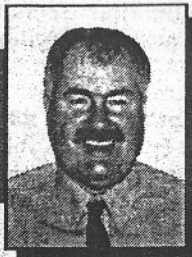


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History

General store was home to post office for many years

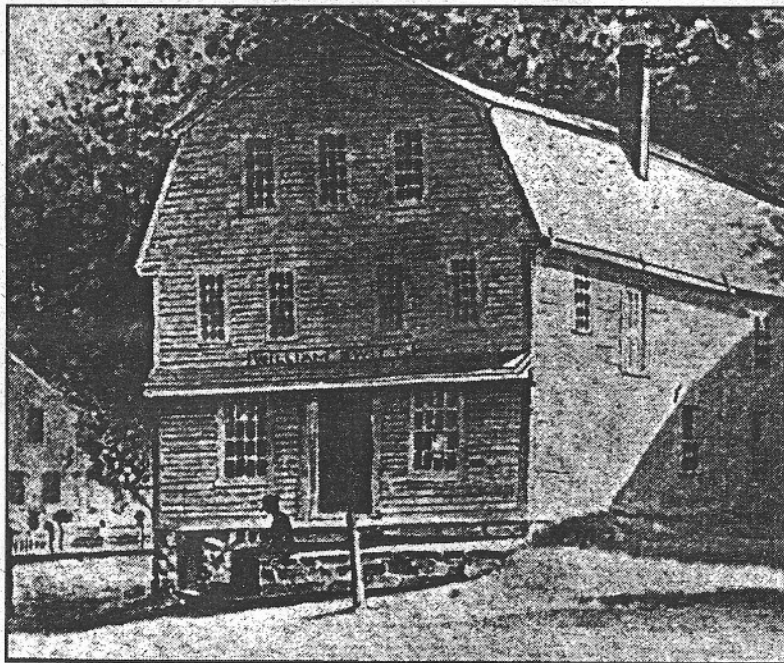


Tom Beardsley

Part Three of Three

The federal post office in Windham Center may be one of the oldest in the United States to operate continuously from the same general locality. It has an interesting history. John Byrne, a local newspaper publisher, was Windham's first postmaster in 1795. Town postmasters were political appointments and nominated by newly elected presidents. Postmasters were often members of the town's prominent families, and throughout the 19th century, the Windham position was held by members of the Taintor, Webb, Abbe, Burnham and Backus families.

William Swift (1823-1907) was Windham postmaster from 1880-93. He was the son of Justin Swift who, from 1831 until the Civil War, operated a cotton mill



William Swift's store served as the Windham Center post office from 1880 until 1886, when it was destroyed by fire. The post office was then transferred into the current building.

in Charles Taintor's defunct paper mill at North Windham. William Swift was Windham's representative to the General Assembly during the Civil War, judge of probate from 1874-75

and Windham town clerk. He took over his father's general store on Windham Green, and continued as a merchant in town for more than 60 years. In 1847, he married Harriet Byrne, the

granddaughter of John Byrne, Windham's first postmaster. Their son William (1848-1919) became a rear admiral in the U.S. Navy in 1908 and was governor of Guam from 1900-02.

Windham's post office was located in William Swift's store, which stood on the location occupied by the Congregational Church. On May 5, 1886, the Windham Masons met in their rooms in Swift's store. Shortly afterwards, the store burnt to the ground, consuming the neighboring Congregational Church. A new church and post office were needed. The current Congregational Church was built in 1886-87. Postmaster William Swift purchased Benjamin Dwyer's store, built next to the Windham Inn in 1875. Swift operated his business and that building until he was replaced as postmaster by George Backus in 1893. The building was purchased by Hatch and Johnson in 1893, and they conducted a country store until 1918 when their clerk, John M. Potter, bought out Hatch's share.

Johnson and Potter became Potter and Potter when John's cousin, Nelson Potter, bought

Johnson's share. In 1923, John M. Potter was appointed postmaster, a position he held until 1955. Nelson Potter became postmaster in 1959, and under his watch, new government legislation demanded that post offices must become a single operation. The Potter and Potter store closed on March 3, 1968. The cracker barrels were removed and the interior was remodeled.

The Windham Center post office is considered to be one of the most picturesque rural offices in the country. It continues a long tradition that dates back to at least 1726 when post riders from New London dropped and picked up mail from the new county seat at Windham Green. Next time you visit the post office, consider its long and conspicuous history and the fact that you're in one of the oldest, continual post office buildings in the country.

Come and join me on a bus tour and discover the rich history and industrial heritage of the Quinebaug Valley on Oct. 22. Contact the Windham Recreation Department at 465-3046 for details.