



# Loom & Spindle

The Newsletter of the Windham Textile & History Museum / The Mill Museum  
411 Main St., Willimantic, CT, 06226 / (860) 456-2178 / [themillmuseum@gmail.com](mailto:themillmuseum@gmail.com)  
website: [www.millmuseum.org](http://www.millmuseum.org) Fall, 2019

## BIG CHANGES COMING TO THE MILL MUSEUM

Big improvements are coming to the Windham Textile and History Museum (the Mill Museum of Connecticut) over the next two years. A \$100,000 Local Capital Improvements Project (LoCIP) obtained by the Town of Windham, which owns the Museum's buildings and grounds, will bring much needed infrastructure improvements, while a \$41,000 Good-to-Great grant to the Museum itself will create a new, discovery-style exhibit that depicts the rise, flowering, and subsequent decline of the Connecticut textile industry — and what is taking its place in the postindustrial present.

"When the Museum opened thirty years ago in 1989," says Executive Director Jamie Eves, "it featured what were then modern exhibits. But three decades later, changes are needed. The Mill Museum is moving forward into its next thirty years."

*"The Mill Museum is moving forward into its next thirty years"*

The LoCIP grant will fund new climate control in the Museum's third-floor archives. "The old HVAC system gave out a couple of years ago," says Eves. "It became obsolete, broke down, and can't be repaired. The new system will provide good conditions for protecting the Museum's collection of historic artifacts." The new climate control completes a general overhaul of the Museum's HVAC system begun several years ago by the Town of Windham. "The Town has been a great partner in maintaining these two historic buildings," Eves said.

The LoCIP project will also ameliorate a water problem in the basement of one of the Museum buildings, replace a handicap ramp with a newer more ADA-compliant structure, and repave the Museum's parking lot.

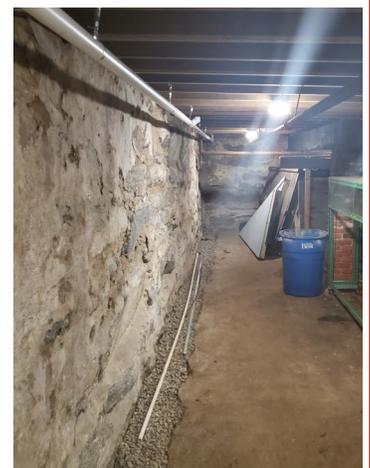
The Good-to-Great grant is a two-year project to modernize the Museum's main exhibit room, creating a new, state-of-the-art permanent exhibit. "Thirty years ago, the trend was 'living history,' with period rooms that reconstructed kitchens, parlors, bedrooms, and factory floors as they looked in an earlier era," Eves said. "We'll still have those, of course. But today's younger museum-goers expect something else too. Modern exhibits use technology to tell stories, like the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC."

The new exhibit, tentatively called "Textile Towns and Thread Cities" will trace the early-19th-century creation and rise of textile mill communities in Connecticut, their late-19th- and early-20th-century flowering, and their late-20th-century decline — with an eye to the experiences of these communities in the postindustrial present. "The Mill Museum tells more than the story of Windham and Willimantic," says the Museum's Educational Director, Bev York. "It tells the story of all the textile and mill communities throughout Connecticut. It's a statewide story, a regional story."

"The new exhibit will be what we think of as a 'discovery' exhibit," adds Eves. "Rather than recreating a place in time, it will tell a story, from beginning to end. As visitors travel through the exhibit, the story will unfold before them. That's how exhibits are done today. And it will include audio and video, for modern museum goers."

To complete the project, the Museum will be doing a lot of fundraising. "The State's Good-to-Great program is providing 75% of the cost of the project," says Eves. "We have to raise the other 25%, or about \$12,000. We think we can do it. The new exhibit will bring in a lot more visitors, and more visitors means more business in Windham and Willimantic generally, with more people shopping, dining, or gassing up their cars. We believe the community will see the value of this, consider it a good investment, and help us raise our match."

