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Loom and Spindle

The Mill Museum Newsletter

February 2025

Mill Museum Launches New Exhibit That Addresses Gender Roles

An engaging and revealing exhibit, *Stitched through Stages*, will open on Saturday at the Mill Museum.

It features historic toys, homemaker tools, and related items. The artifacts illustrate society's earlier expectations on girls and women, and encourages visitors to look back at assumptions made about gender roles.

Among the artifacts are a "little mother" toy sewing machine, a Singer sewing machine, a fabric doll and cradle, a toy iron, and a toy baby carriage.

and a lace wedding gown.

“Stitched through Stages explores the intersection of childhood play and domestic life, showcasing mid-century toys alongside homemaker tools to reveal how gender roles have been instilled from an early age,” says the exhibit’s curator, Megan Starbird. She’s a museum board member and a member of the committee overseeing the Willimantic Chocolate Festival.

Starbird selected the items while searching through the museum’s permanent collection and installed the exhibit. She was assisted by museum volunteer Julia Henck, who previously had an internship at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art.

“This collection invites visitors to consider how material culture has shaped perceptions of labor, femininity, and the societal expectations placed on women,” Starbird added. “Once ordinary objects of daily life, these artifacts now serve as historical touchstones, sparking conversations on craftsmanship, family traditions, and the ever-evolving dynamics of gender roles.”

In addition, a companion exhibit will feature some 30 sad irons, which are also part of the museum’s permanent collection.



Sad irons, also called flat irons, are antique household irons made out of cast iron.

“‘Sad’ is a Middle English word that means solid,” Jamie Eves, senior curator at the Mill Museum and Windham Town Historian, explained about the inviting display he organized.

“Solid they are -- and heavy. They were commonly used in Europe in the 1600s, but in China much

Stitched through Stages explores the intersection of childhood play and domestic life

or coal stoves.”

In addition to the sad irons, the exhibit will include antique, pre-electric irons. One is an early 20th-century stainless steel iron that is hollow and meant to be filled with hot water. Another is a 19th-century coal-fired steam iron. These irons come in different shapes, weights, and varieties.

“Long, very heavy irons were used by tailors. Some of the irons on display were manufactured by the New England Butt Company, which also made iron barrel hoops, hence its name, [and was located in] Providence Rhode Island,” he added.

An antique ironing board will be displayed, too. Visitors to the exhibit can practice ironing with cold irons.

The exhibits will open on Saturday, February 8, the same day Willimantic observes the annual Chocolate Festival. Chocolate treats will be available at the museum as supplies last.

The exhibits continue to be on display through June. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. Regular admission charges apply.

"The Mill Museum once again is taking part in Willimantic's popular yearly tradition of the Chocolate Festival. This year, we particularly encourage visitors to come to the museum so that they can view the engaging temporary exhibit, as well as see the beautiful, recently-completed renovations to our main exhibit room," Mill Museum Executive Director Aaron Skarzenski said.

“A new carpet has been put on the floor and several areas were painted. In coming months, we will place items for our permanent collection in part of the spacious room.”

Formally known as the Windham History and Textile Museum, the Mill Museum, 411 Main St., Willimantic, is located in the historic former headquarters of the American Thread Company. It houses a museum, historical society, library, and

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communities in Connecticut.

Mill Museum Joins Celebration of Chocolate Fest

Mill Museum will join other Willimantic organizations and businesses on Saturday February 8 to celebrate one of the community's tastiest traditions, the Chocolate Fest.

This year marks the 19th annual Romantic Willimantic Chocolate Fest.

The museum will mark the occasion by serving chocolate treats, as supplies last. The museum also launches new engaging exhibits to mark the day.



Other events are scheduled throughout downtown Willimantic on Saturday. Live music will be performed, facepainting, crafts, and many discounts at downtown businesses are among the featured events.

These include:

* Cupid Made Me Do It 2 Mile Urban Challenge. The road race starts at 10 a.m. on Saturday. It starts and ends on Riverside Drive in Willimantic and the course includes three iconic bridges. A portion of the proceeds go to the Windham Area Interfaith Ministry. Race day registration starts at 8:30 a.m. at the First Baptist Church.

* Chocolate Cake Baking Contest at the Windham Senior Center & Human Services Department. Cakes will be auctioned off after voting.

* Chocolate Chip Stroll lets visitors stroll and taste samples at several downtown businesses between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.

*Window decorating contest at businesses with prizes awarded.

*And Willimantic Food Co-op Birthday Bash with 45 cakes on display.

News Briefs

Mill Museum Annual Fundraising Campaign

Supporters and members of the Mill Museum are reminded to respond to the organization's annual fundraising initiative.

It requests donations for the museum's annual fundraising campaign.

Checks can be mailed to the museum or donations can be made online through the museum's website.

All donations are gratefully accepted and will be acknowledged.

Dragoon Camp in Lebanon

The Lebanon Historical Society Museum will have a Dragoon Camp event between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. on Saturday, February 22.

It's presented by Sheldon's Horse -- The Second Continental Light Dragoon.

Demonstrations include: enlistment, uniforms, writing, sewing, medicine, drilling and cavalry skills.

It's free and open to the public.

Slater Memorial Juried Exhibition

Norwich's Slater Memorial Museum's Converse Art Gallery will hold an opening reception for the Annual Connecticut Artists Juried Exhibition on Saturday, January 25 at 1 p.m.

Get Woven into the Fabric of Our Museum

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 time for personal research.

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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