

May 02, 1998

## The Pine Grove Seminary, South Windham

**The South Windham House Hotel pictured in 1905. The building is better known today as the home of the Pine Hill apartments.**



Several months ago the Pine Hill apartment building in South Windham was accidentally set alight. Fortunately the fire was brought under control, thus saving one of Windham's most historic, and interesting structures. The building, which houses the Pine Hill apartments, was erected in 1855 for Dr. Jabez C. Fitch (1819-1885), as an

expansion to his private boys school. Fitch had instituted the Pine Grove Seminary in South Windham in 1848 to take advantage of the arrival in the village of the New London, Willimantic and Palmer railroad. The Seminary operated out of a small wooden building from 1848 until 1855, located adjacent to a small grove of pine trees on the hill at the rear of the current building.

Up until 1855, Pine Grove's students had boarded in private residences in nearby Spaffordville (South Windham). The arrival of a second major railroad line through South Windham in 1855, connected the small Windham industrial community to Rhode Island, Hartford and New York's Hudson Valley. These improved transport connections, coupled with the school's growing reputation for getting its students admitted to Yale, resulted in increased applications for admissions. This convinced Pine Grove's headmaster and founder, Jabez Fitch, to commission Edwin Fitch, a well known architect from nearby Mansfield, to build a fine new school building, at the foot of the hill, below the original school. This southern section of the town of Windham was originally named for one of the founders of the firm which subsequently laid the foundation for the historic Smith and Winchester Company. Millwright George Spafford inaugurated the manufacture of paper-producing machinery on Windham's Pigeon Swamp Brook in 1829. The community, which grew around this factory, became known as "Spaffordville." Spafford, and his partner James Phelps, manufactured papermaking machines and cutters in the village until 1837. But their highly successful business was destroyed by that year's financial panic, and Spafford sold out to his brothers-in-law, Charles Smith and Harvey Winchester. The railroads arrived several years later, and the railroad companies demanded a change of name, so the name "South Windham," was adopted to avoid confusion with the nearby railroad depot at Staffordville, Connecticut, and "Spaffordville" gradually fell from general usage.

An 1857 advertising circular for Jabez Fitch's Pine Grove Seminary stressed that, "the school is easy of access by the 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. The Seminary, "situated in the pleasant village of South Windham," provided special tuition in Latin, French, English and Music-for extras fees. Fitch moved the Seminary to Norwalk, Connecticut, in 1867. He died there in 1885, but his body was returned to Windham and buried in the Old Willimantic Cemetery. The vacant Seminary building was purchased by the Smith and Winchester Company, and became the South Windham House Hotel. This local institution prospered for many years, thanks to its proximity to the railroads. It was widely known for its saloon. A path linking the hotel to the Smith and Winchester works was known as "whiskey Alley." The South Windham Hotel closed shortly after World War II.