



# Loom and Spindle

THE MILL MUSEUM OF CONNECTICUT /  
WINDHAM TEXTILE AND HISTORY MUSEUM

## AT THE MUSEUM:

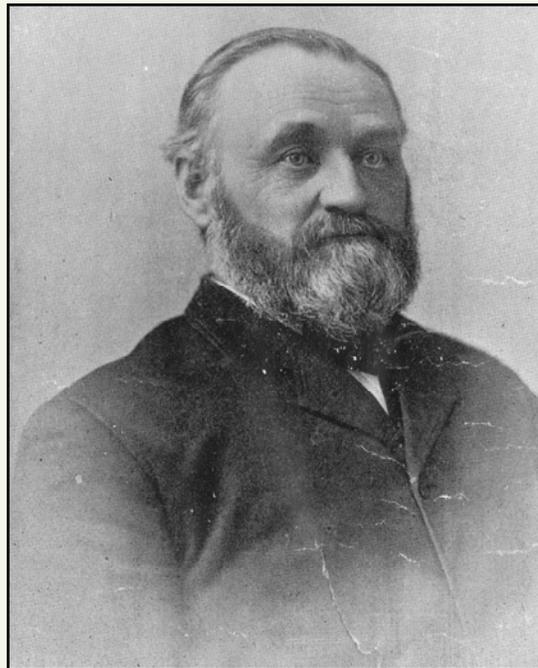
- **Exhibit: Dollhouses:  
A Miniature World.**  
Feb. 5–June 13.
- **Children's Event:  
Bookmaking.**  
Apr. 10, 1:00-2:30 PM. Stitch  
a book. \$2 per person, Kids  
Club members free.
- **Event: Dollhouse Fair.**  
Apr. 11. 1:00-4:00 PM.  
Includes doll-making work-  
shop with Charlotte  
Anderson, doll hospital, book-  
signing with Barbara  
McClintock, and miniature  
sales. \$2 per person, Kids  
Club members free.
- **Children's Event: Story Hour.**  
Apr. 18, 1:30-2:30 PM. \$2  
per person, Kids Club  
members free.
- **Event: Doll Victorian Tea.**  
May 2. 2:00-4:00 PM. Kids  
bring dolls and parents,  
grandparents, or other  
relatives. Adults \$15,  
children \$10, Kids Club  
members \$5, dolls free.
- **Children's Event: Making  
May Baskets.**  
May 8. 1:00-2:30 PM. \$2 per  
person, Kids Club members  
free.
- **Children's Event: Playing  
Marbles.**  
June 12. 1:00-2:30 PM. \$2  
per person, Kids Club  
members free.
- **Children's Event:  
Embroidery.**  
July 10. 1:00-2:30 PM. \$2  
per person, Kids Club mem-  
bers free.

For reservations, call 860-377-  
7755.

For more on Children's Events, see  
page 3.

## J. A. CONANT: CONNECTICUT MILL WORKER, MANAGER, AND ABOLITIONIST

BY JAMIE EVES



J. A. Conant in c. 1894, when he was superintendent of the  
Holland Silk Mill in Willimantic, CT

As Connecticut prepares to observe the 150th anniversary of the Civil War, *Loom and Spindle* begins an occasional series of articles on Connecticut, the textile industry, and the Civil War. In this issue, we examine the life and times of John Ashbel Conant, a Connecticut mill worker, manager, and conductor on the Underground Railroad.

Conant was in many respects an ordinary Connecticut Yankee. He was born in 1829 in the rural hamlet of Chaffeeville, in the hill town of Mansfield. His father, Lucius, was from the "middling," a small farmer who, only a few years later, moved the family to the nearby village of Gurleyville, to take a job as overseer in a small silk mill. The Conants had lived in Mansfield for generations. In later years, after he became a successful businessman, Conant (or his children, for he died two years before the book was published) gave his biography to Allen Lincoln for inclusion in Lincoln's two-volume *Modern History of Windham County, Connecticut*. He provided detailed information about his family history, tracing his roots all the way back to 1620s colonists at Plymouth and Salem,

MA. The deeply religious and highly principled Conant seems to have identified strongly with his Separatist forebears, whom he likely saw as role models, dedicated zealots who had risked everything for their cause. They were the kind of people that he wanted to be, too.

