

## CAPTAINS OF INDUSTRY: TEXTILE MILL OWNERS AND MANAGERS

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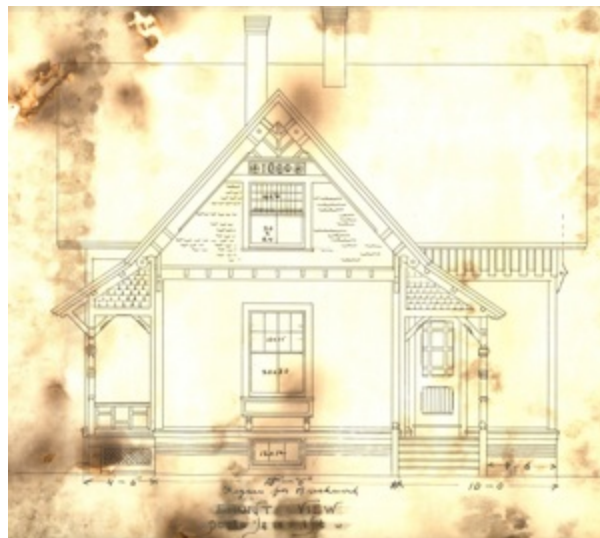
*The Oaks, a neighborhood of quaint, six-room, freestanding Victorian cottages that William E. Barrows, the General Manager of the Willimantic Linen Company in Willimantic, Connecticut, had built for his workers in the 1880s. Photo c. 1880, from the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.*

When **William Eliot Barrows** became General Manager of the Willimantic Linen Company in Willimantic, Connecticut, in 1877, he determined to make it a showpiece of what historians call industrial paternalism or industrial benevolence, the belief that employers were like parents and employees like children, and that the employers were responsible for the moral and cultural education of their workers. Barrows accordingly built himself a large, ornate mansion on the outskirts of town and surrounded it with the Oaks, a refined neighborhood of quaint Victorian cottages for the Company's skilled workers. He built a school, a company store, and a library for workers and their families.

A few years later his successors added a park for the workers' recreation. He instituted coffee breaks. He mandated that all of his employees learn to read and write, and established classes to teach those who couldn't. He built the Company's magnificent new Mill No. 4 – at the time the largest one-story building in the world – with electric lights and stained glass windows. Yet Barrows's tenure at the Company was largely a failure. His Board of Directors became upset because he spent large sums of money on what they considered frivolous projects like the Oaks and the Dunham Hall Library. And while the workers might have appreciated the nice homes and coffee breaks, they resented being treated like children. The Board of Directors fired him in 1883. Whether progressive paternalists like Barrows or rapacious robber barons, the owners and managers who founded and ran Connecticut's textile mills viewed themselves as leaders

and innovators who could – and should – use their wealth and vision to shape their era. There were a lot of men – and some women – in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island with capital to invest in new ideas in the early 1800s. The shipping industry (especially the West Indies trade, the China trade, and the slave trade) had given rise to great fortunes that could be invested in high-risk-but-high-ceiling projects like textile mills. The first entrepreneur to invest in Willimantic was Perez Richmond from Rhode Island, who erected a cotton mill there in 1822. He was soon followed by “Deacon” Lee, who built a second mill later that year. In 1825, three Massachusetts men, Asa, William, and Seth Jillson, opened a third mill.

In 1828, three more Rhode Islanders, Mathew Watson, and Nathan and Arunah Tingley, founded another cotton mill, the Windham Manufacturing Company. In 1845, two more Rhode Islanders, Amos and James Smith, bought Lee’s mill, enlarged it, and renamed it the Smithville Manufacturing Company. In 1860, Grant Swift of Mansfield, Connecticut, opened a small silk mill at Willimantic. Four years later, James and Goodrich Holland bought Swift’s mill, tore it down, and replaced it with a much larger operation. Swift moved to another location in town. In 1866, E. B. Summer opened a third silk mill in Willimantic, and in 1870, Hiram and Albert Conant moved their silk mill to Willimantic from Mansfield. By 1880, rows of stone and brick textile mills, small and large, lined the steep, rocky slopes of the Willimantic gorge.



*Architectural drawing, c. 1880, of one of the worker cottages in the Oaks. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.*

By far the most successful of the Willimantic Textile tycoons was Austin Dunham. In 1845, Dunham, a forty-year-old Hartford, Connecticut, textile merchant who had been born in Mansfield, Connecticut, joined forces with Lawson Ives (a Hartford metal goods manufacturer), William Jillson, and John Capen to purchase Richmond’s mill at the foot of the falls, in a neighborhood known as **Down Sodom**. They replaced it with a larger, three-and-a-half story cotton mill. In 1858, Dunham bought out his partners. By 1870, the mill had two waterwheels

and a steam engine for power, employed 110 workers (60 men, 30 women, and 20 children), and produced \$200,000 worth of cloth each year – about \$3.5 million in today's money. In 1877, it merged with another, even larger, company that Dunham owned at Willimantic.

