

LIFE AT THE MILL BOARDINGHOUSE

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Mill workers standing on the front porch of the Elms boardinghouse, c. 1925. While the Elms was designed for young, single female boarders, in 1870 and 1880 both males and females boarded there. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.

On a quiet late summer morning, we sat at an old, polished oak table in the beautiful wood-beamed Dunham Hall Library at the Windham Textile and History Museum, poring over old photographs. With white cotton gloves, we examined each image in turn, allowing them to carry us into the past.

The photo that really grabbed our attention showed an ornate parlor decorated with flowers. On the reverse, someone had written a date – 21 September 1914 – and the words, “where Walter and I stood to be married.” Beneath, in pencil, was added, “Elms Boarding House, 287 Main, Elms Living Room.” A second photo identified the “I” as Minnie Ethel Snow, a relative of the Elms’s landlady and landlord.



The Elms, an industrial boardinghouse operated by the Willimantic Linen Company and (later) the American Thread Company in Willimantic, Connecticut in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. This photo is c. 1925 and is from the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.

Factory boardinghouses like the Elms in Willimantic, Connecticut — across the street from the old American Thread Company mills — were once commonplace. Nineteenth-century mill owners erected them to house the thousands of young, single women and men — mostly women in their teens and 20s — who were the typical factory hands of the early Industrial Revolution. In an era of industrial paternalism, boardinghouses helped ease workers into factory life by providing not only inexpensive accommodations, but also camaraderie, family-style living, and social control. As the photo attested, they were an integral part of the personal lives of generations of workers, fit places for weddings.

The **First Industrial Revolution** — characterized by the manufacture of textiles using waterpower — got underway in Connecticut in the early 1800s, having spread westward from its origins in Rhode Island. Eastern Connecticut in particular had plenty of small rivers for waterpower, lots of surplus capital from the **Market Revolution** (especially from the shipping industry), deep water seaports to connect it to distant markets, and a growing population of underemployed but industrious and literate farmers, farm laborers, and farm children seeking work as mill hands.

Before 1830, most of the mills in Connecticut employed older, married workers with families, which meant that boarding houses were rare.

Early Connecticut mill owner Smith Wilkinson explained, “In collecting our help, we are obliged to employ poor families, and generally those having the greatest number of children, those who have lived in retirement situations on small, poor farms, or in hired [that is, rented] houses.” After 1830, however, when the need for labor increased, owners built boardinghouses to attract younger, single workers as well as families. Increased reliance on young, single workers — and on boardinghouses — came to be known as the **Lowell-Waltham System**, after the Massachusetts cities of Lowell and Waltham, where young “**mill girls**” and boardinghouses were especially common. Later in the nineteenth century, in the 1890s, as

more immigrants began to arrive from Ireland, French Canada, Italy, eastern Europe, and elsewhere, the mills returned to hiring mostly families, and in the twentieth century boardinghouses became less common.

Owners tried to make the boardinghouses as homelike as possible. They discovered that rural parents felt better about allowing their teenagers – especially their daughters – to leave home to work in the mills if the boardinghouses had safe conditions under stable female management. “The most efficient guards were adopted in establishing boardinghouses, at the cost of the Company, under the charge of respectable women,” noted a Massachusetts mill owner. “Under these circumstances, the daughters of respectable farmers were readily induced to come to these mills for a temporary period.”



All of the bedrooms had at least one window, so there was plenty of light and fresh air. Around 1901, the owners installed indoor plumbing, placing a bathroom on each floor, each with its own tub, toilet, and lavatory. In all likelihood, earlier boarders had used chamber pots and factory. It sought to foster a homelike atmosphere by hiring an older married couple, Mr. and Mrs. Bartlett, as housekeepers. According to a contemporary newspaper account, which (An earlier plan showed a dinner table) dresser from the Elms is on display at the Museum.

we found quoted in Tom Beardsley's *Willimantic: Industry and Community* (available for sale in the Museum's Linen Company Store gift shop), the Bartletts staged Christmas parties for their all-female boarders, featuring the Elms again, including the bath-rooms and adding dust chutes and a metal fire escape to the rear. Boarders still probably slept two to a bed; the evidence for this is the existence of an "isolation room," complete with its own bathroom, for sick boarders – unnecessary if each boarder had her own room.

Like most boardinghouses, the Elms was designed to look and feel like a large house. According to engineers' plans in the Museum's library, the Elms was a three-story wooden structure, 96 feet long and 45 feet wide. Later, in 1917, the American Thread Company (the first floor was mostly communal space containing, besides the housekeeper's quarters, kitchen, a dining room, and a parlor for white-gap board company, who probably were not permitted upstairs. The building had white gap board siding, shutters, a wrap-around porch, and stages from the windows. the "living room" we had seen in the evocative 1914 wedding photo.

