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Loom and Spindle

The Mill Museum Newsletter

May 2024

Mill Museum To Recall Women's Role in American Revolutionary War Era Through Live Textile Demonstrations, Exhibits

As Americans prepare to mark the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution in 2026, Willimantic's Mill Museum will begin the commemoration earlier in a major exhibit starting in June related to the homekeeping skills practiced by women in colonial America.

Opening on Saturday June 29, the museum will present the ground-breaking exhibit: *Liberty's Daughters in Northeastern Connecticut: Women, Textiles, and the Nonimportation Movement in the Revolutionary Era*.

Over the ensuing months, the museum will present multiple live demonstrations of preindustrial textile technology and other women's homekeeping skills, as well as sponsor related programs in the museum's main exhibition room.

The presentations and exhibits will bring to life the critical role played by women in the birth of the United States. It will explore how women as makers of textiles, often out of cotton, wool, or flax, contributed vitally to the success of American boycotts against English manufactured goods in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War.

" The male leaders of this Nonimportation Movement quickly realized that, in order for it to succeed, it needed the energetic support of American women. "

Although not all colonial women could spin or weave, by the time of the American Revolution about 75% of colonial households owned spinning wheels and around 10% owned looms. Enslaved women also produced textile products.

The exhibit will also examine the extent to which women's role in the boycotts empowered them both politically and economically and set the stage for the transformation of the American economy in the years following the Revolution.

"When in the 1760s and 1770s, American colonists decided to protest laws and taxes enacted in [Britain's] Parliament -- indeed, to protest the entire notion of Parliamentary supremacy -- they put teeth in their protests by boycotting British manufactured goods," says Jamie Eves, the Mill Museum's interim executive director and Windham town historian, who is the co-curator of the upcoming exhibit.

The boycotts were called the "Nonimportation Movement." Many of the items boycotted by the colonists were textiles.

"The male leaders of this Nonimportation Movement quickly realized that, in order for it to succeed, it needed the energetic support of American women, for it was women who knew how to spin thread and yarn, and weave it into cloth," he explained. "Without women's labor and enthusiastic support, the boycotts would have failed."

The exhibit will focus on the contributions of patriot women -- called the Daughters of Liberty at the time -- to the success of the Nonimportation

Movement, Eves explained.

"It also explores how women's vital role in the movement may have -- or may not have -- transformed women's political and economic roles in the new republic following the American Revolution, interweaving conclusions reached by mainstream historians with local examples."

> *" Women could earn money independent of their husbands, perhaps [indicating] the beginning of suffrage. "*

Peggy Church, co-curator of the exhibit and an experienced weaver and spinner, agrees about the importance of these home-based skills in the 1700s.

"With their skills in spinning and weaving, they provided homespun textiles in support of nonimportation of British goods," Church said.

"Women could earn money independent of their husbands, perhaps [indicating] the beginning of suffrage," she added. "They held spinning bees on village greens to publicly demonstrate in support of nonimportation."

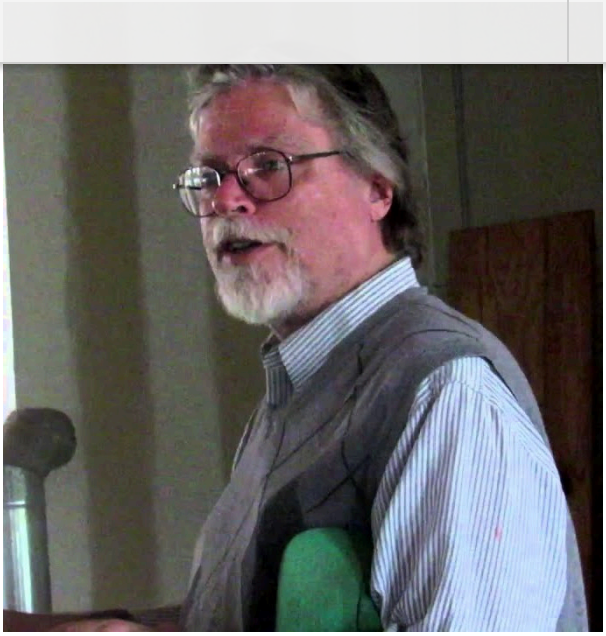
Eves points out that many colonial women took part in these 18th century spinning bees. It was a public act of defiance to the British.

