry through Eagleville, note the fine dam and the impressive water power, which supplied a livelihood for several generations of Connecticut millworkers and their families.