

Aug. 19, 2004

# Time and Again

## Windham's Swifts

During the late 18th and 19th centuries, the Swifts were one of Windham's most prominent families. William Swift, the family's progenitor, arrived in Massachusetts in 1680. His great-grandson, Rowland Swift, (1721-95) left Wareham, Mass., for Lebanon in 1760. Two of Rowland's nine children, William Swift (1744-1835) and Zephaniah Swift (1759-1823), settled in Windham Center.

The younger brother, Zephaniah, graduated from Yale University in 1778 and afterwards studied law. On admittance to the bar, Zephaniah Swift established a law practice in Windham and then embarked upon a political career. Windham's freemen sent Swift to the state House of Representatives in 1787 and he served for six consecutive terms. Northeastern Connecticut's voters subsequently sent him to Congress. Upon leaving Washington, D.C. in 1797, Swift then resumed the practice of law at Windham.

Zephaniah Swift became a Judge of the Connecticut Supreme Court in 1801 and its chief justice in 1806. Judge Swift wrote the first legal treatise ever published in America. "A System of the Law of the State of Connecticut" (1795) includes Swift's observations on government, the state constitution and the differences between English and American common law. In 1810, he published the first American treatise on the law of evidence, followed in 1820 by "A Digest of the Laws of the State of

Connecticut." Swift's "Digest" and his judicial opinions are still widely cited today.

In 1814, Swift represented Connecticut at the Hartford convention, when the New England states were threatening to secede from the Union over the War of 1812. He then resumed his legal career, but in 1820 he briefly returned to the Connecticut House of Representatives. In 1822, Swift went to live with his daughter at Warren in Trumbull County, Ohio, where he died in 1823.

In 1824, Judge Swift's nephew Justin Swift (1793-1884) took advantage of the rise of manufacturing in Windham Center's neighboring community, the factory village of Willimantic Falls, and began spinning cotton thread there in a small mill located on the east side of Bridge Street. In 1830, Swift purchased George Spafford's paper mill in North Windham and converted it into a cotton mill. The following year Swift became one of the incorporators of the Windham Bank, where he served as president for many years.

Justin Swift operated his North Windham cotton mill for the next 29 years. It burned down in 1860, but he rebuilt it and in 1862 leased it to the Merrick Manufacturing Co. of Holyoke,



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Mass. In 1872, Gardiner Hall, a Willington thread manufacturer, purchased Swift's old mill and put his grandson, Edward Harrison Hall, in charge. The Hall thread mill operated in North Windham until it burned Christmas, 1913.

After leasing his North Windham cotton mill to the Merrick Co., Justin Swift purchased a store in Windham Center, and upon retirement, his son William Swift (1832-1905), took over its operation. William Swift was educated at the Bacon Academy and the Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, Mass. From 1869 until filing for bankruptcy in 1873, he operated a silk mill in North Windham. William then operated his father's old store until his own death in 1905.

William Swift's son, also

William, was born in Windham in 1848. He entered the U.S. Navy after college and quickly acquired the rank of commander. In 1898, William Swift Jr. played an active part in the Spanish-American War, in which the United States captured the Pacific island of Guam.

The following year the U.S. government organized Guam as an unincorporated U. S. territory, controlled by the Navy Department. In 1900, the Navy appointed Swift commander of the Guam naval base, and he later became the governor of Guam, a post he held until 1902. In 1906, the Navy appointed Swift commander of the Boston Navy Yard and 1908 promoted him to rear admiral. It was in Boston that Rear Adm. Swift compiled the Swift Report, a plan for the reorganization of U. S. Navy yards. Swift retired shortly afterwards and died in Newport, R.I., in 1919.

From legal treatises, to cotton and silk mills and naval achievements, the Swift family not only made an impact upon Windham history, but also upon wider American history. The family is long gone from Windham, but not totally forgotten.