"The importance of the bees was that women had to make a public choice to support the boycotts or not," Eves said. "Not joining the bees risked having the entire household branded as Tories. Joining the bees cemented one's commitment to the cause."

Many historians also say that the political American Revolution was followed by two economic revolutions: the Market Revolution and the Industrial Revolution during the years of the new republic, Eves added. "Women participated in both, in major ways," he recalled.

Jamie Eves

In recent decades, historians also have debated whether the boycott of British goods in the years before the American Revolution actually led to political empowerment of women.



The question was addressed in a 1980 book called “Liberty’s Daughters.” Its author is Mary Beth Norton, a former history professor at the University of Connecticut and past president of the American Historical Association. For decades, she taught American history at Cornell University.

In her studies, she has argued that women were empowered by their role in the boycotts and that the American Revolution was a first step in an emerging women’s rights movement, according to Eves, who himself is a veteran UConn history professor.

“Since then, other historians have challenged Norton, maintaining that she exaggerated women’s political gains and arguing that the Revolution was less liberating than she believed,” Eves said. The debate will be addressed during the museum’s exhibit.

In coming days, the Mill Museum will list on its website a schedule of upcoming events connected to the Liberty’s Daughters exhibit. These include: Spinners are expected to demonstrate the techniques used to spin wool, flax, and cotton. Cotton will be spun on a great wheel and on a charkha. Other information will be presented on silk. Bobbin Lace making and rug hooking demonstrations are scheduled, too.

Among those scheduled to take part are Peggy Church, as well as Mansfield Historical Society Director Ann Galonska.

On Saturday August 17, the Mill Museum will partner with colleagues at Windham Preservation, Inc., to reenact a Revolutionary War-era spinning bee on the Windham Green. The similar bees done in the 1700s were contests to see who could spin the longest thread, usually of flax, Church explained.

In coming months, group and individual tours of the exhibits and attendance at demonstrations are strongly encouraged. The museum’s exhibit is scheduled to

run through Sunday Oct. 20. It's being partially funded via a grant from Connecticut Humanities.

CPTV to Feature Mill Museum and Its Textile Experts

The crew of a popular CPTV program recently stopped off at the Mill Museum to film an upcoming show related to the engaging museum and its many creative activities.

CPTV's "Where ART Thou" is scheduled to premiere the half-hour episode at 7:30 p.m. on Sunday July 14.

The series, now in its third year, regularly is aired by Connecticut Public Television. It's hosted by Ray Hardman.

The crew tours the state in search of fascinating artists, performers, and unique places. Many programs focus on local artists and the arts communities in Connecticut.

For the upcoming show, the CPTV crew showed up at the Mill Museum on April 24.

They were interested in filming the "hidden" areas of the museum -- spaces the public doesn't get to see, according to Mill Museum Interim Executive Director Jamie Eves, who is also Windham town historian.

They filmed a hidden tunnel underneath the museum's main exhibit room, the second-floor vault, and some other locations.

The two tunnels under the museum accommodated steam pipes in earlier days. Steam heat and steam power were introduced to the Willimantic mills in the 1870s and 1880s, according to Eves. Steam was generated by two central steam plants, one on each side of the Willimantic River, and pumped to auxiliary buildings via pipes that ran through underground tunnels.

While at the museum, the crew also took video of the Dugan Mill Factory Floor Exhibit. It turns out one member of the CPTV crew attended Eastern Connecticut State University. He previously visited the museum, as a student, and was enthusiastic about the industrial exhibit, and encouraged others in the crew to see it.



