A Brief History

The town of Windham was incorporated on May 12, 1692. Mohican Sachem Chief Joshua willed the land to 16 men, most of whom resided in Norwich. The land called Windham consisted of what is now the towns of Windham (which includes Willimantic), Mansfield, Scotland, Chaplin, and Hampton. The town was named after Wyndham, England.

On December 4, 1700 Windham’s first Minister, Reverend Samuel Whiting, was ordained. The church was a Congregational Church, stemming from the Puritans. The first church building was erected shortly after on the Windham Green. Early settlers were farmers that grew crops such as wheat, rye, corn, barley, flax, and hemp, as well as raising livestock. Early industry in Windham consisted of sawmills, gristmills, and blacksmith’s shops taking advantage of the water power from streams and rivers.

In 1823 Windham, along with Lebanon, Columbia, Chaplin, and Mansfield petitioned the General Assembly to become their own county. Tolland County, the last county formed in Connecticut, had just been formed a few years earlier, taking towns away from Hartford and Windham counties. The town of Windham was no longer the center of Windham County. The courts and other government offices had been moved to Brooklyn, which was more centralized and easier to travel to. All transportation was difficult due to the poor quality of the roads. The General Assembly denied the petition.

One year later, Lebanon petitioned the General Assembly to be returned to New London County, which they had originally been part of before the creation of Windham County. The General Assembly granted their petition. That same year, Mansfield and Columbia petitioned the General Assembly to join Tolland County. The General Assembly denied both petitions. Mansfield tried again in 1826, and Columbia tried again in 1827. This time the General Assembly granted both towns their petitions.
The town of Windham is made up of four parts; North Windham, Windham Center, South Windham, and Willimantic. As with many towns with abundant river water-power, mills are a very large part of the history of the town. The mills sprang up around the Willimantic River in the borough of Willimantic, while Windham remained a farming community. North and South Windham had limited industry. The populated area of town in the colonial period was Windham Center. When the industrial revolution came to the United States, the mills grew and Willimantic became the more populated area.

In 1877 The Willimantic Enterprise newspaper started serving the citizens of Windham and surrounding towns. The newspaper grew, and became the Willimantic Chronicle, and later The Chronicle. The newspaper has been published by the same family for 5 generations. In 1889 the Willimantic State Normal School opened its doors. (A “normal school” was a school of higher education which women went to after High School to become teachers.) The course of study was two years long. Women signed a contract stating they would only teach in Connecticut and received free tuition and books. Room and board was $3.50 a week. The school became Willimantic State College in 1959, and in 1967 Eastern Connecticut State College. Then in 1983 the college received university status and afterwards became part of the state university system as Eastern Connecticut State University. In 1907 the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady Mother Mercy established a small hospital across from Saint Joseph’s Church. This was Windham’s first hospital building. The hospital vowed to treat all patients no matter how little money they had, their race, or their background. Many of the patients were mill workers who were victims of machinery accidents. By 1929 the hospital was having a problem with too little space and had to start turning people away. In 1930, during the height of the depression, $500,000.00 was raised, the Vanderman family donated 12 acres of land, and Windham Memorial Community Hospital (now known as Windham Hospital) was established.

Willimantic

The word Willimantic is the Algonquin Indian term for “land of the swift running water”. Prior to 1821, the village was known as Willimantic Falls and was a single school district where about 20 families resided. In 1822, Charles Lee erected a factory on Main Street made of stone quarried from the Willimantic River. Small shops and manufacturers had been built on the banks of the Willimantic before, but this was the beginning of Willimantic as we know it. In 1825, the three Jillson brothers built a factory along the Willimantic, and in 1827, they built a second building. By 1828, there were six cotton factories in Willimantic, all of them were built within a seven year span.
By 1849, railroads were adding to the growth of Willimantic. The first three railroads to go through Willimantic were the New London Northern Railroad, the Willimantic Railroad, and the Palmer Railroad. It was not long before others followed. Railroads were not the only form of transportation. Trolleys were common from 1902 to 1932. Trolleys regularly ran from Willimantic to Coventry, where they continued into Hartford.

