

MILL WORKERS' ROW HOUSE EXHIBIT

When Connecticut's first factories opened in the early 1800s, it was not long before the owners decided to build company housing for their workers. The early mills were powered by falling water, and the waterfalls were located principally in thinly populated, narrow, rocky valleys rather than areas of more densely populated farmland or in river or seaports. Company housing both attracted workers and gave owners the opportunity to recapture wages in the form of rents. Company housing existed in several forms: boardinghouses for single workers, apartments, row houses, and single-family cottages. In Connecticut, the most common type of company housing were family row houses. Typically one-and-a-half-story or two-story duplexes (although sometimes they were quads), Connecticut's mill row houses usually had six rooms, intended as a kitchen, a parlor, a dining room, and three bedrooms. United States Census records for Willimantic, CT, however, show that each unit was usually inhabited by more than one family, in order to be able to afford the rent. That meant that often ten or twelve people shared a unit, and the dining room and sometimes the parlor were also used as bedrooms, with the kitchen the only common room. It is this arrangement that the Mill Museum shows in our Workers' Row House Exhibit. The first company houses in Willimantic were built in the 1820s, and the city's several cotton mills continued to build them through the 1880s. The Museum's exhibit is modeled after row houses built in the 1860s by the Willimantic Linen Company.

The Kitchen. The workers' houses in Willimantic did not have indoor plumbing until about 1917; they had to haul water from nearby wells. The cast-iron, coal-burning stove in the exhibit was used to heat water for bathing, dishes, laundry, and cooking. The stove was also used to heat the house in winter, and to warm heavy flatirons for pressing clothes. The sink is an 1880 cast-iron sink. The pots and pans are made from tin and cast iron. The kitchen table is an 1870 drop leaf pine table and is original to one of Willimantic's row houses.



The Bedroom. Many people slept together in one bed. They used “honey pots” (also called “chamber pots”) as they did not have indoor bathrooms. Visitors can see one tucked under one of the beds. Sheets were made of cotton and blankets of wool. Some clothing was homemade, but by 1920 most were store-bought. The oak dresser came from the Elms, one of Willimantic’s company boardinghouses.



Connecting to the Mill Museum's Archives

To go to the Museum's online archive to see an architectural floor plan for a company-owned row house in Willimantic, [click here](#). To see an engineer's sketch of the exterior of a company-owned row house, [click here](#). To see an architectural plan of the Elms, a company-owned boardinghouse in Willimantic, [click here](#). (The plan was made in 1909, when the Elms converted from coal stoves to central steam heating.) To see an architect's sketch of a single-family cottage designed for skilled workers at the Willimantic Linen Company, [click here](#). (Connecting to the Mill Museum's Archives made possible in part by a grant from Connecticut Humanities.)

Virtual Tour

For a virtual tour of the Mill Workers' Row House, the Mill Manager's Mansion, and Thread Mill Square for elementary school students, [click here](#). (Virtual Tour made possible in part by a grant from the Last Green Valley.)