**Renovations to the basement of the Dugan Mill Building are underway. The space has been plagued by water problems. A quality sump pump, pipes, a dehumidifier, pallets, and lights have been installed, turning the basement into usable storage space, and protecting the 1877 historic structure from water damage.**



## Coming Events

**Exhibit: Trains, Trees, and Toys.** Join us for our annual holiday exhibit, featuring model trains, vintage toys, and decorated trees. A joint project with the Connecticut Eastern Railroad Museum. Opens Dec. 14. Closes Jan. 5. Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, 10:00 a.m.—4:00 p.m.

**Special Event: 10th Annual Holiday Shop Craft Fair.** More than a dozen local artisans, with fabric art, tea baskets, alpaca fuzzies, illuminated bottles, jewelry, God's Glory photographs, knitted notions, seasonal greens, and more. Great hand-crafted gifts for the holidays. Nov. 30, Dec. 1, Dec. 7, and Dec. 8. 10:00 a.m.—5:00 p.m. Saturdays; noon—5:00 p.m. Sundays. At the Museum's Dugan Hall. No admission. Free cider.

**Program: Spinning Bee.** Join master spinner Peggy Church for an old-fashioned spinning bee. Spinners are invited to bring their wheels and join in the fun and conversation. Novices are welcome. Usually held the 4th Saturday of each month; dates may be changed due to holidays, so check the Museum website. 10 a.m.—1 p.m. No admission fee.

**Program: Kids Club,** a special program for children from four to twelve years old, organized and led by Bev York. Normally on the second Saturday of each month, 2—3:30 p.m. \$5 per child; Kids Club members are free. Dec. 14 is a Gingerbread Holiday, with a small materials fee added.

**Special Event: Holiday Gift Wrapping at the East Brook Mall.** Look for volunteers from the Mill Museum at the East Brook Mall in Mansfield, CT, Dec. 14—24, wrapping gifts for donations to the Museum. Want to volunteer to wrap? Call Kit Eves at 860-617-4364.

**Program: Roc Day / St. Distaff's Day.** In the Middle Ages, after the Christmas holidays were over, women again took up their distaffs and commenced spinning. Join us for a special Roc Day spinning bee at the Mill Museum. Saturday, Jan. 11, 10 a.m.—1 p.m. Free.

**Special Event: Snow Ball.** Jan. 11. Dance the night away at the elegant Snow Ball, the Museum's major fundraiser. 7—11 p.m. at Eastern Connecticut State University's Betty Tipton Room in the Student Center. This year's theme is A Century of Women Voting in Connecticut. \$75 per person.

**Exhibit: "Unlacing the Corset, Unleashing the Vote."** Opens Feb. 8, closes May 31. In 2020, Connecticut — and the rest of America — celebrates the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment, which established women's suffrage throughout the entire country. The Mill Museum joins the celebration with an exhibit on how women's lives in Connecticut have changed since 1920, with an emphasis on fashion, activism, and millworkers' lives. The exhibit will be guest-curated by Kira Holmes, assisted by about a dozen other volunteers and staff.

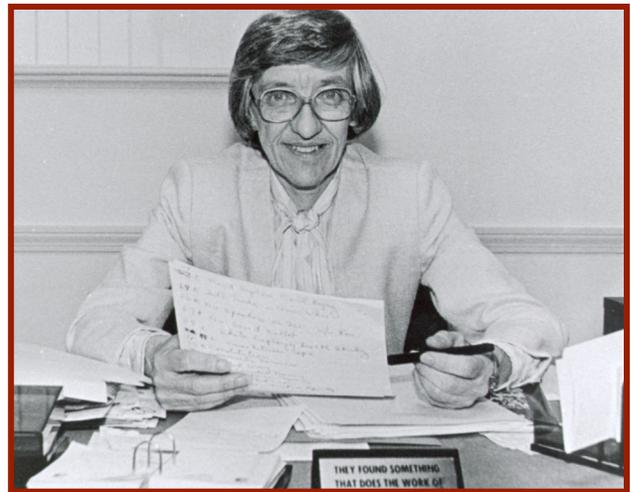


*In celebration of 100 years of Connecticut women having the right to vote — and of the Mill Museum's upcoming exhibit, "Unlacing the Corset, Unleashing the Vote" (Feb. 8—May 31, 2020)— this issue of Loom and Spindle features short biographies of two 20th-century Connecticut women millworkers who became leaders.*

