

— HISTORY —

State-funded gunpowder mill first for the colonies

In the 18th century, the section of Windham where the borough of Willimantic would be established during the early 19th century was known as Willimantic Falls. However, this section of the town was also known as the "State" because of the state-financed gunpowder manufactory located on the Willimantic River, east of the old "Iron Works" bridge. This location is better known today as the site of the Windham Mills complex.

At the commencement of the Revolutionary War, the colonies were in dire need of gunpowder, and efforts were made to manufacture it in various parts of the country.

Consequently, at a special session of the Connecticut General Assembly in December, 1775, it was enacted that a bounty of 30

English pounds sterling should be paid out of the treasury to the person who should erect the first powder mill in the colony, and manufacture 500 pounds of good mer-

chantable gun-powder. The challenge was taken up by two of Windham's leading citizens.

In early 1776, Col. Jedediah Elderkin and Judge Nathaniel Wales Jr. built a powder mill at Willimantic Falls. Elderkin was a noted Windham lawyer, who regularly represented the town in the legislature. He and Wales were also members of Gov. Jonathan Trumbull's Council of



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Safety, and it was assumed that Trumbull greatly encouraged the pair to manufacture much needed gunpowder for the Continental Army.

The earliest record of powder manufactured by Elderkin and Wales is found in the Connecticut Governor's Council of Safety minutes for the session dated April 29, 1776. On this date a New Haven merchant, Adam Babcock purchased 200 pounds of gunpowder from the Windham mill for his privateer, which he was fitting out to raid British shipping in the Long Island Sound.

By May 1776 Elderkin and Wales' powder mill at Willimantic Falls had manufactured 1,000 pounds of gunpowder, and the Legislature paid them a premium of 60 pounds

sterling.

In a June 4, 1776 letter to Congress, Gov. Trumbull stated that powder mills at Willimantic and Hartford were both in full operation and that another one was nearly completed.

A license to manufacture gunpowder had also been granted to William and George Pitkin at Hartford, but the earliest order for powder from that mill was dated June 28, 1776. Consequently, there is little doubt that Windham was the first town in the colony to manufacture gunpowder for the Revolutionary War. It was a profitable business, because on July 2, 1776, Gov. Trumbull's Council of Safety the price of gun powder at five shillings and fourpence per pound.

In July 1776, the General

Assembly voted for funds so Elderkin and Wales could build a powder magazine in a dry side hill, near to their powder mills, and that it be constructed of rough stone. The mill continued to furnish large quantities of powder until Dec. 13, 1777, when it blew up, killing 22-year-old Roswell Moulton, son of William Moulton.

A New London newspaper dated Dec. 19 1777 announced: "Amongst other obstacles to impede our success, last Friday the powder mill in Windham blew up." It was totally destroyed, and never rebuilt, but Windham-manufactured gun powder at the "State" greatly aided the cause of the colonies in their darkest hours during the early years of the Revolutionary struggle.

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