

History of South Windham and the Guilford Smith Home

Charles Smith, Guilford Smith's father, bought this land from Elisha Holmes (who lived in the red brick house across the street) when he was 30 years old and built this home in 1836. Mrs. Holmes was a cousin of Charles. In 1838, Charles Smith and Harvey Winchester, a blacksmith who lived next door, were employees of Spafford, Phelps and Co. They each paid \$50,000 to buy the buildings and the patents. They changed the shop to Smith, Winchester & Co. Charles Smith had worked there since he was 21 and was the foreman of the 9 employees. Mr. Winchester was married to Charles' sister, Emily. They now owned the first successful paper making machinery in the country which supplied large rolls of paper to newspapers all over the country and world, including Japan. George Spafford (South Windham was originally called Allentown, then Spaffordville and then changed again to South Windham, so as not to confuse the railroad with Staffordville) died soon after. 100 people were employed at Smith and Winchester, which was most of the men in a town of only 600 in population. Each machine cost \$20,000 and weighed 100 tons. The company also eventually made parts for paper cutters and paper bags.

Present day Machine Shop Hill Road is aptly named because of the large machine shop on the corner. The village of South Windham grew because of this business. South Windham was known as a pleasant village which had elm-shaded walks which were illuminated with gas at night. There was also a wooden covered bridge crossing over at the Shetucket River (which is an Indian word from the tribe of Uncas, meaning "where two rivers make one") with the usual warning in great black letters on white, "The riding or driving of any Horses, Teams or Carriages on this Bridge in a Gait faster than a Walk is by Law prohibited."

100 years after the establishment of the Smith and Winchester Manufacturing Co. in 1938, the town had grown to 2,000 people. Most families at that time were of the Protestant faith and when the Ku Klux Klan came to recruit men for \$10 each, not one South Windham member joined. South Windham children were taught in a white two room school on Babcock Hill grades 1-8.

Next to the Machine Shop was the Guilford Smith Hall built to house the volunteer fire department and a hall upstairs. Guilford Smith bought South Windham their first horse-drawn steam fire engine. The Hall had a large stage with a curtain, seats, and a small kitchen behind the stage. The Hall was used for graduations, grange meetings, parties, concerts, dances and debates.

Guilford Smith was born in 1839 in this home built by his father; just a year after his father bought the paper making machine shop from Spafford. Guilford Smith was an only son of Mary Abbe and Charles. He had a sister, Mary. He was first married at age 24 in 1863 to Mary Ramsdall and then Anna Paton. He had no children. At the time of Guilford Smith's death in February 1923, he was worth over a million dollars. He gave \$225,000 to various local organizations in his will including \$25,000 for a library to be established in South Windham, \$10,000 to the Willimantic YMCA, \$5,000 to Connecticut College in New London, \$5,000 to the Card Home, and \$5,000 to St. Joseph's Hospital in Willimantic. Prior to his death, Guilford Smith gave a parcel of his land where he had a vegetable and flower garden, for a church to be built in 1902. This church is present day South Windham Congregational Church. Mrs. Guilford Smith's favorite flowers were gladiolas and roses.

A trust was established on behalf of the library in 1930, and a board of Trustees was organized to oversee the library funds. The library still operates from this trust now 80 years later. The library opened formally on April 4, 1931 with 1,100 books in the collection. We now have 11,000 items for circulation. Ethel Nichols was the first librarian and she eventually served in that capacity for 28 years. She worked eight hours a week for .34/hour at \$12.00 a month.

The original front door is now the side door facing the Machine Shop. Charles Smith died in 1896 and his wife five years later in 1901. When Guilford Smith married, he built the green house on the other side of the Winchester Home. Even the barns and stables of Guilford Smith was a showplace. As a Halloween prank one year, some teenagers painted his mahogany staircase in the barn green!

The furniture left in the house upstairs is all original to the Smith family. The cradle is the very same one that Guilford Smith was rocked in as a baby in 1839. The room next door where the pictures of South Windham are stored was originally called the "Trustees Room" where the board met regularly.

Jonathan Hatch owned the old "haunted" house on Machine Shop. He was a kind and generous man who gave work to those who got off the train in South Windham looking for a job. He left a large sum of money for the hospital. His portrait hangs in the Hatch Wing of Windham Hospital. Sanitarium Road was named after Dr. John Rose opened a sort of hospital for the treatment of alcoholism and drug addiction in the former Obwebetuck Hotel built by Guilford Smith and Winchester. The road used to be called Obwebetuck Avenue. On March 28, 1908, a train engineer going south at 2A.M. started blowing the whistle up near old Rogers plant and didn't let up for quite some time. Most of the residents were upset by being wakened at the time in the morning, but when they looked outside, they saw that the sanitarium was burning to the ground. All the patients, but one woman, whose mine was gone and returned to get her purse, got out of the building. The land on Machine Shop Hill on either side of Sanitarium Road was owned by the Hatch family and it was a cranberry bog for many years. He owned most of the land in South Windham. His home was the showpiece of South Windham. He left it to his son George.