## Betty Tianti in Her Own Words

On May 17, 1994, the *Hartford Courant* carried Betty Tianti's obituary. "Betty L. Tianti," the *Courant* noted, "a pioneering union leader who rose from the thread mills of Willimantic to become the nation's first female president of a state labor federation, died Monday [at her daughter's house] in Alexandria, Virginia. She was 64."

The *Courant* summarized Tianti's life. She was born in 1929. She grew up in Plainfield, a textile mill town in eastern Connecticut. In 1955 she took a job at the American Thread Company in Willimantic to support herself and her young daughter. She



became shop steward, then president of her local branch of the Textile Workers Union of America. She left Willimantic in 1962 to work as an organizer for the national union, traveling throughout the country, especially through the South, where most of the textile mills were then located. She returned to Connecticut in 1970 to head up the state union's Committee on Political Education. In 1985 she became director of the state AFL-CIO. In 1988 Gov. William O'Neill named her state Commissioner on Labor. Suffering from acute emphysema, she stepped down in 1990. Tianti died in 1994. She was the first woman to head a state AFL-CIO, and was Connecticut's first female Labor Commissioner.

In 1992, Tianti was interviewed by Thomas Beardsley, then historian-in-residence at the Mill Museum. Here are excerpts from Tom's interview. (To read the full interview, you will need to acquire a copy of Tom's book, *Willimantic Industry and Community: The Rise and Decline of a Textile City*, published by the Mill Museum in 1993.)

"I was born in Plainfield, Connecticut, in August, 1929, in the year of the Wall Street Crash. I was brought up and went to school in the general area of Eastern Connecticut. My parents were both mill workers, and worked in textile mills in places such

Cont'd p. 4

-Annual Appeal-

Big changes are coming to the Mill Museum. You can be part of the excitement!

The Mill Museum has been chosen by the State of Connecticut's Good-To-Great program to receive a grant to install an up-to-date, state-of-the-art permanent exhibit in our main exhibit room. Titled *Textile Towns and Thread Cities*, the exhibit will trace the history of the rise, decline, and rebirth of Connecticut's textile mill communities, from the early 1800s to the present. With audio and video components, the exhibit will be accessible, attractive, informative, and compelling. A two-year project, the State will fund 75% of the \$55,000 cost. We have to raise the other 25%, and we are asking for your help. What that means is, that for every dollar you donate to this project, the State will be matching it with three dollars! Your contribution to the Museum's annual appeal can make it happen!

The Museum has also begun an endowment fund, with the goal of creating an investment fund to ensure the Museum's future. And the Town of Windham (which owns the Museum's buildings) acquired a Local Capital Improvement Project grant from the State of Connecticut that is repaving the Museum's parking lot, installing a new handicap ramp, solving a water problem in the basement, and installing climate control in our archives.

Be part of the Museum's future. The Mill Museum is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation, so your donation may entitle you to a federal tax deduction.



Preliminary design sketches for the Museum's proposed permanent discovery-style exhibit, *Textile Towns and Thread Cities*. Help us move the Museum into the 21st century.



WINDHAM TEXTILE & HISTORY MUSEUM ANNUAL APPEAL

The Windham Textile & History Museum is a 501(c)(3) non-profit educational institution that preserves and interprets the history of the textile mills, mill workers and manager, mill communities, textiles, and textile arts in eastern Connecticut.

