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## The Ballamahack Farm

**The Ballamahack farmhouse on Ballamahack Road.**



Today, some Yankee history, mixed with a little Italian-American history. Windham is primarily a rural, agrarian town, despite 150 years of massive industrial expansion, which led to the growth of Willimantic in its southwest corner. Evidence of farming abounds in the town's winding back roads.

Colonial farmhouses abound. One such example is at 41 Ballamahack Road in Windham Center, the home of Gene and Sandra Rijs.

Many will recall that Sandra (Todaro) Rijs is the daughter of the late proprietors of a Willimantic institution, the Italian Garden Restaurant, Salvatore and Angelina Todaro. Sandra Todaro was born in St. Joseph Hospital, Willimantic in 1933, and was raised in a house in Babcock Court, Willimantic. Her father Salvatore was born in Sicily in 1887, and emigrated to the United States in 1913. Her mother, Angelina was born in Sicily in 1900. The Todaros arrived in Willimantic from Wethersfield in the early 1930s to help with the family restaurant, run by Phillip Pagano, who was Salvatore Todaro's uncle.

Willimantic has a small, but thriving Italian-American community. These immigrants, like numerous other ethnic groups, were attracted to the town at the turn of the century, by employment in the textile mills and service industries. The recently demolished Mill Number Six was built by Italian labor in 1907. There has been a long-standing Garibaldi Club in town which meets at the VFW club. Sandra recalls the strict moral code in their Italian-American household. Her father, when driving with the kids past the Willimantic "poor house" or "town farm" on West Main Street, would warn them that they would end up in there if they didn't behave. Sandra also recalled the adjustments that new immigrants had to make. Sandra's mother was raised in rural Sicily, where all the houses were constructed in marble and stone. The only wooden constructions were temporary, usually put up in haste after the regular earthquakes which hit this Mediterranean region. When she first arrived in Wethersfield from Sicily, and saw the wooden houses, she thought there had been a recent earthquake!

Gene and Sandra have lived in their 18th century cape farmhouse since 1966. It had served as a farmhouse until as recently as the 1950s. In the 18th century it was occupied

by the Follett family and was worked as a vegetable and dairy farm, with a specialization in growing asparagus. The old farm is surrounded by well built stonewalls. Legend has it that British prisoners-of-war built these walls, ensconced in the Windham Jail during the Revolutionary War. The ell to the house was originally a woodshed, and was not converted for living until around 1960. The house's picture window was installed in 1963. The Ballahamack farm barn had stalls for milking, and is built from chestnut wood in traditional post and beam construction.

The farm's last full-time farmer was Thomas Mara (1872-1948). Mara was born in Sprague, Connecticut. He fought in the Spanish-American War at the turn-of-the-century, and subsequently spent eight years working in Panama, during the construction of the canal. Thomas Mara, and his Irish-born wife Kathleen, purchased the Ballahamack Farm in 1913. Mara died, aged 76, in the Rocky Hill, Connecticut Veterans home, and his widow Kathleen moved out of the property in 1951, thus ended 200 years of farming on this Windham property. Gene and Sandra Rijs have slightly remodeled this historical home, but it still retains a colonial feel.