Despite his traditional Yankee background, Conant grew up during an age of great change and upheaval, a time when challenges to social and political norms like slavery were becoming commonplace. It was the early stages of the industrial revolution. While some farmers still struggled to wrest their living from the thin, worn-out soil of places that had been farmed for too long, enterprising men with surplus capital to invest were building the nation's first textile factories. Conant's hometown of Mansfield figured prominently in these changes as the birthplace of America's silk industry. Modernizing farmers planted mulberry trees and raised silk worms, and forward-thinking millers spun silk thread in several small, inexpensive-but-innovative, one-room millhouses. People Conant knew well – his father, his uncle Joseph Conant, several of his Gurleyville neighbors, and other members of his extended family – moved from traditional semi-subsistence farming to silk, including the related Hanks family that built America's first silk mill. It was only natural that Conant would join them. As he moved haltingly towards adulthood, it would be silk, not farming, that became his career.

Like many other marginal Yankees, Conant moved around a lot, living in several locations and with a number of different people. In 1839, when he was 10, he was sent to live with his mother's brother, a farmer in Tolland, CT, probably as an informal apprentice, a common arrangement. In 1843, when he was 14, Conant returned to his father's house in Gurleyville, and the next year went to work as a laborer in the silk mill where Lucius was overseer. In 1845 Conant left Gurleyville to work for O. S. Chaffee, a prosperous farmer who also owned a silk mill in nearby Chaffeeville, where Conant had been born. Then, two years later, in 1847, he switched employers again, taking a job as a jack spinner in another small Mansfield mill. He didn't stay long, returning to Chaffee's mill in 1848. Then he moved on again, later that year, to work in small silk mill in Atwoodville, another Mansfield hamlet.

Continued on page two

**J . A . C O N A N T : C T M I L L W O R K E R ,  
M A N A G E R , A N D A B O L I T I O N I S T , C O N T .**

Working in textile mills, even small ones like those in Mansfield, was physically demanding and potentially incapacitating. In time, the work caught up with Conant, and he became chronically ill. In 1849, now a young man of 20 with several years experience spinning, he left rural Mansfield, a world of poor hilltop farms, extended Yankee families, and small mills, and traveled to growing mill city of Rockville, CT, to take work as a jack spinner at the American Mill. For the first time in his life, he experienced both urban life and the dangers of the larger mills. The silk industry was in depression, many of the small Mansfield mills that had opened two decades earlier were now closed, and Conant probably felt lucky just to have a job. But in 1851 he became very sick. Nothing in the historical record identifies the illness, but it seems to have recurred several times during his life, on each occasion forcing him temporarily to quit working as a jack spinner. Considering the era, his need for extended recuperation, and the fact that 19th-century textile mills were notorious for clouds of lint and fabric dust, a good guess is that he had developed some sort of lung disease. As Conant lived to the age of 89, it probably wasn't tuberculosis. But it might have been brown lung, typical for industrial spinners. Perhaps it was his bouts of illness and convalescence that inclined him to deepen his religious faith, which became increasingly fervent as he aged.

Far from affluent, in these years Conant lived on the margins of society. After recuperating for a few months, in 1852 Conant got married, and two years later his first child was born. Sick or not, he now had a family to support and he had to go back to work, first at a silk mill in Mansfield Hollow, then away from Mansfield as a spinner in Broad Brook. Once again his health failed him, but after a short convalescence he was back at work in Gurleyville, this time as an overseer. After his son was born, Conant moved again, this time to Hartford, where he once more took up mill work. In 1856 he attempted to break away from the mills and purchased a farm in West Hartford, but he couldn't make a go of it. In 1857 Conant moved yet again, to Waterford, where he took a job as the manager of a marginal silk mill. When this mill went out of business in 1859 – the same year that his mother died – Conant remained in Waterford, finding work as an overseer in a hoop skirt factory. This job didn't last long, either, and Conant soon moved on to mill jobs in Waterbury and Ellington.

