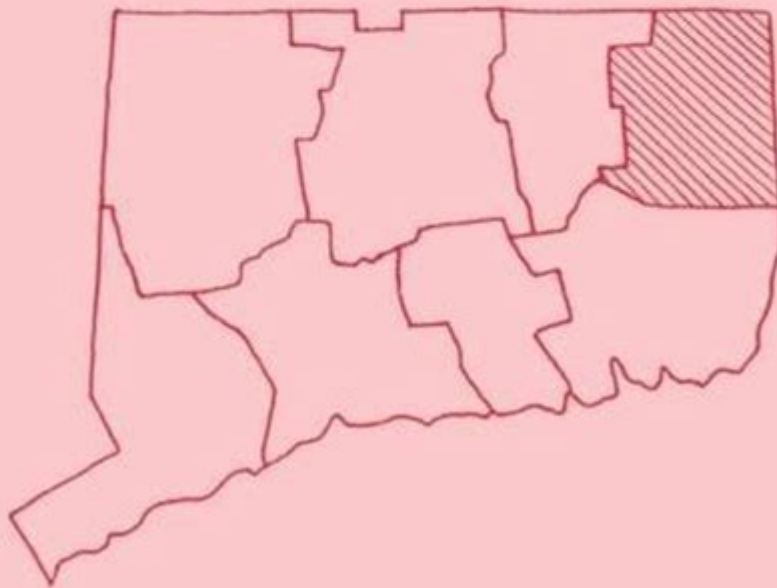# History Of Windham County Connecticut

HISTORY OF

WINDHAM COUNTY

CONNECTICUT

Volume I
1600-1760

Ellen D. Larned

Windham County, Connecticut has a rich and varied history that reflects the broader narrative of New England's development. Established in 1726, Windham County has experienced significant transformations over the centuries, from its early days as a frontier territory to its role in the industrial revolution and beyond. This article will explore the historical developments, key events, and notable figures that have shaped Windham County into what it is today.

Early Settlement and Colonial Era

During the early 17th century, the land that would become Windham County was inhabited by Native American tribes, primarily the Pequot and Mohegan. These tribes thrived on the rich natural resources available in the area, utilizing the rivers and forests for sustenance and shelter.

Establishment of Towns

The establishment of Windham County began with the arrival of European settlers, primarily Puritans from Massachusetts. The first significant settlement occurred in the 1680s when a group of settlers from the Massachusetts Bay Colony moved into the area. The following towns were incorporated:

1. Windham - Incorporated in 1692, Windham became the county seat and central hub of commerce.
2. Willimantic - Originally part of Windham, it developed as a vital textile manufacturing center in the 19th century.
3. Killingly - Incorporated in 1708, it was known for its agricultural output.
4. Putnam - Settled in the early 18th century, it became an important industrial town.

The county was officially established in 1726, and its boundaries were defined to include a mix of settlements that would grow in size and importance over the coming years.

The Revolutionary Era

Windham County, like much of Connecticut, played a notable role during the American Revolutionary War. The county's residents were deeply involved in the struggle for independence.

Military Contributions

Numerous militia units were formed from the towns within Windham County. Some contributions included:

- The 6th Connecticut Regiment - This regiment was involved in several key battles, providing essential manpower to the Continental Army.
- Local Leaders - Figures such as General Israel Putnam, who hailed from the region, were instrumental in organizing local resistance against British forces.

The support for the Revolutionary cause also manifested in the form of financial contributions and supplies, with local farms and merchants providing food and goods to the soldiers.

19th Century Industrialization

The 19th century marked a period of significant economic change for Windham County, driven largely

by the Industrial Revolution. The region transformed from an agrarian society into a bustling industrial hub.

Textile Manufacturing

One of the most profound changes was the rise of textile manufacturing. Willimantic emerged as a key player in this industry, leading to its nickname, "Thread City." Key developments included:

- Willimantic Linen Company - Founded in 1854, it became one of the largest linen manufacturers in the United States, employing thousands of workers.
- Other Mills - Numerous smaller mills and factories sprang up across the county, producing textiles, machinery, and various goods.