\_\_\_\_\_ \$50          \_\_\_\_\_ \$100          \_\_\_\_\_ \$200

\_\_\_\_\_ [Fill in the amount: \_\_\_\_\_]

\_\_\_\_\_ Please add an additional \$ \_\_\_\_\_ to my contribution, to be matched by the State of Connecticut's Good-to-Great Grant three-to-one!

Please make checks payable to WTHM.

Or use our Paypal account by clicking the link on our web site, [www.millmuseum.org](http://www.millmuseum.org).

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Betty Tianti, Cont'd

as Sterling and Moosup. We lived in company mill houses. My mom and dad separated when I was about seven years old. I had three brothers, two older and one younger, and my mom brought the four of us up by herself. My maiden name was Mathieu. My mother was German and French, and my father was French Canadian....

"Those were tough days. It was the Depression. When my father was out of work, he would go down to the mill, to stand around, and wait to be chosen to work. Maybe he got five hours of work a week. We grew our own vegetables, and had a cow, a pig, and chickens. We got by. As soon as my two older brothers were old enough, at 16, they quit school and went to work, getting jobs in the mills. I was the first in the family to go on and finish high school. That was Plainfield High in 1946. I was 17. My parents pushed me to go on to college. I did quite well at school, and went to the University of Connecticut, but lasted for only one semester. I quit and went to work. I didn't really want to leave college, but none of my friends had gone on to university. In those days, you just did not go....

"I found work at the Ashland mills in Jewett City, and the Cranska linen mills in Moosup. After that I went with a friend to Winchendon, Massachusetts, where this New York leather goods concern was making pocket books.... They moved back to ... New York City. I was around 20 or 21 years of age....

"I met my husband in New York in the early 1950s. He was in the Air Force reserves, and was called up when China bombarded the islands of Quemoy and Matsu in 1954. He was overseas when my daughter was born in October, 1954. I came back to Danielson, Connecticut, and stayed with my mother. Soon after, my husband and I separated and divorced.

"In 1955 I began work with the American Thread Company in Willimantic. I worked in Number Six Mill in the shuttle bobbin department. My first wage was a dollar and three cents a hour. My mother worked the first shift, so I worked the second shift while she looked after my daughter. It was about a 40 minute drive to Willimantic from Danielson, but several of us traveled together. There were close to 2,000 people working at American Thread when I arrived there....

"I had not been working in Willimantic for too long, when I became annoyed by how the piece-work rates were being calculated.... A lot of people agreed with me, and in essence what they said was put your money where your mouth is, and run to become the [shop] steward, so I did!

"I was elected ... and became a shift shop steward for the Textile Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO.... [Shortly afterward, Tianti was also elected Secretary-Treasurer of her local.] "I still worked full time on the shuttle bobbins, and fixing. I received something like \$50 a month to do the union duties, but the work dug into your piece-work earnings, so you can understand why it was such an unpopular job. After shuttle bobbins, I worked as a machine fixer. I think I was one of the first women ever to be a machine fixer. This had been strictly a male domain, but I needed the pay. Anyway, the women were usually more knowledgeable about the machinery, because they had been operating it for the longest time, so they were qualified. I soon worked out how to change the pulleys, without calling a fixer. I knew how to block the pulleys up with the wrenches to take the weight. It was no big deal, but when you were a fixer, the pay was double! Okay, you got your hands dirty, but it came off with soap and water, and you were not working any harder than when you were an operator!

"The company knew that they could not refuse me the job, because the Equal Rights Amendment had just been passed. They knew that if they had refused me, I would have brought in a sex discrimination case against them...."

## Amy Hooker: Labor Heroine

In 1925 Amy Hooker was 38, single, and the President of the Willimantic Textile Union Council, an affiliate of the United Textile Workers of America, a former craft union that had recently metamorphosed into an industrial union. She was about to lead one of the bitterest, most divisive strikes in Connecticut history, and in the process stand up to one of the state's most powerful corporations.