For Conant, these were years of spiritual and political development. Somehow, he found time to become involved in antislavery activity in Willimantic, CT, where, according to Harold Strother's *The Underground Railroad in Connecticut*, he became a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Like other conductors, Conant kept quiet about his activities, even in later years. Yet his involvement seems to have been real. Although Conant did not reside in Willimantic until after the Civil War, for eight crucial years – from 1843 to 1849 (when he was aged 14 through 20) and 1852 through 1854 (when he was aged 23 through 25), he lived only a few miles away in next-door Mansfield. Especially during the tumultuous years of 1852-54 – when Conant was married, returned to Mansfield, and fathered a son; and when the Compromise of 1850, Fugitive Slave Act, Kansas-Nebraska Act, and publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by former Connecticut Harriet Beecher Stowe inflamed many New Englanders – Conant might easily have traveled the few miles from Gurleyville or Atwoodville to Willimantic to join in antislavery activity. Tellingly, it was precisely then, in 1852, that the 23-year-old Conant voted in his first Presidential election, casting his ballot for Free Soil Party candidate John Parker Hale, an antislavery United States Senator from New Hampshire.

Conant did not serve in the Union army when the Civil War began in 1861, probably because he was too busy supporting his family. Instead, he continued to work a series of peripatetic jobs in silk mills – jobs that probably didn't pay much. His second son was born in 1861, but tragically died the next year. In 1863, his wife Caroline also died. The wandering Conant and his son returned to Mansfield, where he joined his brother David in owning and operating a small silk mill. He remarried in 1864, to Marietta French Brown, a widow with a child of her own. When his and David's mill failed, he took a job in yet another Mansfield silk mill. Then, in 1865, life changed for both Conant and the country. The Civil War ended, and Conant secured a job as an overseer with the large Holland Silk Company mill in Willimantic. For a number of years, he leased a house or

houses in Willimantic, although in time he built two high-style Victorian homes on Prospect Hill. He worked his way up in the company to superintendent. He fathered two more sons, in 1866 and 1869 – although one, George, died in 1889, when he was only 23. No longer constantly inhaling the lint-filled air of the mill floor, Conant's health stopped deteriorating. He retired from the Holland Company in 1907, when he was 78. He died in 1918, prosperous and respected.

Conant continued to fight for causes. After voting for the abolitionist Free Soil Party in 1852, he joined the fledgling Republican Party, attracted by its antislavery wing. But the Republicans became increasingly conservative and he left the party in 1872. Adopting temperance as his new cause, he joined the Prohibitionist Party. Then, in 1884, although still a strong temperance advocate, he left the Prohibitionists for the reconstituted American Party, with its platform of nativism and opposition to Freemasonry and other secret organizations. It is uncertain how much the new party's nativist views appealed to Conant, but it is clear that it was its anti-secret ideals that were the primary attraction. In 1884 Conant, now an affluent mill manager, was the American Party's Vice Presidential candidate, although when it became obvious that the party would garner only a few thousand votes nationwide, both he and Presidential candidate Samuel Pomeroy, a former Republican Senator from Kansas, withdrew in favor of the Prohibitionists. His religious affiliations also changed. An early Methodist (the Methodists were strongly associated with antislavery activity in the Willimantic area), he later converted to Congregationalism (joining a church in Hartford), but in 1881 helped found the First Berean Church in Willimantic. A small but radical Protestant sect, the Bereans, founded in the United States in the 1850s, were biblical fundamentalists who focused on the promises God gave to Abraham, Isaac, and David, and denied the idea of the Trinity.

Although few of Conant's friends and neighbors agreed with his radical political and religious views, they nevertheless both tolerated and respected him as a man of principle and an efficient manager. Allen Lincoln probably spoke for many when he eulogized Conant two years after his death: "He ever stood conspicuously for reform, progress and improvement, strongly opposing all those agencies or elements which he believed were detrimental to the best interests of the individual and of the country at large. Though men differed from him in opinion, they always respected his integrity and his loyalty to his honest convictions. Life was to him purposeful and earnest and every obligation was bravely met and faithfully performed. He did not weigh his acts in the scale of policy but in the scale of right and his example of fidelity to principle and faithfulness to duty is one which may well be followed." Like many of his fellow abolitionists (Henry David Thoreau comes to mind), Conant was probably a hard man to like and an even harder man to vote for, but he was an easy man to respect.

