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South Windham village once booming

The stately American Thread mills remind most of us of Willimantic's rich history. However, a group of industrial buildings at nearby South Windham rarely strikes a chord of memory for those who live outside of the village. These structures housed an overlooked machine-manufacturing company that during the 19th and 20th centuries gained worldwide fame. Moreover, one of the company's founding families, the Smiths, played a significant role in Windham's postbellum development.

Charles Smith (1806-96) and Harvey Winchester (1801-84) established the Smith and Winchester Co. at South Windham in 1838 to build papermaking machinery. Both men were members of long-established Windham and Coventry families. Charles Smith's father, Joshua Smith was an organ builder, who

transferred his skills into woolen cloth manufacturing at North Windham in 1810. He refitted a mill to produce woolen cloth, a mill that his uncle Charles Taintor had



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previously built to manufacture papermaking machinery. Joshua Smith subsequently supplied blue-dyed woolen cloth to the U. S. Army during the War of 1812.

Joshua Smith's daughters Myra and Emily, married two of his employees, machinist and millwright George Spafford and blacksmith Harvey Winchester. Smith's son, Charles, then trained as a machinist with brother-in-law Spafford. When Joshua Smith died, George Spafford took the

mill over, and with the assistance of experienced paper mill builder James Phelps, refitted it back to its original task, to build a papermaking machine known as a Fourdrinier, named after its English inventor Sealy Fourdrinier.

Charles Smith became an expert in the construction of this type of machinery and became Spafford's supervisor. In 1830, Spafford sold the North Windham mill to Justin Swift, who converted it into a cotton mill. Spafford built a larger manufacturing plant on the site of an old fulling mill at Pigeon Swamp Brook that processed raw woolen cloth. The Pigeon Swamp Brook that processed raw woolen cloth. The Spafford and Phelps Co. prospered, and the factory village that grew around its plant became known as Spaffordville. However,

the company collapsed during the financial crash of 1837. Shortly afterwards, Charles Smith and Harvey Winchester purchased the site, and formed the Smith and Winchester Company.

During the 1840s, the little village of Spaffordville in Windham

became one of the nation's leading centers for paper-machine manufacturing, and the business boomed as the demand for newspapers grew. The machines were loaded onto 12-horse wagons, hauled down the Norwich turnpike and then shipped from Norwich's inland port to New York and Boston. This was an expensive, time-consuming process and Smith and Winchester lobbied for the building of a railroad through the village.

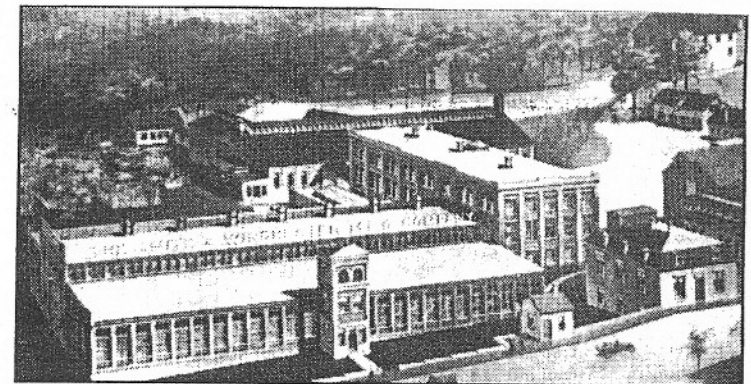
The New London and Northern Railroad arrived at Spaffordville and Willimantic in 1849. However, the railroad company was concerned that two railroad depots on the same line with similar names, Spaffordville and Staffordville, would confuse its passengers. Accordingly, the village of Spaffordville was renamed South Windham in 1850.

South Windham became a prosperous manufacturing village and was home to a wooden type manufacturing company, hence the worker cottages on Type Road, which housed the factory's workers. The village also housed a furniture making company and a plant for processing gypsum, a material used to make plaster and cement. However, the Smith and Winchester Co., which exported its paper-making machinery to Cuba, Japan, Australia, Canada, Mexico and England, built South Windham's reputation.

In 1858, Charles Smith hired his 19-year-old son Guilford Smith as a clerk and a draftsman. In 1863, Guilford became the company's superintendent and his father went into semi-retirement, and concentrated on administering the Windham Bank, an institution that he had helped to establish in 1842. Smith's son Guilford married the daughter of Thomas Ramsdell, the Windham Bank's president, and Guilford himself took over as the bank president in 1886. He represented Windham in the General Assembly in 1898, 1899 and 1904.

Guilford Smith's (1839-1923) name is familiar, as his home which now houses the South Windham Library. Moreover, he financed the building of the Guilford Smith Hall and firehouse located on Babcock Hill Road. The Smith family fortune was central in the building of the Willimantic Congregational Church in 1870, the establishment of St. Joseph's Hospital, the building of the South Windham Congregational Church and Guilford made generous donations to support the Windham Center Episcopal Church. Moreover, Guilford Smith's wife donated the funds to establish the Windham Center Library, once the Windham Bank vacated the building and relocated to Willimantic in 1886.

It may have been a good idea to rename Windham "Smithville."



The Smith and Winchester Plant, 1919

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