Hooker was born (probably) in New Britain, CT, where she was baptized at St. Mark's on Sept. 9, 1887. Her father, Dwight Freeman Hooker, had worked as a joiner. Amy became a textile worker at an early age. The 1910 United States Census found her, 23 years old, living with her parents Dwight and Alice in Newark, NJ, and working in a factory making straw hats. She never went to school beyond the 6th grade, although she learned enough to be a union leader and later a private art teacher. In 1920 the Census recorded her living as a lodger in Scotland, CT, only a few miles from Willimantic, and unemployed. She subsequently showed up in several Willimantic street directories, living in the Thread City in the late 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. She moved around a lot, residing in a series of low-rent, working-class apartments, almost all of them in older buildings later demolished in Willimantic's 1970s urban renewal. She seems a bit shadowy - the 1920 Census showed her as unemployed; the 1930 Census recorded her living in Hasbrouck Heights, NJ (a suburb of Passaic, the scene of another bitter 1926-27 textile strike - one wonders if she went there to participate), with her older married sister Carrie and working at her old occupation as a straw hatter; and 1920s, 30s, and 40s Willimantic street directories failed to list any occupation for her (although such information was recorded for almost everyone else who was employed). One suspects that she was blacklisted in Willimantic after the 1925 strike failed, and had trouble finding work. Why had she come to Willimantic from New Jersey in the first place? Probably because, like many working class Americans, she followed friends and relatives - her sister Mattie and brother Dwight also lived in Willimantic, although she never lived with them. Why did she return to New Jersey? Was it simply to reconnect with her sister, or was she somehow involved in the Passaic strike? Why did she come back to Willimantic in the 1930s? Did she perhaps live with a lover? No - all the people who lived at the same addresses as she did changed with each move, and the majority were working class couples. Possibly her friends in the union took care of her after the strike.

The 1925 ATCO strike lasted nine months -- or more, depending on how you measure these things -- and involved thousands of workers. 2,500 workers -- the entire factory workforce -- went out on strike -- and about 1,700 'scabs' were brought in to replace them. The strike was about wage cuts. ATCO had cut its piece rates several times in the early 1920s, and workers were frustrated. The union was fairly new at the ATCO mill, and most of its members were women and immigrants. The strike wore on through the long hot summer. Several of the women strikers were arrested for verbally abusing strikebreakers; in June Celia St. George, Jeanette St. George, and Caroline Kozek found themselves in court and fined \$10 for name calling. To protest the eviction of strikers from their tenements -- and to dramatize that the evictions would leave families homeless -- the union conducted a parade of baby carriages. In June, the UTWA also erected tents on the outskirts of Willimantic, to house evicted strikers. In July the UTWA ominously threatened a general strike against

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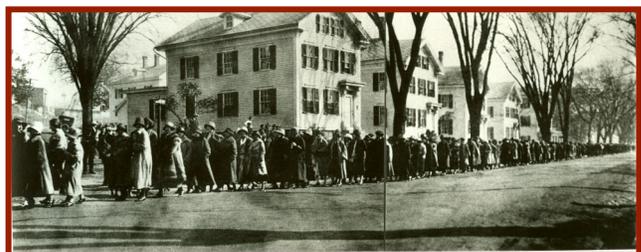
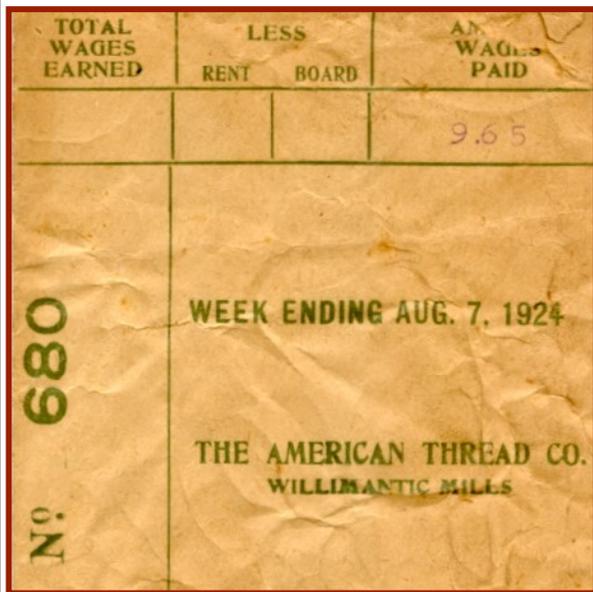
### Amy Hooker, Cont'd

