



THREAD MILL SQUARE EXHIBIT ROOMS

The second floor of the Mill Museum's main building recreates the components of an 1890s textile mill community. In the Industrial Era, Thread Mill Square was the vibrant heart of Willimantic, Connecticut's fabled Thread City, the home of almost a dozen textile factories. Factory buildings lined one side of the Square, while the other side was filled with storefronts, mansions, and mill worker tenements. A 19th-century "walking city," no part of Willimantic was more than a mile — a 20-minute walk — from the Square. In the Museum, our recreated Thread Mill Square is surrounded by eight exhibit rooms: the Mill Workers' Row House kitchen, the Mill Workers' Row house bedroom, the Mill Manager's Mansion dining room and parlor, the Mill Manager's Mansion bedroom, the Mill Manager's Mansion laundry room, the Company Office, the Brooke Shannon Sewing Machine Exhibit Room, and the Peggy Church Weaving Studio. The central room — Thread Mill Square — ties the others together. Here you will see the outdoor water pump for the Mill Workers' Row House, a collection preindustrial textile tools and machinery (including several spinning wheels of different types, as well as hetchels like the one pictured above), a 19th-century sleigh, historical wall maps, and other artifacts. The staircase leading from Thread Mill Square up to the third floor holds the Museum's Stairwell Art Gallery, featuring the display, "Art of a Mill Town."

Virtual Tour

For a virtual tour of Thread Mill Square, the Mill Workers' Row House, and the Mill manager's Mansion designed for elementary school students, [click here](#).



In the 19th century, the Willimantic Linen Company, Willimantic's largest cotton mill (the Company had briefly manufactured linen thread in the 1850s, but switched to cotton when the Crimean War cut off its supply of Ukrainian flax) and one of the largest manufacturers of cotton thread for home sewing machines, also manufactured ornate wooden thread cases of various designs. Stores that sold WLC thread could purchase the cases to display spools of thread for sale. The Mill Museum has several of these cases on exhibit. This oak checkers table is one. Designed for small general stores, its drawers held spools of thread, while customers played checkers next to warm wood stoves.



This ornate antique desk once belonged to a branch of the Austrian Habsburg dynasty. It was brought to the United States by Leopold von Habsburg, who fled Austria following World War II. Leopold tried his hand at several occupations in the United States in the 1920s and 1930, including acting, and finally settled down as a factory worker at the American Screw Company plant in Willimantic, CT. Leopold lived out his days in a small house on Valley Street. The desk is an example that immigrants came from all backgrounds -- different ethnicities (Leopold's father was a German Austrian, his mother of Spanish descent), social classes, and levels of education.



Industrialization meant urbanization, and urbanization meant buildings crowded together -- which meant that fires became real dangers. One of the reasons that Willimantic became a borough within the Town of Windham in 1833, and upgraded to a city in 1896, was so that residents could tax themselves in order to create professional fire departments. At first, Willimantic had three municipal fire brigades and a fourth brigade -- the American Fire Brigade -- owned by the American Thread Company, which purchased the Willimantic Linen Company in 1898. In the 20th century, the three municipal brigades merged and ATCO closed its brigade, centralizing firefighting in the Willimantic Fire Department. To communicate the existence and location of fires, the city installed fire alarm boxes, connected to the firehouses by telegraph lines. Gamewell boxes like this one were scattered throughout the city, housed in larger red boxes.



The above is a detail from an oil painting of Thread Mill Square by Windham, CT, artist Annie Wandell.

The full original hangs in the Mill Museum's Stairwell Gallery, which houses the majority of the Museum's "Art of a Mill Town" exhibit. The Gallery is directly off from the Museum's Thread Mill Square exhibit rooms, on the staircase connecting the Museum's second and third floors. Wandell's wonderful painting shows Thread Mill Square in its last days; not long after she painted the scene in the 1980s, the brick factory building on the right and the archway over the street were demolished. The automobile bridge was replaced in 1999 with the famous Frog Bridge (officially called Thread City Crossing) a few blocks upriver, and became a pedestrian bridge with a garden. That WAndell captured the scene in winter symbolizes that it was the end of an era.



The Mill Museum is both a history museum and an art museum, with a number of pieces of textile-related art on display. This sculpture -- part of our "Art of a Mill Town" display -- is titled "Mending the Earth: The Scraps of Time," an award-winning piece by Phoebe Godfrey, Joe Serrenho, and Tina Shirshac. A metal/ceramic sculpture made from 100% recycled materials. This collaborative piece explores the regenerative power of nature and honors the ant community as an example of collective problem solving. After the collapse of humanity's unsustainable culture, the artists imagine that ants will work together to take the scraps of time -- what humanity leaves behind -- to mend the earth for the good of all remaining life. Includes wire, scrap metal, a discarded sewing machine, ceramic ants, etc.



An old-fashioned water pump sits in the Mill Museum's Thread Mill Square exhibit space, just outside of the Mill Workers' Row House Exhibit rooms. Willimantic did not begin to install municipal piped water systems (and sewer systems, too) until the end of the 19th century, and not in working class neighborhoods until several years into the 20th century. Until then, city dwellers -- like rural folks -- got their water from wells and used outdoor privies. A late-1800s insurance map shows that, in Willimantic's Iverston neighborhood (composed mainly of company-owned worker row houses) the wells and privies were located next to each other, in alleyways behind the houses -- a circumstance that would have made cholera and other similar diseases real threats. Not surprisingly, then, the drive to install municipal water and sewers was led by Mayors Oscar Tanner and Danny Dunn, elected at the turn of the century by immigrant and working-class voters. Dunn himself was of Irish descent. Pumps like this would have been installed atop the outdoor wells -- and, later, in kitchen sinks. Today, water pumps are electric and mostly invisible. But these older, hand-powered pumps are easier to understand -- and, among others things, explain such expressions as "pump-priming."



The Museum's Stairwell Art Gallery, on the staircase leading from the second to the third floor, features the exhibit, "Art of a Mill Town."



Thread Mill Square also has an exhibit of preindustrial textile tools and machines, including this flax wheel, also called a Saxon or Irish wheel. There are also great wheels, also called walking wheels, hetchels, boat shuttles, click reels, and more.