Although, other than Strother, there is no direct evidence to tie Conant to the Underground Railroad in Willimantic, circumstantial evidence makes it likely that he was involved. He lived near the city in the crucial and enflamed decade of the 1850s, a time when he was still young and impressionable. He was a Free Soiler and later an antislavery Republican. And he fit the profile of a New England abolitionist. He was deeply principled and sternly moralistic. He was a Methodist, at least during the crucial 1850s. Like many abolitionists, he advocated temperance, flirted with nativism, and was antimasonic. Throughout his life, he had a tendency to act decisively upon his beliefs, even when they were unpopular. He seems rarely to have questioned himself, or attempted to see things from other people's points of view. His career in the silk industry (as opposed to cotton) meant that, unlike many Connecticut cutters, he had no economic ties to slavery. And he was a modernizer, someone who in his career forsook traditional farming (with an occasional relapse) for modern industry, and who – despite the rigidity of his beliefs – was also open to new conceptions of social justice and political and moral ideals. He was a complicated man, but so were most of the abolitionists.

## NEWS & NOTES

Thanks to a donation of cabinets, countertops, and flooring from Design Center East in Willimantic, CT, the Museum has a new staff pantry. The Alternative Incarceration Center supplied to labor to install the donated items.

Thanks to a grant from the Town of Windham, CT, the Museum's sprinkler system is being repaired and upgraded. The old system broke down frequently, and several of the pipes had begun to rust. The same grant will also install rain gutters on the Museum's main building.

The Fifth Annual Snow Ball, the Museum's major fundraiser, was a great success, setting a new record for money raised. This year, the Snow Ball was held in the restored ballroom in the Windham Court House. Special thanks go to the Museum's President, Stephen Kenton, who chaired the Snow Ball Committee. Other committee members include Pamela Horrocks, Robert Horrocks, Shirley Mustard, Marion Wolfe, Faith Kenton, Brooke Shannon, Katherine Eves, Jamie Eves, Carol Buch, Paul Siege, and Lynn Duval. Gordon Macdonald designed the program cover. Particular thanks go to a wonderful cadre of student volunteers from Eastern Connecticut State University; to Windham Mayor Ernest Eldridge, who greeted every guest; and to special guests Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, State Senator Donald Williams, and State Representative Susan Johnson. It was a night to remember.

Thanks to a grant from the SBM Foundation, the Museum has an elegant new walking map of historic Willimantic, CT. The map features three historic walks: the Mills, Mill Housing, and the Bridges of Willimantic. The map was designed by Bev York, Jamie Eves, Brooke Shannon, and Potpourri Quick Copy. Copies of the map are on sale at the Museum's Linen Company Store gift shop.

The Museum has a new publication, *Built to Last: Reusing Industrial Age Buildings in a Postindustrial City: The Case of Willimantic, Connecticut*, by Jamie H. Eves. The 34-page booklet examines several restored historic buildings in downtown Willimantic, including the Windham Court House, the former A & P supermarket, Capitol Theater, the former Electro Motive factory, and the Windham Textile and History Museum, formerly the Willimantic Linen Company's store. The booklet is for sale at the Museum's Linen Company Store gift shop.

The Museum received a generous grant of \$1,000 from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, as recommended by Patricia and Charles Walker. The money is to be used for general operating support. The Museum is deeply grateful for the gift.

## KIDS' EVENTS

### Saturday, April 10th, 1:00 pm–2:30 pm

Did you know that some books used to be sewn together? Hear about the history of bookmaking and make your own book from cardboard and paper using just needle and thread. FREE to Kids Club members, otherwise \$2 per person.

