

The Taintor dynasty

A number of wealthy and influential families dominated Windham's social and economic life long before the arrival of cotton and silk mills in the town at Willimantic Falls. One such dynasty, the Taintor family, was descended from the colony's original landed aristocracy.

In 1634, the crown granted Welshman Charles Taintor substantial acreage in the Connecticut River Valley, where he subsequently established an exclusive trading network with the West Indies.

In 1782, Colchester's John Taintor (1725-98), who the Windham Herald newspaper described as "a man of wealth and great influence before and during the revolution," arrived in Windham and began to trade locally produced goods with the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean.

John Taintor's sons, John Jr. (1760-1825) and Charles (1762-1854), inherited their father's trading network and continued to send Windham cattle, knitted woolen goods and cheeses to the West Indies in return for rum and British manufactured goods. In

1800, to ensure the speedy transportation of their goods from Windham's inland location, the Taintors established a joint stock company and built the Windham and Mansfield Turnpike.

In 1807, the Taintor brothers hatched a scheme to provide fresh water to the Windham Center village, and formed another joint-stock company, the Windham Aqueduct Co., which pumped spring water to every house in Windham through subterranean wooden pipes.

The War of 1812 benefited both Windham and the Taintors who, by supplying the United States Army and Navy with provisions from the town, instigated an economic boom there and virtually every businessman and farmer in the village benefited. However, the resulting economic and commercial growth transformed the ancient village, causing the rapid construction of unplanned buildings and bringing noise and chaos to the old colonial community.

The stench of cattle dung and sheep droppings permeated Windham's narrow thoroughfares and affected the Taintors' manorial residences, located in the village center. In response to the infestations of flies and smells, the Taintors urged their fellow town officers to initiate a program of village improvements. When the Windham selectmen refused to fund it, the Taintor brothers transcended the local political process and applied to the Connecticut General Assembly for permission to operate the Windham center village under the auspices of a private joint-stock company.

This incorporation was granted in 1814, and the Taintors' "village company" appointed a clerk to enact municipal by-laws. Cattle, geese and sheep were banned from the village and "ancient grants" allowing tanning works, shops and houses on the town's public highways were revoked. When the town government failed



Tom
Beardsley

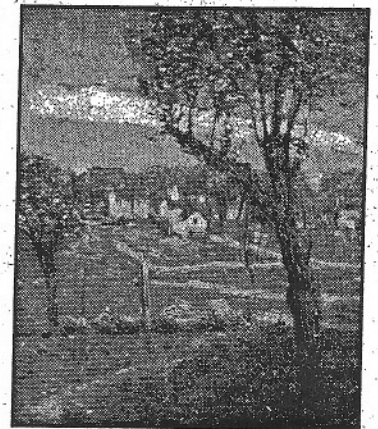
to respond to the problems caused by rapid commercial growth, private joint-stock companies took over.

Charles Taintor eventually abandoned his pursuit of power and wealth. His death certificate in 1854 noted that his occupation was "making merry."

The turning of cotton industry waterwheels in nearby Willimantic signaled the end of the Taintor dynasty in Connecticut. The last in the local line, Charles' son, Yale-educated Giles Taintor (1800-82), retired from business in New York City at age 33 to run the family estates. Since he spent most of the year at a New York City hotel, he was not involved in Windham politics and in 1856, his business was to "take care of his money." However, Taintor did build Windham's Fitch Academy, a private school that prepared boys for entry to Yale University.

The Taintor family was related, through marriage, to famed American impressionist artist Julian Alden Weir (1852-1919). Giles Taintor's sister, Eliza, married Rufus Lathrop Baker, a descendant of early Windham settlers. Rufus and Eliza Baker's son, Charles Taintor Baker, had three

daughters, Ella, Cora and Anna. Weir married Anna in 1883 and after her death during childbirth, he married Anna's sister Ella in October 1893 and spent more than 40 summers on the Baker's Windham homestead. In Windham, Weir produced some of his most acclaimed work, including the "U.S. Thread Company Mills, Willimantic, Connecticut" (1893) the acclaimed "The Factory Village" (1894) and the 1895 painting of Windham Center, "View from Mullins Hill."



J. Alden Weir's 'View from Mullins Hill.'