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History

Windham Free Library home to many local historical items



Tom
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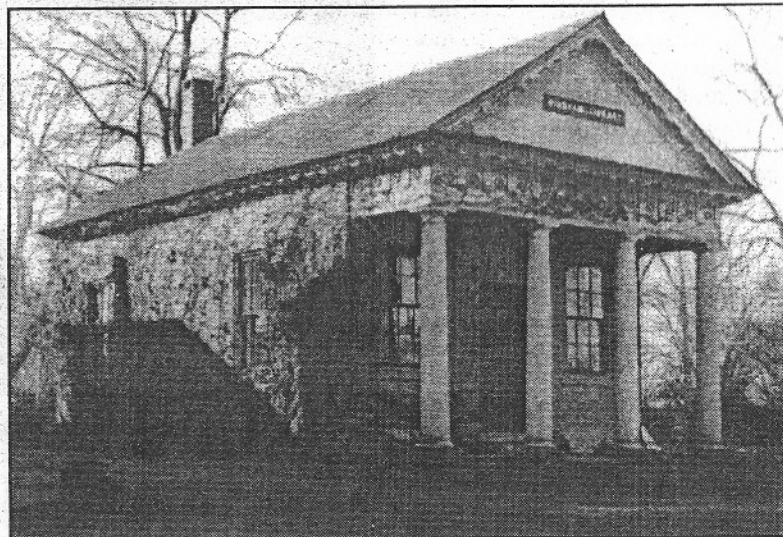
Windham Center is one of the most attractive, well preserved Colonial villages in New England. Despite the heavy modern-day traffic, it retained much of its ancient appeal thanks in part to its 19th century decline and the development of nearby Willimantic as an urban and industrial area. Windham Center witnessed Gen. Rochambeau's troops. The village was also a summer home for the famed American impressionist artist Julian Alden Weir, who captured many local scenes on canvas. Some of these paintings can be found on the Windham community web site at www.threadcity.com.

When entering Windham

from the south, one is struck by the attractive green, framed by the Congregational Church, the old Windham Tavern, the many fine Colonial and Victorian houses, and the Windham Free Library. The latter dates from 1832 and was built on the site of the old Windham County Courthouse, erected in 1729. In 1790, that building housed the offices of Windham's first newspaper, the Windham Herald.

The Windham Free Library building originally housed the Windham Bank. Its Greek Revival style was particularly popular at that period for public and commercial buildings. In the 1850s, the Windham Bank printed its own banknotes, with a frog vignette depicting the 1754 "Battle of the Frogs." The frog engraving appeared on the \$1, \$2, \$3, \$5 and \$10 notes, featuring a frog standing over the dead body of another frog.

The Windham Bank relocated to Willimantic in 1879, and changed its name to the Windham National Bank. It sur-



Ruth Ridgeway

The Windham Free Library, pictured in September 1951.

vived until 1955 when it merged with the Connecticut Bank and Trust Co. of Hartford.

The old bank building on Windham Green served as a meeting hall until 1897. It was rarely used, but became the center of bicentennial celebrations in 1892 when it briefly became a museum of Windham

history. Current and past residents formed the Windham Free Public Library Association in 1897. The young people of the village performed several plays in the old building to raise funds for renovation. Local merchants and contractors provided free materials and labor, and the renovation of the old bank building went

ahead. The new venture was also greatly aided by the Rev. Frederick Means, the pastor of the Windham Congregational Church, and Julian Alden Weir.

The Windham Free Library opened in September 1897 with 250 books, and continued with bequests and funding provided by Mrs. Guilford Smith, Mrs. Delia Hibbard and Mrs. Lucy Colcord. The first librarian, Julia Swift, held the position until her death in 1915. State aid was acquired in 1917, assuring an annual input of \$100 per year for new books.

The library has developed into an important home of valuable local history artifacts, documents and newspaper including many portraits of local worthies and scenes of old Windham dating from 1915, and a map of the original layout of the town, with the land allocated to its first settlers. This fascinating old building is well worth a visit, but be sure to call ahead to library director Penny Frank.