Ray Hardman

They also filmed the museum's archival area. The host interviewed Eves about the many fascinating locations in the museum.

The crew also filmed as Eves operated the spool tumbler in the Dugan Mill exhibit.

"The spool tumbler is the only piece of powered industrial machinery that the museum runs," Eves explained.

It was used at the American Thread Company's sawmill in Milo, Maine. It sanded down rough-cut white birch thread spools. In recent years, the tumbler was restored by students at Windham Technical High School.

The CPTV crew also filmed and interviewed Peggy Church, an experienced weaver who teaches many classes at the Mill Museum.

She said six crew members showed up to visit with her at her studio.

"They immediately scanned the studio space and began unpacking an incredible amount of equipment. They set up the interview location with four cameras and lots of lights and wired Ray and I with microphones," Church recalled.

Many of the questions they asked came as a result of Church speaking with a producer earlier.

"The gist of the questioning aimed at how I came to a lifetime of textiles," Church said. "Pathways open before us and we take them or we don't."

Her pathway dates back decades ago.

"For me, a pathway opened in 1973 when my mother-in-law offered me the extra great wheel as a thank you for a weekend insulating an attic floor," Church said. Her learning to spin led to learning how to weave, and so on, she said.

For the CPTV program, she also demonstrated on a floor loom she uses for her Airbnb Experience, "Weave yourself a tea towel."

The crew shot from every angle to show the mechanical action of the loom.

Next, she demonstrated the big computer-controlled loom.

"There is a clickety clack sound as the solenoids move and I treadle the shed open and flick the fly shuttle back and forth and beat the weft yarn into place," Church said.

They also took video of flax spinning.

While in the region, the CPTV crew also visited with WILI radio host John Murphy and John Starinovich, a noted Willington woodworker.

Viewers interested in seeing a trailer for the series' third season, can visit a landing page at ctpublic.org/wat.

Mill Museum Volunteer Profile: Jean de Smet

Jean de Smet is always ready to lend her leadership skills, expertise and time to Willimantic's Mill Museum.

In recent months, she's staffed the museum's front counter to greet visitors, wrapped gifts for a holiday fundraiser, weeded museum gardens, and helped to recruit attendees for a lecture on the environment. She's vacuumed, dusted, and cleaned the toilets weekly.

A former first selectman for the town of Windham, she's now best known as a community activist. She also has been president of Willimantic Renaissance Inc. (WRI), which runs the highly successful 3rd Thursday Street Fest. She was one of the founders of the Chocolate Fest, too. Jean also volunteers with the Garden Club of Windham and still finds the time to help out at the soup kitchen.

"I've always been a member of lots of

"I've always been a member of lots of organizations around town," Jean said in a recent

organizations around town," Jean said in a recent interview.

interview. A graduate of the University of Connecticut who also attended the Women's Campaign School at Yale, Jean says it's really important for everyone to volunteer in the community.

"It makes you feel really good when you give back," she explained. "Everyone is so thankful no matter what level of giving you're doing."

For instance, when she staffs the museum's front desk and gift shop on weekends, she makes sure to engage with visitors.

If they were from out-of-town or new to the museum she would ask: Why did they come to see this exhibit? What is it they're looking for?

"They're happy to find a smiling face and a friendly ear that wants to hear why they're there," Jean explained. "The more you interact with people, the more you're going to get back." She works alongside many other volunteers who help out at the museum and at other worthy organizations in town.

"We're the people who do the work out there in the world, and whether it's blue-collar work or white-collar work, we're the workers," she said. "When we see something, we all know enough to say, 'I'll help.'… And no matter what the chore, people jump in and help however they can. It's pretty phenomenal."



Volunteers Jean de Smet (right) and Ann-Marie Hettinger holding down the fort on a recent Saturday morning at the Mill Museum's Gift Shop..
(Image: Amy Marwood)

Often, when gardening at the museum, she delights other volunteers by bringing her dog BB, who is a Goldendoodle. The lovable dog is known for her friendly personality.

