

Just Spooling' Around: Making White Birch Spools For Connecticut Thread In Willimantic, Maine

By Jamie Eves • July 1, 2022



Until recently, thread usually came packaged wound onto wooden spools. The preferred wood was white birch, a hardwood that was nevertheless fairly lightweight and easy to shape on a lathe, less expensive than other hardwoods, and which could be fairly easily dried to remove the sap. At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, Connecticut's textile mills used local birch to make their spools. William Weaver, a Willimantic, CT newspaper editor, described the "Spool Shop" of the Willimantic Linen Company as it appeared in 1863. The Spool Shop was located in an 1820s stone structure that had formerly been the Jillson Mill, which had manufactured cotton thread and cloth. The WLC (which, despite its name, manufactured cotton thread) acquired the Jillson Mill after it closed in the 1850s, converting it into its Spool Shop. (This building no longer exists, having been demolished in the early 20th century. It was located on Main Street, just to the east of what is today the north end of Willimantic's "Frog Bridge.") Weaver wrote:



Sketch of the Willimantic Linen Company Spool Shop as it looked in 1860. Originally, this was a small cotton mill on the banks of the Willimantic River in Willimantic (Windham), CT, built in the 1820s and known as the Jillson Mill. The Jillson family sold it to the Linen Company in the 1850s, which converted it into a Spool Shop. The sketch was made in pencil in the late 1800s by a local Willimantic pharmacist/Florist on brown wrapping paper. From the Windham Textile and History Museum collections.

“From our home we pass down Jackson street ... to Union formerly called “Back” street, and across it to Main street, in front of the old Jillson mill, with its north end and belfry almost in the road. The original Jillson mill, ... now a part of the [Willimantic] Linen [Company] establishment, is used principally for the manufacture and storage of spools for the thread manufactured by this company. These spools are made from the white birch, heretofore used mainly for pea-brush and bean-poles. The company use large quantities and pay from five to six dollars a cord for it. The spools are made by machinery especially adapted to the purpose, and are turned out with great rapidity.”

Despite the fact that Connecticutters used white birch for little other than spools, “pea-brush and bean-poles,” and perhaps firewood, it was by the end of the Civil War becoming scarce. Birch had never been plentiful in Connecticut’s oak-hickory forests to begin with, where taller trees with wider canopies towered above it and starved it of light. Even today, most of the white birch in Connecticut grows on rocky hillsides in places like Bolton Notch, where larger trees are unable to get a foothold. However, birch was – and still is – plentiful in northern New England’s North Woods, where smaller trees predominate, and so after the Civil War the WLC built a sawmill in extreme northern Maine for the purpose of manufacturing the Company’s birch spools.

In 1879, the Linen Company bought 173 acres in the eastern part of the thinly settled frontier Maine township of T8R8NWP (Township Eight in Range Eight North of the Waldo Patent), also known as Howard (after Abijah Howard, an early homesteader), where Wilson Stream emptied into Sebec Lake. Non-indigenous New Englanders had first begun settling in T8R8 in 1826, following the purchase of the town from Harvard College by a local land speculator. By the 1850s, about 14 families had settled in the western part of the T8R8 along a rough road leading in from Guilford to the south. The first public school was held in a one-room log house in 1856. By the 1870s, the rough road had been extended eastward along Wilson Stream to Sebec Lake. The township was thickly wooded, with steep granite hills and narrow, v-shaped valleys. Wilson Stream was shallow and winding, with several waterfalls, more conducive to lumbering than to farming. By the 1870s, there were two small sawmills along the stream. Soon, the WLC would add a third.



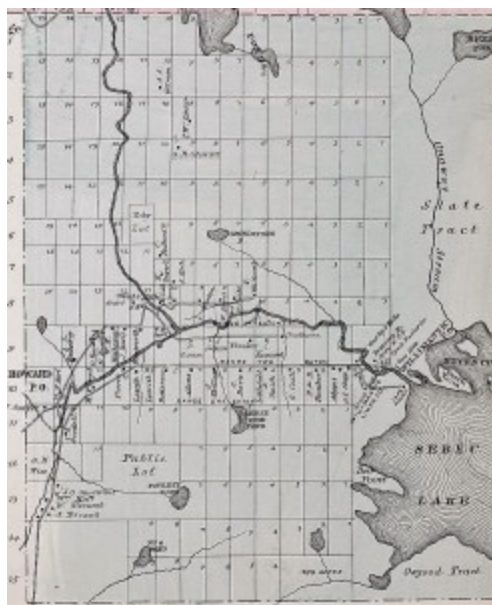
White birch in Willimantic, Maine. Photo by Jamie Eves.



