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## The Backus Store, South Windham

The Backus store at South Windham, pictured in 1912.



George Harlow Backus was a South Windham merchant, well known to several generations of Windham

area residents. He was a direct descendent of William Backus, who arrived in Saybrook, Connecticut from England in 1638. In 1660, William became one of the original proprietors of Norwich, Connecticut, and his son, also William, became a proprietor of Windham in 1692, one of the legatees of Joshua Uncas.

George H. Backus was born in South Windham on September 30, 1858. On leaving school he briefly worked as a clerk for the Adam Nickel Plating Company in South Windham. By 1876, Backus was employed as a clerk in the South Windham mercantile store of Elisha Harlow Holmes. The Holmes family established a thriving mercantile business in the village, which prospered thanks to its proximity to the railroads. Elisha Holmes was educated at the Fitch Academy in the village, and in later years he became a member of the board of South Windham's Radial Thread Buff Company. Well known in its time, this company manufactured "buff wheels" for polishing silver and bronze. One of the buildings still stands on Route 32, and has been recently refurbished. When heading south towards South Windham on Route 32, a left turn in the village leads to Route 203. On crossing the railroad lines, there is a large brick building on the left. This was built by Elisha Holmes shortly after the arrival of the railroads through the village. The earliest located reference to it reveals that it was a millinery store in 1869. In later years it was the residence of the Backus family. Elisha H. Holmes was a famous local merchant and entrepreneur who had also built the adjacent grocery and supply store (pictured). This typical, Yankee country store, built shortly before the Civil War, was located just across the railroad lines. It was the meeting place of generations of area residents. In 1880, Holmes sold the store to brothers George Harlow Backus and his brother William and Edwin. The Backus Bros. grocery Store supplied provisions for railroad travelers, the workers of the Smith and Winchester paper-producing machine factory, the residents of the South Windham Hotel, and for people from the outlying rural areas.

New York Times journalist Allan Keller, who was raised in South Windham during the early years of the century, captured the Backus store's historic Yankee character. In his

1955 book "Grandma's Cooking," Keller refers to the Backus store as the "crossroads store," and "Grandpa's club," "a wondrous place," with a large pot-bellied stove, where men met and talked endlessly amongst the odors of vinegar, molasses, pickles and licorice.

The Backus general merchandising and coal yard business became well known across New England. George Backus served as village postmaster in the 1890s, and his brother William operated the telegraph office in the village's Central Vermont railroad depot. George was also a Windham selectman for 17 years, and served one term as an assessor. George was in business in the South Windham store, as an employee and owner, for an amazing 62 years from 1876 until 1938. It took an hurricane to put him out of business. The 1938 hurricane caused extensive damage to the building and George decided to retire. Windham historian Ruth Ridgeway recalls the store well. She has lived in South Windham for almost 60 years and remembers that it was demolished when the state highway (Route 32) was constructed around 1940. George Backus died in Pomfret on November 30, 1942, aged 84.