### Sunday, April 11th, 1:00 pm - 4:00 pm

Enjoy the Museum's Dollhouse Exhibit and take part in the activities of the day, including a doll-making workshop led by Charlotte Anderson, a reading and book-signing of *Dahlia* by author/illustrator Barbara McClintock, a doll hospital (bring your injured dolls & stuffed animals for repairs), and a miniatures sales event. Refreshments provided. Event admission is \$2 per person, Kids Club Members FREE.

### Sunday, April 18th, 1:30 pm–2:30 pm

Let's stretch out on the carpet in the Dunham hall Library for some stories about cloth and textiles. Be sure to bring some of your favorite textiles, like a blanket or stuffed animal. Ages 4 to 8. FREE to Kids Club members, otherwise \$2 per person.

### Sunday, May 2nd, 2:00 pm - 4:00 pm

Come experience a Victorian Tea with your Mother, Grandmother, Father, Grandfather, Sister, Brother, Friends and of course your dolls. Event includes: tea, scones with jam & cream, sandwiches & pastry. Adults \$15, Children \$10, Children and Kids Club Members \$5, Dolls free.

### Saturday, May 8th, 1:00 pm - 2:30 pm

Come celebrate spring and learn how to make a May basket. Children will weave their own May baskets from strips of colored construction paper. They will be provided small trinkets to take home in their baskets. In the process they will learn about how weaving makes a stronger and colorful carry-all, as well as weaving techniques. Everything is provided. FREE to Kids Club Members, otherwise \$2 per person.

### Saturday, June 12th, 1:00 pm - 2:30 pm

Come play marbles! Did you know that this was a game from the Victorian Era. Come learn how, and then try your luck. There will be prizes and more. Refreshments are included. FREE to Kids Club Members, otherwise \$2 per person.

### Saturday, July 10th, 1:00 pm - 2:30 pm

Learn how to do embroidery. Children will embroider their own projects to take home and use. They will learn basic needle skills of cross-stitch, seed stitch, and line stitch. All supplies included. Refreshments are included. FREE to Kids Club Members, otherwise \$2 per person.

For reservations for any of these events call 860-377-7755.

## MUSEUM MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL SPRING 2010

If you have already renewed your membership, thank you!

Student/Senior, \$15 \_\_\_\_\_

Sustaining, \$75 \_\_\_\_\_

Individual, \$25 \_\_\_\_\_

Patron, \$100 \_\_\_\_\_

Family/Household, \$40 \_\_\_\_\_

Benefactor, \$250 \_\_\_\_\_

Additional Donation \_\_\_\_\_

We are a 501(c)3 organization. Your donations are tax deductible.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

Checks payable to: W. T. H. M.

Windham Textile and History Museum, 411 Main Street, Willimantic, CT 06226

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**THE MILL  
MUSEUM OF  
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WINDHAM TEXTILE AND  
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**W A L L O F  
R E M E M B R A N C E**

The Museum has a Wall of Remembrance, to remember and honor those people who worked in, owned, and/or built the textile mills of eastern Connecticut. The Wall was begun a few years ago as part of the campaign to create the Windham Mills State Historic Park, located in the old textile city of Willimantic, part of the town of Windham, CT. The park, now completed, perches on the banks of the Willimantic River, across the street from the Museum, in between the celebrated Garden on the Bridge and the former Willimantic Mills of American Thread Company. For several years, the Wall was located in the lobby of the Windham Town Hall, but it was recently moved to the Museum, which is closer to the Park.

For a donation of \$20, you can have a small plaque engraved with the name of a former textile mill worker, manager, owner, or builder, along with the particular mill with which they were affiliated, to be placed on the Wall of Remembrance. Make check payable to WTHM and mail to 411 Main St., Willimantic, CT 06226



**Left: Wall of Remembrance at the Mill Museum of Connecticut / Windham Textile and History Museum.**

**Below left: Windham Mills State Heritage Park.**



**DONATIONS WANTED**

The Museum is seeking donations to purchase some new card tables. The tables will be used for teas, events, and traveling exhibits. The Museum's current card tables are in bad shape. Anyone who wishes to donate \$20 for a card table, make check payable to WTHM and mail to 411 Main St., Willimantic, CT 06226