# AN ELM GROWS IN WILLIMANTIC

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*The main building of the Windham Textile and History Museum — the Mill Museum — as it looked shortly after it was built in 1877, at the corner of Main (left) and Union (right) streets in Willimantic, CT. The Willimantic Linen Company's factory buildings were just across Main Street, to the left. Icons of Connecticut village life, elms lined Main Street in front of the factory, and also grew in front of the store. Nineteenth-century factory cities and villages like Willimantic were not grim wastelands, but rather small elm forests surrounded by cleared farmland.*

"What kind of tree is that?" Stephanie asked.

Stephanie was a student intern at the Windham Textile and History Museum and a history major at the University of Connecticut. She knew a lot about trees and probably already had a pretty good idea what the tree was — she just hadn't expected to see one. It was about 20 feet tall, had serrated leaves, and was located on Union Street in Willimantic just outside the Museum's Dugan Mill exhibit building.

It was a young American elm. For people Stephanie's age, elms are unfamiliar, but folks born before 1970 remember elms from our youth, when they symbolized New England village life. Then, in a flash, they had disappeared, victims of the Dutch Elm disease, a deadly epidemic accidentally introduced from Europe.

But it turns out that not all the elms died. Some of them survived.

English colonists who came to Connecticut in the 1600s knew all about elms. Several species, including the English elm (ironically, introduced to Britain by the Romans), grew throughout southern and eastern England, from whence most colonists had come. They were glad to find elms in Connecticut, not only because the trees were familiar, but also because they were cherished icons of English culture.

Tall, graceful, and long-lived, with especially tough, hard wood, elms had long been central to rural English life. They comprised much of the country's famous hedgerows. They were used for fuel and making tools, especially plow handles. In many English communities, venerable elms marked the village center. In pre-Christian times, elms had been considered symbolic of the vital force of Mother Earth herself, because they lived so long and were so tall, strong, and tough.

So, while the colonists viewed most of the trees they found in the New World either as nuisances or resources, and cut down as many of them as they could in order to transform the forest into farmland and the trees into timber, they spared the elms.

They left tall, single elms standing in pastures, to provide shade for their livestock.

They allowed elm seedlings to sprout along stone walls and other fences, thereby marking boundaries. If good fences made good neighbors, so did good elms.

They even planted elms in their yards. To their mind, unlike other trees elms symbolized civilization rather than wilderness, and their presence proclaimed that the landscape had been anglicized. The colonists further believed that, because of the trees' great height and massive, spreading canopies, elms would protect their homes from lightning, gales, and the sun. Newlyweds sometimes planted pairs of bridal elms in their front yards, to express their wish that their marriages might endure as long as the great trees themselves.

By the late 1700s, American elms were a familiar and frequent sight across Connecticut. Under the circumstances, it's not surprising that, following independence, elms – along with chestnuts, another common New England tree – came to be seen as symbols of America itself, every bit as representative of the growing, rural nation as turkeys, maize, pumpkins, hard cider, and Niagara Falls, other well-known American icons. Searching for symbols to represent the new nation, painters from the Hudson Valley School – who collectively invented "nature's nation," the first truly American approach to art – came to Connecticut to paint elms as often as they visited western New York to depict Niagara Falls.

At the same time, independence brought important changes in the shape and layout of Connecticut villages, changes that had a major impact on elms. For the first time, Connecticut villages began to develop distinct, European-style centers, with greens, churches, and clusters of homes. Connecticut artist John Warner Barber sketched dozens of these emergent villages. Typically, he juxtaposed horizontal greens and crossroads with vertical churches and elms, and the four became the chief icons of the Connecticut village.

Because elms seemed to symbolize Connecticut village life, the independent new nation, and America's traditional English roots – and because they were spectacularly beautiful with their graceful, Grecian-urn shapes and spreading, shady canopies – in the 1800s they

became Connecticut's favorite tree.  Soon, they lined the streets of the state's burgeoning new industrial centers. New Haven, Waterbury, Willimantic, and other mill cities all planted elms.