Upstairs were 36 bedrooms, 17 on the second floor and 19 on the third. Most were 9 feet 6 inches wide by 12 feet 4 inches deep, or 117 square feet, just enough for a double bed and a dresser – and thus two boarders, for in the 19th century people typically slept at least two to a bed. It featured lace curtains, an ornate carpet, intricate wallpaper, a fireplace (which did not appear operational), Victorian-era molded furniture, and framed photographs on the walls. Two more photographs, circa 1915, showed the landlady and landlord – Julia Lamb ("Grandma") Snow and George Washington ("Grandpa") Snow – perched in comfortable chairs.

With dozens of boarders to feed, the Elms would have required a great deal of food. In 1917 it had a capacious 576-square-foot kitchen, complete with three sinks, a gas range, a gas stove, a steamer, and a "potato parker." It also had a 460-square-foot "pastry kitchen" with an icebox and baker.

Nineteenth-century mill boardinghouses were designed to provide a safe, refined middle-class residential experience — all the better to attract teenaged farm girls, and to reassure their nervous parents. The Elms had an elegant parlor fit for a wedding, as shown in this 1910s photo. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.

To find out more about who lived in the Elms boardinghouse, we visited the Center for Connecticut Studies on the top floor of the J. Eugene Smith Library at Eastern Connecticut State University to search through the 1870 and 1880 manuscript federal census on microfilm. We squinted at the enumerators' handwritten notations. With bright yellow pencils (pens are not allowed in the Center), we transferred the information onto white index cards.

Each decade, the United States undertakes a comprehensive census of the population in order to ascertain each state's representation in Congress and to collect any social and economic data that Congress may have requested. Several new questions are added each time the census is taken, and consequently the forms grow ever longer over time. Enumerators go door to door, recording the information they gather on preprinted forms. These forms, with the enumerators' notes, are known as the manuscript census.



Mrs. Julia Snow ran the Elms boardinghouse in the 1910s. One of her duties was to protect the virtue of the young female boarders. She looks like she was probably good at her job. From the collections of the Windham Textile and History Museum.

Several years ago the federal government began putting manuscript censuses on microfilm. Today, all of the censuses from 1790 to 1930 are on film, except for the 1890 census, which was destroyed by fire. For privacy reasons, manuscript censuses from 1940 to 2000 are not yet available. The Center has all of the Connecticut population censuses on microfilm. The University of Connecticut's Homer Babbidge Library and the Connecticut State Library in Hartford also have the agricultural and industrial censuses, as well.

The 1870 census was the first one to include the Elms, which had been built in 1863. We wound the microfilm roll into the reader and pushed the fast-forward button until we reached Windham. Unfortunately, the enumerators didn't record street addresses that year, but they did number each dwelling.

Slowly, we turned the hand crank on the reader, checking each dwelling until we found one with a long list of residents. The second name listed was Jane E. Bartlett, and her occupation was recorded as “boarding housekeeper.” Since we already knew from other sources that a Mrs. Bartlett was the first housekeeper of the Elms, we knew we were in the right place.

In 1870 the census recorded the name, race, gender, age, occupation, and place of birth of each person. Sixty-seven people were recorded living at the Elms. These included the housekeeper, her husband, Charles Bartlett (a machinist), four domestic servants, and 61 boarders.

Since a 1909 plan of the Elms showed 36 bedrooms, apparently the boarders lived two to a room – a pleasant contrast to the early 19th-century factory boardinghouses in Lowell, Massachusetts, where boarders frequently slept four to a room.

We were surprised to discover that the Elms had both male and female boarders, another contrast to Lowell, where in the early 1800s all the boardinghouses were single sex. According to the historian Thomas Dublin in his book *Women and Work*, 19th-century factories built single sex boardinghouses in a paternalistic effort to control the sexuality of their unmarried female employees – and to get rural fathers to allow their young daughters to take jobs in the mills. Yet in 1870 the Elms had 31 female and 30 male boarders. The almost 50-50 ratio suggests that the women lived on the second floor of the three-story building and the men on the third. The servants probably lived on the first floor, along with the housekeeper and her husband.

Although the 1870 census did not record respondents’ marital status, a quick check of surnames indicated that most of them were probably single. We also checked the 1880 census, which did record marital status, and discovered that all but four of the female boarders that year were single, while two were widowed, one was divorced, and only one was married. However, nearly half of the male boarders in 1880 were married, although obviously not to other boarders.

Another interesting discovery was that most of the female boarders were Yankees, while most of the men were immigrants. In 1870, 23 of the female boarders were from New England or New York, while only nine were born elsewhere – six Irish, one English, one German, and one Scots. In addition, two of the female servants were Irish and two were Yankees. Of the 30 men, only 11 were Yankees, while six were Irish, seven English, one German, four Scots, and one Swiss.

The 1880 census told a similar story – three quarters of the female boarders were Yankees, while almost half of the men were immigrants.

