

AMERICAN THREAD COMPANY MILLS

The Mill Museum's buildings were once part of the sprawling American Thread Company (ATCO) factory complex, at one time the largest thread mill in the United States, and one of the largest factories in Connecticut. ATCO began as the Willimantic Linen Company (WLC), founded in 1854 by Austin Dunham (1805-1877) and Lawson Ives (1804-1867), two Hartford, CT businessmen. By 1890, the WLC manufactured the majority of the cotton sewing machine thread made in the United States. Its Willimantic Mills plant was more than a dozen buildings, the largest of which were Mill No. 1, Mill No. 2, Mill No. 3, Mill No. 4 (the largest of them all), and Spool Shop. In 1898, the WLC was purchased by ATCO, then secretly a subsidiary of Coats and Clark, the British textile giant. A few years later, as the result of an antitrust lawsuit filed by the Woodrow Wilson administration, ATCO (which by then included several other mill complexes in New England, in addition to its Willimantic Mills) was legally separated from Coats and Clark. ATCO then expanded the Willimantic Mills complex, adding Mill No. 5, Mill No. 6, the Dye House, the Concrete Warehouse, and expanded boiler houses. In 1985, ATCO closed its Willimantic Mills complex and consolidated operations in North Carolina and Georgia. Today, ATCO no longer is no longer a separate company, its remnants having been reacquired by Coats and Clark a few years after it left Willimantic. But much of its old Willimantic Mills complex still exists, across Main Street from the Mill Museum: Mill No. 1 (now an apartment building called Artspace), Mill No. 2 (an office complex called Windham Mills), the Concrete Warehouse (also an apartment complex), the old stone office building, and the old stone stable (the last two owned by Windham Mills). Where Mill No. 5 once stood is now the Heritage River Park, and where Mill No. 6 and the Dye House once rose are now parking lots. In between Artspace and the Heritage River Park is the old Thread Mill Square and Stone Arch Bridge, now the Garden on the Bridge. Visitors to the Mill Museum are welcome to stroll the grounds of the Bridge and the Park, and to view the exteriors of the former mill buildings from the sidewalks and parking lots.

Nineteenth-century working conditions were often harsh in America's mills. The mills were hot in the summer and cold in the winter. They were dusty, dirty, and very loud from the machinery. The work day was 12 to 14 hours, and children were often employed because they could be paid less for the same amount of work. During the 1890s, the Willimantic Mills complex produced 85,000 miles of thread a day. The Company established subsidiary mills in Willimantic and Milo, ME, for the production of wooden spools.

The Company developed and produced thousands of thread products used for clothing, bedding, shoe laces, stitching baseballs, automobile interiors, and tea bags. The 19th century was devoted to cotton products, which were mass produced on water-powered machinery driven by the Willimantic River. In the 20th century, the company produced thread products of all descriptions, including synthetics and blends. The dying of these products was accomplished with thousands of colors developed in their chemistry department. The Company progressed to steam power and electric power.

The factory complex started with buildings of stone, quarried from the river bed, and brick structures, built by Irish and Italian masons, respectively. It grew into one of the largest thread complexes in the world. The most famous structure was Mill No.4, which was the first electrically lit factory building in the world and thus eliminated the dependency on sunlight. Thomas Edison's designs were utilized in the construction.

In 1925, the workers at the American Thread Company went on strike because their wages had been cut. The company went to northern New England to hire replacements to take the place of the striking workers. Many immigrants came to Willimantic to work in the mills. Yankees, English, Scots, Irish, French Canadians, Italians, Poles, Germans, Estonians, Ukrainians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Swedes, and Puertoriquenos all came to Willimantic looking for jobs and opportunities.

Connecting to the Mill Museum's Archives

To see one of the Willimantic Linen Company's advertising trade cards, [click here](#). (This advertisement implies that the Company's thread was so strong, that it could be used instead of steel cables to suspend the Brooklyn Bridge.) For another WLC trade card, [click here](#). (This advertisement implies that WLC thread was so strong that it could pull Jumbo, the famous circus elephant.) To inspect an illustrated booklet explaining how thread was made in 19th-century Willimantic, [click here](#). To see a postcard showing the stone arch bridge when it was part of Thread Mill Square, with American Thread Company factory buildings on either side, [click here](#). To see an early 20th-century fire insurance map showing Mill No. 2, Mill No. 5, and Mill No. 6, [click here](#). To see an early 20th-century fire insurance map showing Mill No. 1, [click here](#). (Connecting to the Mill Museum's Archives made possible in part by a grant from Connecticut Humanities.)

CThumanities

A Video Tour of the Site of Willimantic's First Industrial Mill

Part 1. Finding the site of Perez's Richmond's 1822 cotton mill — and the neighborhood called Down Sodom — on an 1897 map. Narrated by Windham Co-Town Historian Jamie Eves. For an article by Dr. Eves about Down Sodom, [click here](#).



MAP
OF THE CITY OF

MILFORD

CONN.

Official Records and Surveys under the direction and
personal supervision of

THOMAS FLYNN, C.E.

PUBLISHED BY

D.L. MILLER & CO.

528 & 530 Locust St. Philada. Pa.

1897.



Part 2. Standing in the middle of Down Sodom. Narrated by Windham Co-Town Historian Jamie Eves.





Part 3. A walk down Factory Street. Narrated by Windham Co-Town Historian Jamie Eves.







