

# Elisha Holmes' Windham entrepreneurial activities

*Part one of two*

Although born in Lebanon, Elisha Holmes Sr.'s (1799-1886) entrepreneurial abilities, allied with his future wife's inheritances, helped to build up the industrial village of South Windham. His son, Elisha Jr., followed his father's example and played an important role not only in the village's economic and social development but also in Windham's wider civic and political life.

Junior became a member of Willimantic's school board, a Windham town assessor, a selectman, a board of relief member and a public notary. A 1901 biography of Holmes Jr. declared, "Much of the commercial prosperity of both South Windham

and Willimantic is directly due to the influence and example of this successful man."

Elisha Holmes Sr. arrived in South Windham in 1818 to serve an apprenticeship under the tutelage of cabinetmaker Amos Denison Allen (1774-1855). Allen's son, Edwin Allen, later established the wood-type manufacturing shop, that gave South Windham's Type Road its name.

Holmes Sr. married Amos Allen's daughter, Lydia (1801-70), in 1822 and the couple had



Tom  
Beardsley

seven children. However, illustrating the high child mortality in the age before anti-biotics, only two of those children, Lydia (1839-1913) and Elisha Jr. (1844-1915), grew to maturity. Daughter Adeline died at 17 months in 1824, Henry died at 17 months in 1830 and Harriet died at 9 months in 1831. Mary Ellen died in 1837, at 10 and William Tracy tragically drowned in 1849 at 14.

Despite these tragic losses, Holmes Sr. took advantage of the railroad's arrival in the village and wisely invested his wife's inheritances in South Windham.

More-over, the establishment of the Smith and Winchester Co. in the village in 1837 helped to expand senior's wealth. He prof-

itably sold tracts of village land originally owned by his father-in-law, Amos Allen, to Charles Smith and Harvey Winchester when they expanded the South Windham paper-making machine industry established a decade earlier by George Spafford and James Phelps.

Millwright George Spafford had inaugurated the manufacture of paper-producing machinery on Pigeon-Swamp Brook in 1829 and the community that grew around this factory became known as "Spaffordville." Spafford and his partner, James Phelps, manufactured papermaking machines and cutters in the village until 1837.

However, that year's financial panic destroyed this successful undertaking and Spafford sold out to his brothers-in-law, Charles Smith and Harvey Winchester. The railroads arrived in Spaffordville a decade or more later.

However, train passengers kept confusing Spaffordville with Staffordville further up the line, so the New London, Willimantic and Palmer railroad renamed Spaffordville "South Windham."

Enriched by his land deals and inheritances, Holmes Sr. built a fine brick mansion in the village

in 1845 that still stands on the northeast corner of Machine Shop Hill Road and South Windham Road, next west to the South Windham post office.

As the village grew, Holmes Sr. became determined to transform Spaffordville into a model industrial village.

He planted elm trees along its streets and in 1848 went into partnership with Giles Taintor, a wealthy financier from the nearby Windham Center village. Taking advantage of the railroad's imminent arrival, Holmes and Taintor established an elite private boys school in the village and appointed a leading Connecticut educator, Dr. Jabez C. Fitch (1819-85), as headmaster.

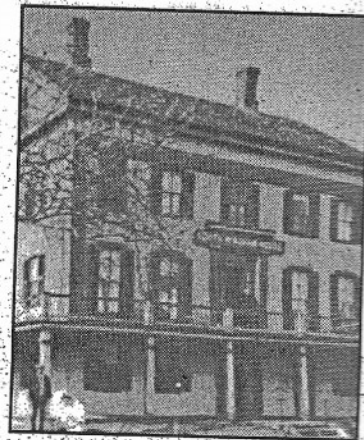
Although operating out of a small wooden building, the Fitch Academy rapidly expanded as the region's wealthiest citizens sent their sons to study with Fitch. They knew that successful graduation from the South Windham academy guaranteed entry into Yale University.

The arrival of a second railroad in South Windham in 1855, connecting the village directly to Rhode Island, Hartford and the Hudson Valley, convinced Hol-

mes Sr. and Taintor to expand the academy.

They commissioned Edwin Fitch, a well-known architect from nearby Mansfield, to build a new school building at the foot of the hill below the original school, located adjacent to a small grove of pine trees. Accordingly, Holmes, Taintor and Fitch renamed the new school the Pine Grove Seminary.

*Continued next week*



Holmes and Taintor's Pine Grove Seminary School, pictured in 1905 when it served as the South Windham Hotel.