Wilson Stream in Willimantic, Maine. Photo by Jamie Eves.

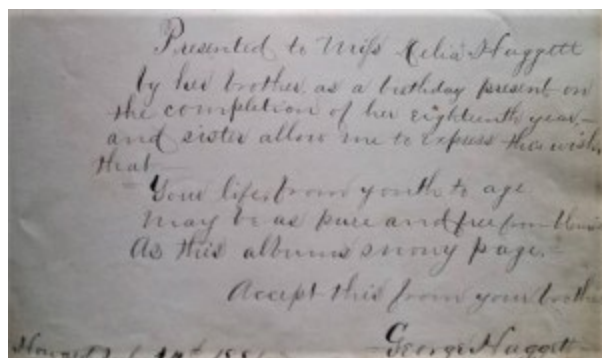
In 1880, the WLC erected a large sawmill near the mouth of the stream for splitting white birch for spools. In addition to the sawmill itself, the Company built drying sheds, a boardinghouse for lumberjacks and other workers, and family housing. The next year, T8R8 incorporated as the Town of Howard. Two years after that, in 1883, it was renamed Willimantic, Maine. At first, the mill turned out only rough wood blocks for shipment to Connecticut, which the Company transformed into finished spools in its Connecticut Spool Shop. But in 1886 the WLC added a spool shop to the Maine sawmill and closed the Spool Shop in Connecticut. The finished spools were carted by horse-drawn wagons 14 miles to Abbot, ME, where there was a train station for the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad. The Company employed 8-12 horses. It cut on average 2,000 cords of white birch a year. For power, the WLC – which was also pioneering electric lights and power in Connecticut – installed the first electric generator in Maine.

An atlas of Piscataquis County, Maine, published in 1882, shows the location of the Linen Company's sawmill in Maine.



Map of Willimantic (then called Howard), Maine in 1882. The Willimantic Linen Company sawmill is shown where Wilson Stream flows into Sebec Lake. Public domain.

The Mill Museum has in its collection an autograph book that, in 1881, George Haggett presented as a gift to his sister, Delia Haggett of Springfield, ME, a small town deep in the forests of northern Maine. The autograph book shows that at the time George worked in Howard at the Willimantic Spool Works. Over the next three years, Delia filled her autograph book with the autographs of family members, friends in Springfield and Carroll (another North Woods town), folks she knew in the large textile mill city of Lewiston, ME (where she may have taught school), George's coworkers in Howard, and others. The beauty of the signers' cursive handwriting is impressive — penmanship was clearly prized in the 1880s. Even farmers, lumberjacks, and mill workers had elegant, practiced signatures. The autograph book is a fascinating artifact from a bygone time with an important connection to the Connecticut textile industry.



A page from Delia Haggett's 1881 autograph book, signed by her brother George, who worked at the Willimantic Linen Company's spool mill in Willimantic, Maine. From the Windham Textile and History Museum collections.

In 1898, the Willimantic Linen Company and all of its holdings – including the sawmill in Maine – were acquired by the American Thread Company (ATCO). At about this time, most of the white birch in Willimantic, ME, had been cut. Shipping spools overland by wagon to the nearest railroad station in Abbott was difficult and expensive. So, in 1902 or 1903 (depending on the source) ATCO closed the Willimantic sawmill. It acquired woodlands in nearby Lakeview Plantation, and built a sawmill in Milo, ME, where there was a railroad station. The Milo sawmill used steam power. The sawmill at Willimantic was sold and eventually became a hunting camp and recreation facility, although most of the buildings have since been torn down.



The former ATCO Spool Mill in Milo, Maine, now a hardware store. Photo by Jamie Eves.

ATCO operated its sawmill at Milo until 1975. At its height, it employed about 700 workers. Today, the mill is a (very large) hardware store, in which some of the original gearing and wall paint can still be seen. The boarding house has been converted into a private home. A few years ago, Willimantic, CT resident Al Beaulieu acquired one of the Milo mill's old spool tumblers and, along with Francois Gamache, transported it to Connecticut and donated it to the Mill Museum. It was restored by students at the Windham Technical High School and is displayed at the Museum. It is fully operational, a valuable relic of a bygone era.



Interior of the former ATCO Spool Mill in Milo, Maine. The posts still show the old ATCO paint. Photo by Jamie Eves.



Spool tumbler originally used in the ATCO's Milo, Maine, Spool Mill, now restored and on display at the Mill Museum. Photo by Jamie Eves.

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