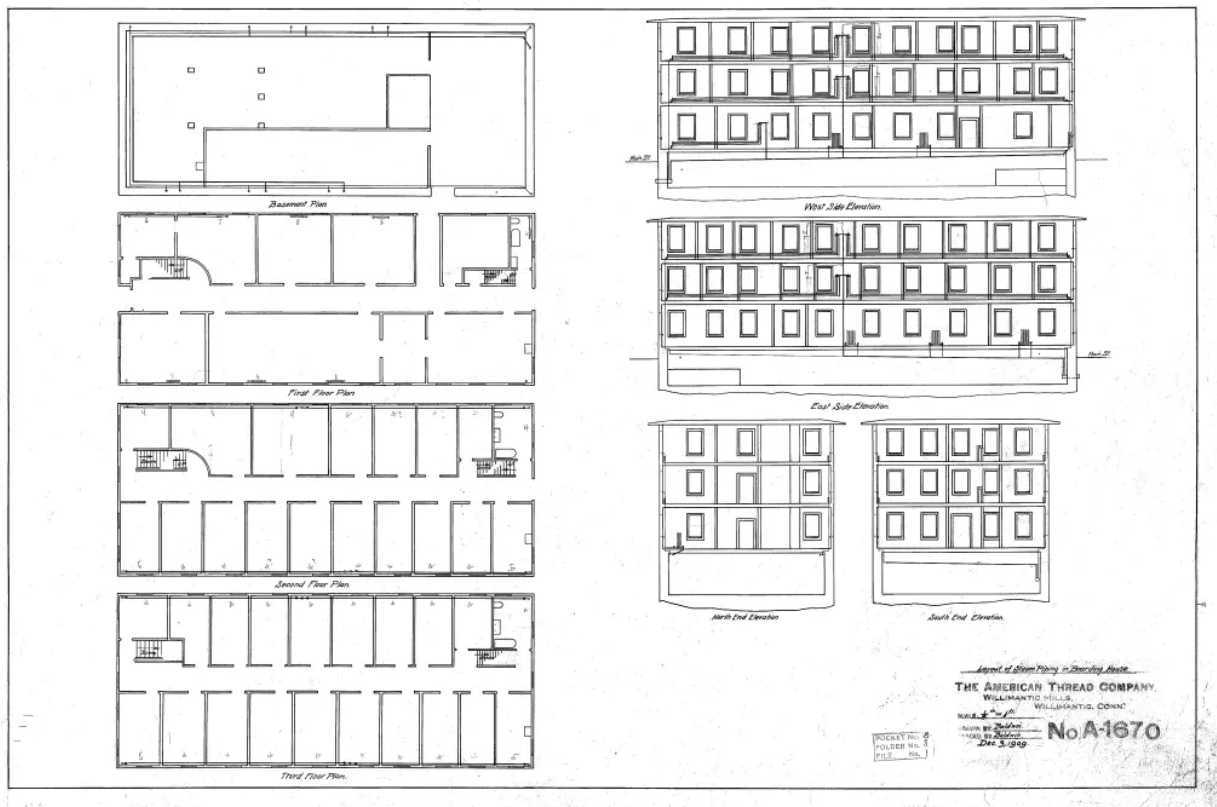
The female boarders were also younger than the men. In 1870 nearly 40 percent of the females were under 20, compared to only 13 percent of the males. A third of the men were 30 or older,

compared to only 16 percent of the women. In 1880 most of the females were still in their 20s, while the majority of the men were now over 30.

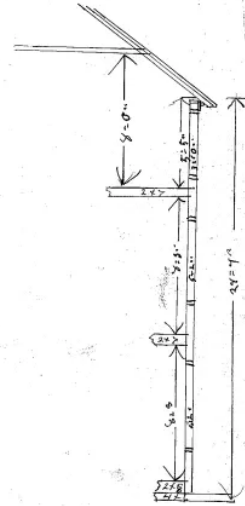
Finally, males were more likely than females to be considered skilled workers. While both censuses listed the occupations of almost all of the women as “works in the mill,” the 1880 census indicated that most of the men held skilled positions such as painter, dyer, stonecutter, machinist, or carpenter.

In the 1930s the American Thread Company sold the Elms to a private landlord. Company housing was no longer profitable, and during the Great Depression the company sold all of its housing, including its single-family residences, duplexes, and apartments, as well as the Elms.

Renamed the Elms Hotel, the building remained a boardinghouse for many years. In the 1950s a fire destroyed the third story. The building was remodeled after the fire (minus the third floor and wrap-around porch) and today it is an apartment house.



At left: Engineer's plan of the Elms boardinghouse in Willimantic, drawn in 1909 when the building was expanded. It shows the parlor, dining room, kitchens, and keeper's rooms on the first floor, along with workers' bedrooms on the second and third floors. The plan is in the collection of the Windham Textile and History Museum.







Above and at left: Engineer's plans of a boardinghouse. The plans were found among papers and plans left by the Willimantic Linen Company in Willimantic, and which are now in the collection of the Windham Textile and History Museum. The Museum has not yet identified the building, which may no longer exist.