Eastern Connecticut State University students who regularly volunteer on museum projects are especially thrilled to meet BB.

“The students love her,” Jean recalls. Even when BB playfully steals their work gloves, she'll bring them back, if you tell her to.

Beyond being a loyal museum volunteer, Jean likes to remind local residents just how much Willimantic has to offer.

“I think people are not as proud of our community as they ought to be,” Jean said. “We have so much to offer in this community, and our own community just doesn't know about it.”

“I suppose people in New York don't go to the Statue of Liberty, so it's probably a common problem. But we should celebrate our community. It is a great place to live.”

Looking at the region as a whole, one of its challenges is “for us to bridge our racial, ethnic, and age gaps,” Jean said. “We don't know each other well enough.”

It’s one of the benefits of 3rd Thursday. It involves and attracts folks of diverse backgrounds. They taste each other’s food and listen to each other’s music.

When asked about Jean’s record of volunteerism, a friend and colleague, Erin Elizabeth Morelle Mainetti, WRI’s event coordinator, said, “She loves Willimantic like it's her own heart and puts herself out there to create a better environment for all of us.”

Jean also is “incredibly versatile and knowledgeable -- eager to help, lead, and create -- to support individuals and organizations around her.”

“She really puts her words into action and so many benefit from her energy and leadership,” Mainetti added. “She is the best example of a leader and volunteer.”

News Briefs

Volunteers Needed to Assemble Loom

At 10 a.m. Thursday, June 6, several of us will be meeting at the Mill Museum to begin the assembly of an old -- probably 18th-century -- barn loom. The Museum has had the loom disassembled and in storage for many years.

Peggy Church and her weaver friends will attempt to assemble it in the Museum's main exhibit room. Some of the wooden timber pieces are fairly large and heavy, so help is needed.

Currently, the loom (in pieces) is stored in the basement of the Museum's Dugan Building. The plan is to carry them out to the parking lot, lay them on tarps or drop cloths, sort them out, number them, and then carry the parts needed into the Museum.

There are mysteries to be solved, too. Is it one loom or two? Are all the pieces there? We will, literally, be reorganizing history. There will be food as well.

If interested in volunteering, please email Mill Museum Interim Director Jamie Eves at historian@millmuseum.org.

Thanks to BJs, Big Y

Both BJ's Wholesale Club in Willimantic and Big Y World Class Market in Mansfield recently donated gift cards to the Mill Museum for museum events.

They were used for refreshments during a lecture by UConn chemist Challa Kumar and during the opening of the *Footprints in the Changing Sand* art exhibit.

Thanks to both local businesses!

Family Event in Lebanon

Hands On History Day will take place between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. on Saturday June 8 at the Lebanon Historical Society.

The program is free and is targeted to families.

Get Woven into the Fabric of Our Museum

You don't have to live in Willimantic or Windham to support the Mill Museum. We're a REGIONAL museum, so folks throughout eastern Connecticut and beyond can learn about the vital role the mills and the people who worked in them played in shaping the area's history. If you've already become a member, THANK YOU! If not, please consider joining our ranks.

At the $25 COTTON (Individual) level, members receive the newsletter; email notice of the Museum's programs and events; free admission to the Museum, its library and exhibits (special events and fundraisers may be extra); and 1-hour access to staff

At the $50 WOOL (Family) level, membership extends these same benefits to members of a household consisting of up to two adults and any number of children.

At the $100 SILK (Patron) level, membership includes all the above benefits, plus invitations to a private, advance showing of exhibits; free personal tours; and 3-hour access to staff time for personal research.

Membership Levels:

Cotton (individual) membership, $25
Wool (family) membership, $50
Silk (patron) membership, $100

Windham Textile & History Museum
411 Main Street, Willimantic, CT 06226
Make checks out to: WTHM

Go to https://millmuseum.org/join-membership/ and join today or increase your level of membership. Your involvement may be one more thread in a growing tapestry of history.

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