From the end of the Civil War to the outbreak of World War II Willimantic was the center for the production of silk and cotton thread. This was the Victorian era and the height of Willimantic’s grandeur. Many of the interesting buildings in Willimantic, as well as many of the mansions in the Victorian Hill section, were built during this time. Many hotels were built to accommodate the travelers coming into the area, including the Hooker House Hotel, and the Windham Hotel. Traveling salesmen would visit the area regularly to sell their goods. The grand Capital Theater opened downtown in 1926. It was during this time that immigrants from Europe came to Willimantic. Irish, Italians, Polish, Germans, and French Canadians came to work in the mills. The young ladies who did not wish to work in the mills could be domestic help to the wealthier families in town. Later, Estonian, Ukraine, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Puerto Rican immigrants came looking for jobs in the mills. Willimantic grew to be a very culturally rich town.

In 1833 Willimantic was a borough of Windham. In 1893 it became a city. In 1983, the City and the Town consolidated and became one town again. A Board of Selectmen was set up to run the town. Selectmen were voted into office from each of the districts of town. Before the consolidation Windham was governed by a town council, and Willimantic by a City Hall.

By the 1970s, New England was not the prosperous industrial area it had once been. Factories were closing their doors or relocating to the South. The American Thread Company, the largest employer in town, left the area in 1985. It was a devastating blow to the area financially. Today, Willimantic is being revitalized and being recognized as an area with much history to offer.

Provided by Bev York, Director Windham History & Textile Museum
Frogs & Threads

It all started in June of 1754. The villagers of Windham were awakened in the middle of the night by terrible sounds coming from up the road. The settlers prepared for battle fearing it was an Indian attack. When morning came the villagers grabbed their guns and marched towards the direction of the noise. When they arrived at the nearby pond the villagers were shocked to find the bodies of hundreds of dead bullfrogs. Those frogs that were still alive were heading towards the Willimantic River. The reason for the Bullfrog Battle was unclear. Some say there had been a drought, and the Bullfrogs were fighting for territory. Others say it was not a particularly dry summer, and there had been no drought. Another version is that the Miller had opened the dam’s gate leaving the water level quite low. The pond was named Frog Pond from then on. The villagers took the frogs on as their mascot. To this day, you can see frogs all over Windham.

Now about thread. Many towns in Connecticut have nicknames according to what their factories produced, or what the town was or is famous for. Norwich is the self proclaimed “Rose of New England” because the town was once a very wealthy community, and is nicknamed the “Rose City”. New Britain is the “Hardware City” because of its large hardware industry. Meriden is the “Silver City”. Manchester is “Silk City”. Willimantic is the “Thread City” because of the American Thread Company, which was the largest employer in town.

And that is why we have a bridge with giant frogs sitting on spools of thread.
Protect Cultural Resources

Historic Resources

- Conduct full inventory documenting Windham’s historic assets. Add data to the Windham Natural and Cultural Resource mapset
- Promote the protection, preservation and enhancement of historic structures and sites; encourage efforts for other listings on the National Register of Historic Places, such as South Side
- Publicize Windham’s historic resources to enhance public awareness of the value of preservation
- Promote our three districts listed on the National Register of Historic Places (Main Street, Windham Center and Prospect Hill Historic Districts) by listing on the town’s web site and promoting walking tours
- Incorporate archaeological review by the Connecticut State Archeologist in the town’s regulations for site development
- Encourage rehabilitation programs and grants to assist home/business owners with historic buildings upgrade and maintain their properties with the best standards of historic restoration and rehabilitation
- Public improvements in historic districts should complement and be compatible with the historic period of the buildings. Lighting, landscaping, sidewalks, bus shelters, benches and other improvements should be carefully selected
- Encourage adaptive reuse of existing historic structures
- Encourage economic development projects that take advantage of historic resources

Rural Character

- Identify important views, viewsheds and vistas; incorporate their protection into regulations
- Adopt a scenic road ordinance and designate scenic roadways
- Create a program for maintaining roadside mature trees with planned maintenance and replenishment. Become a Connecticut ReLeaf Community
- Encourage preserving, rebuilding or relocating roadside stonewalls
- Commercial development along our roadways has a tremendous impact on rural character. Promote the establishment of a Design Review Board and incorporate design review into the approval process for all commercial development
- Institute Conservation Subdivisions (also known as Open Space or Cluster Subdivisions) as a way to protect the rural character, natural and cultural resources of Windham