Dunham's second mill was the giant Willimantic Linen Company, which he co-founded with Ives in 1845. At first, the Company manufactured linen cloth, but when the Crimean War cut off its supply of Russian flax, Dunham shifted to producing cotton thread instead. In 1857, the Company, flush with profits, built a large new stone millhouse with 10,000 spindles. When the Civil War loomed, Dunham – having learned a valuable lesson from the earlier Crimean War – decided to stockpile cotton in advance of the fighting. Sure enough, when the war began in 1861, most of the other New England textile mills found themselves without Southern cotton. But Dunham had plenty. He continued operation, producing thread that was the in the Union soldiers' uniforms. Business boomed. Dunham became rich.

He expanded operations by building an even larger millhouse adjacent to first, with brand new machinery especially designed to produce thread of sufficient quality and uniformity that it could be used in that popular new invention, the sewing machine. When Dunham died in 1877, his Willimantic Linen Company dominated thread production in the United States.



*Two views of Barrows's mansion on Fairview Street in Willimantic, adjacent to the Oaks cottages, taken in the early 20th century, after it had been converted into a private hospital. Such mansions proclaimed the place of mill owners and managers at the top of the 19th-century industrial hierarchy. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.*



After Dunham, the Willimantic Linen Company was run by professional managers like William Eliot Barrows and Eugene S. Boss. Then, in 1898, mysterious stranger with English accents appeared in Willimantic. They turned out to be agents for the Coats corporation, a British conglomerate that was the world's largest manufacturer of thread, and which is today known as Coats and Clark. Tired of competition from New England mills like the Willimantic Linen Company, Coats had determined to buy them out.

It formed a subsidiary called the American Thread Company – British managed, despite its name – and acquired the Linen Company and several other large New England mills. The new American Thread Company had subsidiaries in Fall River and Holyoke, Massachusetts – and would soon acquire more in North Carolina and Tennessee – but for the next eight decades the mills at Willimantic, with Barrows's showplace Mill No. 4, would remain its main facility.

Mill owners, managers, and agents were successful businessmen who enjoyed refined, genteel lifestyles. They showed off their high status by living in multi-room hilltop mansions with high ceilings, fancy wallpaper, polished wood floors, fine furnishings, and lace curtains. They dressed in nice clothes, employed servants to care for their homes, and enjoyed the respect and admiration of their neighbors. Powerful and wealthy, they were local leaders – the movers and shakers in the communities where they lived.



*In the 1870s Barrows also built the Willimantic Linen Company's company store, shown in this early 20th-century postcard. Company stores were commonplace in Connecticut mill towns. They sold both food and general merchandise*

*to workers and their families on credit, and were in part a device for recapturing wages. This building now houses the Windham Textile and History Museum. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.*



*On the third floor of the Willimantic Linen Company store, Barrows created a library for workers and their families. The library, named Dunham Hall for Austin Dunham, the founder of the WLC, is a prime example of industrial benevolence, or industrial paternalism. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.*



*In 1884, Barrows built the WLC's modern Mill No. 4, the first one-story, electrified mill in the United States. At the time, it was the largest one-story building in the world. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.*



The Willimantic Linen Company's wooden Mill No. 3, shown above in an early 20th-century photo, was located in the Willimantic mill neighborhood known as Down Sodom. The mill was constructed in 1845 by the builder Lloyd Baldwin, who built many of Willimantic's early buildings, for the Welles company, which used it to manufacture cotton thread. It was constructed on the site of the 1822 Richmond mill, the first textile mill built in Willimantic. In 1858 the mill was purchased by Austin Dunham, who was also a co-owner of the Willimantic Linen Company. In 1877 the WLC acquired the building and renamed it Mill No. 3. The American Thread Company bought it in 1898. It was demolished in 1926 to make room for the American Thread Company's electrical generating plant.



In 1915 the American Thread Company turned the old Windham County Fairgrounds, adjacent to Mill No. 3, into a park for its workers, and for the larger Willimantic community. The park had baseball fields, tennis courts, and other facilities. The park was another example of industrial paternalism. Today, it is operated by the town of Windham. Photo by Stephanie Conforti, from the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.



General Eugene S. Boss, the agent of the Willimantic Linen Company in the late 19th century and the American Thread Company in the early 20th century. Boss, a Willimantic native, rose through the ranks from middle management to become the Company's chief executive at the Company's Willimantic Mills plant. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History.



*In the 1880s the Willimantic Linen Company built this elegant Victorian mansion for Boss. The mansion was a visible symbol of Boss's status as the chief executive of Willimantic's largest mill. As this photo shows, it is still one of Willimantic's most elegant homes. Photo by Stephanie Conforti, from the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.*



*Besides the Boss mansion, the Willimantic Linen also built an elegant Victorian mansion for its chemist and dye master, James Reid, in 1880. This photo shows the Reid mansion today. Photo by Stephanie Conforti, from the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.*



*The William Jillson house, built in the 1840s and extensively remodeled sometime after 1865, was the home of another Willimantic mill owning family. This contemporary photo is by Stephanie Conforti, and is from the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.*



*John Love (left) was general manager of the American Thread Company's Willimantic plant in the 1960s. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.*



*The William Brand Company used its Willimantic factory to manufacture electric cables in the 1950s and 1960s. Its successor, General Cable, still has a factory in the city. Cable companies like Brand nevertheless used techniques like twisting originally pioneered by the textile industry. Such spin-off industries were commonplace, and contributed to the complexity and affluence of the industrial era. In this photo, Connecticut Governor Abraham Ribicoff presides over the opening of Brand's new plant. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.*