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A small dynasty in South Windham

Part two of
two

The marriage of young cabinet maker, Elisha Holmes, to his boss' daughter in 1822 established a small local dynasty in South Wind-



Tom
Beardsley

ham, with more than two generations of established industries in the village, the building of two fine Victorian mansions and the establishment of the Pine Grove Seminary, an elite school for boys.

An 1857 advertisement for Jabez Fitch's Pine Grove Seminary pointed out its easy access by the recently constructed New London, Willimantic and Palmer, or Hartford, Providence and Fishkill Railroads.

Twenty boys paid \$50 a term for tuition and board but laundry, lights and fuel were extra. Also for extra fees, the seminary, "situated in the pleasant village of South Windham," provided tutoring in Latin, French, English and music.

Fitch's academy became known across the Northeast for its high standards and pleasant location but in 1867, after a controversial incident in which he almost beat a student to death, Fitch left the academy and moved to Norwalk.

Fitch died in Norwalk in 1885 and his family returned his body to Windham for interment in the Old Willimantic Cemetery.

The Smith and Winchester Co. subsequently purchased the seminary building, and reopened it as the South Windham House Hotel.

This local institution prospered for many years, thanks to its prox-

imity to the railroads, and as a watering hole for the local factory workers. Locals named the path linking the hotel to the Smith and Winchester plant "Whiskey Alley."

The South Windham Hotel closed shortly after World War II and today it houses the Pine Hill Apartments.

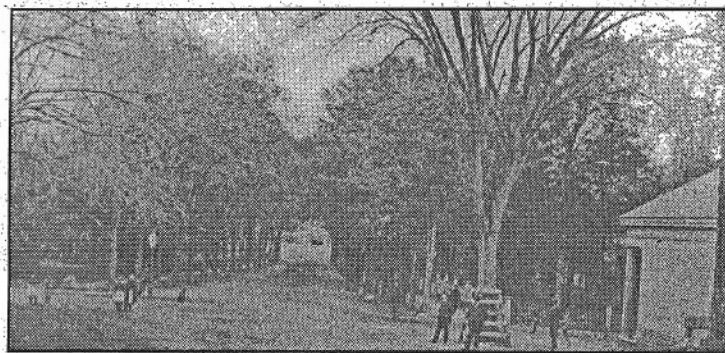
Other than his involvement in beautifying the village and providing a top-class educational institute there, Holmes established a profitable manufactory in South Windham. In 1850, shortly after the New London, Willimantic and Palmer Railroad's arrival at "Spaffordville," Holmes purchased dredging boats to obtain rock gypsum from the sea and the Great Lakes, which he then ground into powder to manufacture plaster of Paris.

Holmes passed much of the wealth generated by land sales and the profitable South Windham plaster mill down to his son, Elisha Harlow Holmes Jr.

Holmes Jr. was educated at the Highland Private School in Worcester, Mass. Upon graduation, he entered his father's plaster mill.

In 1862, Holmes Sr. built a store adjacent to the railroad at the crossroads of what is today Routes 32 and 203. Holmes Jr. sold it to George Harlow Backus in 1880.

The Backus Store became a village landmark and Allan Keller, a South Windham-raised New York Times journalist described it in his 1955 book, "Grandma's Cooking," as "a wondrous place" with a large pot-bellied stove, where men met and talked endlessly among the odors of vinegar, molasses, pickles and licorice. The 1938 hurricane unfortunately



Looking east from Machine Shop Hill Road, this 1905 picture reveals the fine trees planted in South Windham by the Holmes family.

destroyed this typically Yankee country store.

Holmes Jr. represented Windham in the state General Assembly in 1876 and continued to operate the plaster mill after his father's death. However, he closed it down in 1889 to concentrate on a new venture in expanding Willimantic.

He had been a director and treasurer of Willimantic's controversial Dime Savings Bank. He was involved in the bank's closure in 1895 when a fellow director embezzled thousands of dollars to finance the ailing Natchaug Silk Co. located on North Street.

Holmes took advantage of the bank and silk company's collapse. Along with Willimantic businessmen George Stiles and Charles Leonard, he established the Willimantic Machine Co. to build silk spinning machinery in the North Street mills, occupied later in the century by the Brand Co.

Holmes was also commercially involved in his home village and he established the Radial Thread Buff Co. in South Windham to manufacture wire buffing wheels for polishing silver and bronze.

Holmes Jr. married Sarah W. Johnson (1844-99) in 1866 and

five years later, his father built him the fine Italianate mansion in South Windham today occupied by local politician Andy Carey. The Holmes had four children, Richard (1869-1921), Alice (1872-1909), Grace (1874-1953) and Florence (1885-1976). Florence's daughter, Florence Holmes Fitch Osborn (1910-85), became known nationally for a bridge column she wrote in the New York Times Herald Tribune, as "Mrs. Osborn."

Holmes' daughter, Grace, inherited South Windham's landmark house in 1916. She had married George F. Stiles (1873-1956) in 1900. Former Windham town historian Ruth Ridgeway recalls that she and her husband befriended George and Grace Stiles. With the closure of the railroads, the Smith and Winchester Co. transformed the small industrial village into a pleasant suburb.

However, the Holmes' family legacy is still visible in two fine houses on Machine Shop Hill Road, the Pine Groves Apartment building, and in an industrial building that once manufactured buff wheels adjacent to the old South Windham railroad depot.