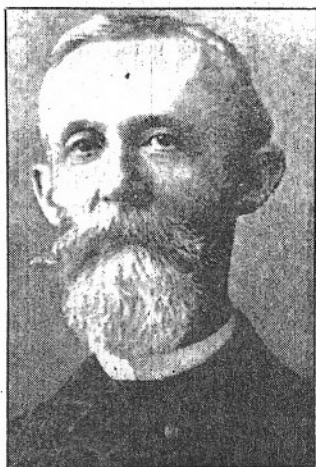


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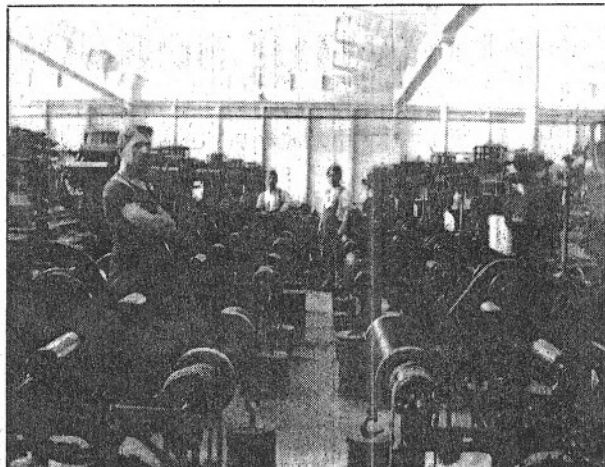
Capt. Charles Fenton, silk manufacturer



Tom Beardsley



Captain Charles Fenton



Interior of the Windham Silk Co. mill on North Street, Willimantic, in 1909. The looms manufactured silk cloth for dresses.

Silk thread and cloth manufacture was an highly important industry which flourished in Willimantic from around 1860 to 1940. Much of the silk industry had its roots in Mansfield and such family names as Atwood, Chaffee, Conant and Fenton are equally as well known in both towns. The subject of this sketch is Captain Charles Fenton, the founder of the famous Windham Silk Co.

Horace Fenton was born in Mansfield in 1814. He worked as a blacksmith, and in 1837 he followed his trade to Crown Point, N.Y. It was there that his second child, Charles Fenton, was born on Aug. 27, 1840. After the death of his wife, Horace Fenton returned to his native Mansfield and worked as a farmer until his death in 1875.

In 1852, Charles Fenton, aged 12, began work in the Mansfield Hollow silk mills. During the next 10 years he acquired a wide knowledge of the processes involving silk spinning and weaving.

But in August 1862, he

joined the 21st Regiment of the Connecticut Volunteer Infantry Connecticut.

Fenton had quite a war. He fought in battles at Fredericksburg, Bermuda Hundred, Port Walthall, Chester Station, Fort Darling, Drury's Bluff, Cold Harbor, Bethesda Church and Petersburg, Chapin's farm, Fair Oaks and Richmond. He was mustered out at Richmond, Va., in June 1865, having acquired the rank of captain.

When he returned to Mansfield, Fenton was appointed manager of the O.S. Chaffee silk mill. In 1870 he worked as a traveling salesman for the

Nonotuck Silk Co. of Chicago, and from 1874 until 1887 he was the superintendent of the Haskell silk mills in Westbrook, Maine.

In 1887, Joseph Dwight Chaffee, the son of O.S. Chaffee, lured him to Willimantic and appointed him the superintendent of the Natchaug Silk Co. 1895. It was taken over by the L.D. Brown Silk Co. of Middletown, and Fenton removed there. In 1901 he returned to Willimantic and helped to form the Windham Silk Co., which operated out of the defunct Natchaug Co. mills on North Street.

The Windham Silk Co. (1901-1937) was one of Willimantic's success stories. It gave regular employment to between 150-200 workers. Thanks to Fenton's experience and his connections, the Willimantic company became famous nationwide for its high quality silk cloths.

Fenton installed sophisticated looms and employed experienced engineers and weavers from across the country. Fenton hired Lyman Icholls as superintendent. Nicholls had worked for Fenton at the Haskell mills in Maine, and joined him in Willimantic when Fenton went into his ill-starred partnership with J.D. Chaffee in 1887.

In 1911, the Windham Silk Co. built a large extension to its mill facing onto the south side of Valley Street.

Fenton's brother, Edward, was the company's agent in Chicago, and his son Robert was company secretary. Robert (b.1872) had a background in engineering. He gained a bachelor of science degree at Tufts, and working as an engineer with the Berlin Iron and Bridge Co. until his father hired him in 1901.

The Windham Silk Co. suffered greatly during the Depression, and went into liquidation in 1937. Lyman Nicholls, the company's general manager, and Fenton's long-time lieutenant, died in his office while cleaning out his desk on a cold January morning in 1938. He was 79.

Charles Fenton retired in 1913, aged 73, and became as equally famous for his skills in cultivating exotic fruits and vegetables in his house and gardens on the "Hill." Fenton became an active member of the Francis S. Long Post, No. 30. GAR. He died in 1922 at age 82.

Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, is a former scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum.

Unaffiliated voters outpace 2 parties in registrations

HARTFORD (AP) — For the first time in Connecticut history, the largest group of active registered voters is neither Democrat nor Republican, but rather unaffiliated, the state's top elections official reported Friday.

The ranks of unaffiliated voters increased 12 percent to 727,381 voters when compared with a year ago, said Secretary of the State Miles S. Rapoport.

Republican voters increased 3.5 percent to 470,774 and Democrats increased 1.7 per-

cent to 469,169. They respond to the registrars' canvass, still remain eligible to vote on Election Day.

More than 1.9 million people are registered to vote. They represent 85 percent of eligible voters — the highest percentage in state history, Rapoport said.

"More organizations, businesses, community groups and individual volunteers worked to increase voter registration than ever before," Rapoport said.

Of Connecticut's 169 municipalities,

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