This industrial boom attracted a wave of immigrants seeking work, particularly from Ireland and Italy, which further diversified the county's population and culture.

Transportation Improvements

The development of transportation infrastructure facilitated the growth of industries in Windham County. Notable advancements included:

- Railroads - The arrival of the railroad in the mid-19th century connected Windham County to larger cities and markets, enhancing trade and travel.
- Canals - The construction of canals, such as the Willimantic River Canal, improved the movement of goods and raw materials.

These transportation networks were vital for local businesses and played a crucial role in the county's economic expansion.

Social Change and Community Development

As Windham County industrialized, it also saw significant social changes. The population grew, and with it, the need for public services, education, and infrastructure.

Education and Institutions

The establishment of schools and educational institutions became a priority for the growing population. By the late 19th century, several key developments included:

1. Public Schools - A system of public education was established, providing education to children across the county.
2. Higher Education - The founding of institutions such as Eastern Connecticut State University in 1889 marked a commitment to higher education.

These advancements in education contributed significantly to the literacy and skill levels of the population, which in turn supported local industries.

Community Organizations

Various organizations emerged to address social issues and promote community welfare. Notable examples include:

- Local Churches - Many churches were established, providing spiritual support and community cohesion.
- Civic Groups - Organizations focused on women's suffrage, temperance, and labor rights became active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

These groups played a crucial role in shaping the social landscape of Windham County and advocating for the needs of its residents.

20th Century and Beyond

The 20th century brought both challenges and opportunities to Windham County. The decline of traditional manufacturing industries prompted economic shifts, while the post-war period saw renewed growth and diversification.

Economic Transition

As industries faced competition from overseas, many textile mills and factories began to close. This led to an economic restructuring characterized by:

- Shift to Services - The economy transitioned toward service-oriented sectors such as healthcare, education, and technology.
- Tourism Development - The natural beauty of the county, including parks and recreational areas, began to attract tourists, providing a new economic avenue.

Modern Developments

In recent years, Windham County has seen a focus on sustainable development and revitalization efforts. Key initiatives include:

1. Historic Preservation - Efforts to preserve historical sites and buildings have been prioritized, recognizing their value in attracting tourism and maintaining community identity.
2. Community Revitalization - Programs aimed at revitalizing downtown areas and supporting local businesses have emerged, focusing on enhancing the quality of life for residents.

Conclusion

The history of Windham County, Connecticut, is a testament to resilience, adaptation, and community spirit. From its early days of Native American habitation and colonial settlement through the industrial revolution and into the modern era, the county has continuously evolved. Today, it reflects a blend of historical significance and contemporary vitality, making it a unique part of Connecticut's landscape. The legacy of its past can still be seen in its towns, institutions, and the spirit of its residents, who continue to honor their rich heritage while looking toward the future.

Frequently Asked Questions

What year was Windham County, Connecticut established?

Windham County was established in 1726.

What is the significance of the name 'Windham' in Windham County?

The name 'Windham' is derived from Windham, England, reflecting the origins of early settlers from that region.

Which town is considered the largest in Windham County?

The town of Killingly is considered the largest in Windham County by area.

What role did Windham County play during the American Revolution?

Windham County was a significant area for military recruitment and provided resources to the Continental Army during the American Revolution.

Which notable historical figure was born in Windham County?

General Israel Putnam, a hero of the American Revolution, was born in nearby Danvers, Massachusetts, but he had strong ties to Windham County.

What is the historical importance of the textile industry in Windham County?

The textile industry was a major economic driver in Windham County during the 19th century, contributing to its growth and development.

How did the geography of Windham County influence its settlement?

The presence of rivers and fertile land made Windham County attractive for agriculture and settlement, leading to its early development.

What are some historical landmarks in Windham County?

Historical landmarks include the Old Windham Town Hall, the Willimantic Textile Museum, and the historic homes in Brooklyn and Pomfret.

What is the role of the Windham County Historical Society?

The Windham County Historical Society aims to preserve and promote the history of the county through research, education, and community engagement.

How did the arrival of the railroad impact Windham County?

The arrival of the railroad in the mid-19th century significantly boosted the economy of Windham County by facilitating trade and transportation.

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