



In 1983, the governments of Windham and Willimantic were consolidated, reverting to a form of government used between 1692 and 1833.

END OF 2 ERAS

City, town reunite under one government as thread company calls it quits

The 1980s was an important decade in the community's history. There were two major events: consolidation and the closure of the American Thread Co.'s plant.

The city of Willimantic and its major industry both disappeared during the 1980s. The borough of Willimantic had been formed in 1833, when an urban form of government was needed to administer the rapidly expanding industrial community in the western section of the ancient town of Windham. An elected warden and a panel of burgesses, which usually consisted of the community's wealthiest citizens, administered the borough. This form of government lasted for 60 years, until 1893, when the state granted the community a city charter, transforming the vibrant borough of Willimantic into a city.

The ongoing controversy between the town of Windham and the city of Willimantic reached a peak in the early 1980s. As the city's industry began to decline during the 1970s, the residents of Windham complained about their increasing tax burden. Why should the suburbs pay for the city's shortcomings? The issue of Windham's consolidation deserves a book, or at least an in-depth study. Suffice to say here that the city and town were consolidated, ending the 90-year existence of the city of Willimantic, and in 1983 Windham reverted to

the form of government which had served it from 1692 until 1833.

Two years after consolidation, the American Thread plant closed its doors. This was not a sudden decision, as the local plant had been slowly winding down since the mid-1970s. In 1992, I interviewed Charlie Johnson, a senior manager at the plant during the 1950s. Charlie was the son of Charles Sumner Johnson, the pastor of the Willimantic Methodist Church from 1936 until 1941, so the Johnsons were well known in the community.

In 1962, Charlie Johnson was sent to Sevier, N.C., to take over the plant's finishing mill, and work previously undertaken in Willimantic followed him there. Johnson believed the time had come for ATCO's Willimantic plant, because it consisted of outdated buildings. Johnson believed the reason why the Willimantic plant had closed was, "because it did not make sense to build new facilities in the northeast because the costs were too high. The old 19th century facilities, like Willimantic, made production difficult because they usually existed on several stories and the movement of materials and machinery up and down elevators made the job more expensive and difficult. In the South, the new facilities were built all on one level. You dropped off the bales at one end of the

plant and ran them quickly through straight-line modern equipment out of the other end, finished and gone. It had nothing to do with labor costs. If we could have had a modern facility in this area, with the good experienced labor in Willimantic, we would have been in clover."

In 1985, the year of ATCO's closure, the zoning commission approved plans for the new St. Joseph Living Center, which was built in 1988. The plans called for a 110-bed convalescent care facility at the corner of Route 14 and Cemetery Road on 10 acres of a 45-acre tract owned by the Norwich Diocese. The new Living Center would replace St. Joseph's Home for the Aged on Jackson Street, which was outdated and deteriorating.

In the summer of 1985, Nutmeg Broadcasting was casting its eye on the old Post Office building as the site for its first FM station. WILL-AM took over the defunct WNOU-FM station and constructed a new studio on Main Street.

Despite the closure of the ATCO plant, the 1980s proved to be a decade of relative growth for Windham, with the building of a fine medical facility — which saw Cemetery Road being renamed Club Road— all overseen by the serenity of a unified town government.