Consequently, the Windham Textile and History Museum has in its collection a number of photographs of Willimantic as it looked a century ago, lined with elms. The photos offer a study in contrasts, for while in the 1800s the surrounding farmland was often completely denuded of trees, the city streets were shaded by hundreds of tall, stately elms. At a time when deforestation was the norm, Connecticut's villages were miniature elm forests, islands of trees situated in a sea of farmland and pasture.

As Connecticut continued to industrialize, the drive to plant elms became increasingly powerful. Like Willimantic, almost every mill city and village in Connecticut had its Elm Street, a shady, peaceful counterpoint to its hot, bustling, busy Main Street, Mill Street, Railroad Street, or Factory Street. Worried by the rapid pace of modernization, Connecticans attempted to recreate the vanishing village life and pastoral ideal of their forebears by planting elms along their residential streets.

In Willimantic, people even planted elms in front of the mills. Elms lined Willimantic's lower Main Street, in front of the Willimantic Linen Company (later the American Thread Company) complex. The Linen Company even named its boarding house "the Elms," and not surprisingly, old photos show tall elms shading the house's spacious dooryard. The Company also planted elms in front of its worker row houses.

By the late 19th century, elms were everywhere in Connecticut.

And then came the great dying.

Thomas J. Campanella traces the fate of elms in his 2003 history, *Republic of Shade*. Beginning in the 1860s, city planners began to remove some of the elms in order to widen the streets for trolley tracks. Then, in the 1880s, the telephone and electric companies cut down more, to create room for utility poles. In the 1920s, automobiles began to poison the elms with carbon monoxide.

But the gravest threat came in the 1930s in the form of the Dutch Elm Disease. A fungus carried by a burrowing insect, the disease had already struck Europe. Somehow, it crossed the Atlantic (most likely in a cargo of boards) and appeared in Ohio in 1931. Carried east by the prevailing winds, the beetles reached Connecticut in 1933.

Two factors aided the spread of the disease. The first was the fact that Connecticans had loved elms so much that they had planted them everywhere, almost to the exclusion of other species. Connecticans were guilty of what environmental scientists call

monocropping, a dangerous practice. With so many elms so close together, the fungus multiplied rapidly and spread easily.

The second factor was the 1938 hurricane. The fierce storm blew down thousands of trees across Connecticut, including hundreds of elms. The damage was extensive and the cleanup slow. The fungus spread rapidly in the rotting bark.

Elms died by the millions. In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, in a frantic effort to save some of them, city crews cut down all the diseased trees they could find. By 1970 almost all of the giants were gone.

Most people came to believe that the American elm had become extinct.

But it turns out that, like chestnuts, they're still around.

A few elms survived, either because they were somehow genetically stronger, or because they were isolated, or because they were located in places where stiff breezes kept the beetles away. Even some of the stumps managed to cling to life, sending up suckers. Seedlings occasionally sprouted. Most young elms still catch the disease, however, when their bark becomes thick enough to support the beetles that carry the fungus.

Scientists, however, have cloned some of the more resistant elms, creating the so-called Liberty elms and Princeton elms.

So, a few elms still grow in Willimantic. Local activist Faith Kenton pointed out a large, beautiful elm on lower Main Street in Willimantic.

Looking for pictures, Fran Funk, the Willimantic *Chronicle*'s longtime photographer, met us at the Mill Museum. We joined her on an elm walkabout. Eagle-eyed, she spotted what had to be the parent of the young elm Stephanie had found next to the Museum, a towering, graceful tree behind a home on Union Street.

We are overjoyed to discover that some elms have survived the great die-off, that nature is stronger and more resilient than we thought, and that American elms still grow in Willimantic.

In 2017 the Windham Garden Club launched the 325 Trees Project, pledged to plant 325 trees and shrubs in celebration of the 325th anniversary of Windham's incorporation as a town. The Club raised money and purchased more than a score of hardy, young, disease-resistant elms, cloned from a single survivor. They planted them along the city's streets. One now grows tall and strong outside the Mill Museum, at the corner of Union and Main

streets. The young tree Stephanie had found, alas, did not survive. But the newcomers are healthy. With luck, elms have come back to Connecticut to stay.


*The Mill Museum's sturdy Liberty Elm is on the left, healthy and growing. It occupies the approximate spot where a 19th-century elm once stood. The Museum is proud to be part of the Windham Garden Club's project to return elms to Willimantic.*