ATCO's other plants – and perhaps even other textile factories – if no further progress occurred, although the general strike never materialized. Evictions began in earnest that month, with deputy sheriffs removing furniture from the homes of strikers Joseph Aubin, Moise Morisette, Nelson Chamberland, Marie Theroux, and William Chalifoux. None of the evicted families opted to move into any of the twenty tents the UTWA had erected, which as of July 16 were occupied by only “two or three caretakers.” Tempers frayed. When a state police officer claimed to have been “manhandled” by strikers, Willimantic Police Chief Allan MacArthur ordered that all parades and marches cease. Amy Hooker organized a committee of herself, two women strikers, and three men to beg MacArthur to rescind his decision. He did, but only after Hooker promised that pickets would stay on the sidewalks, and confine all parades to the morning hours. In September, the UTWA opened a commissary store at 166 Jackson St. in Willimantic to provide food and clothing for strikers and their families.

ATCO's strategy of hiring replacement workers proved successful. The plant reopened on May 11, 1925, after having been closed for two months, and production continued throughout the rest of the strike. As the months dragged on, the union's position grew increasingly weak. By the end of September, it was clear that the strikers had lost and that management had won. A few of the strikers returned to work. Others remained in the area, but took new jobs with other companies. But most simply moved away and never came back. In July the next year, plant manager Don Curtis announced the strike over. Hooker and Mary Kelleher, a representative from the union's national offices sent to assist her, insisted that it was still on, but if it was, it was in name only. In August, 1933, the UTWA officially declared the strike over. The 1700 to 1800 workers then at ATCO – some strikebreakers, some former strikers like those who asked for their old jobs back – did not belong to a union. The union was broken. When in 1934 a general textile strike occurred on the east coast of the United States from Maine to Georgia – and involved several smaller mills in Willimantic – ATCO was not involved. “In Willimantic,” declared the *Hartford Courant*, “the large American Thread Company mills with 1800 employees have not been unionized.” The 1934 strikes, too, failed. The UTWA would not return to ATCO's Willimantic plant until the 1950s, and by then Connecticut's textile industry was already in sharp decline.



There is only one known photo of Amy Hooker, taken many years later. She is the older woman on right. This photo -- of Amy standing next her niece Mildred Bartholomew -- was probably taken sometime around 1950, when she was 63 and living with her sister Carrie Hooker Varley in Hebron, CT. At the time Amy was unmarried (in fact, she never married), taught art to private pupils, was active in the Grange organizing musicals and first aid training, and was otherwise leading a quiet life. Who would know that, a quarter of a century earlier as a young woman of 38, as President of the Willimantic Textile Council -- an affiliate of the United Textile Workers of America -- she stood on picket lines in Thread Mill Square and the stage of the Strand Theater and -- in words of one-time Connecticut State Troubadour Hugh Blumenfeld -- "dress[ed] down American Thread." She paid a great price for her temerity, never again finding employment in the Thread City. A quiet life. Except for 1925, when she led a union, organized pickets, headed marches down Willimantic's Main Street, bargained with plant managers, a police chief, and a mayor, and stood on a stage in Willimantic's Gem Theater rallying thousands of angry workers. Even quiet people have their day.



Clockwise from top: Pay envelope from American Thread in 1924, showing a weekly wage of \$9.65. Police guarding replacement workers during 1925 ATCO strike. ATCO Strikers picketing on Main Street in Willimantic.

# The Mill Museum

## Windham Textile and History Museum

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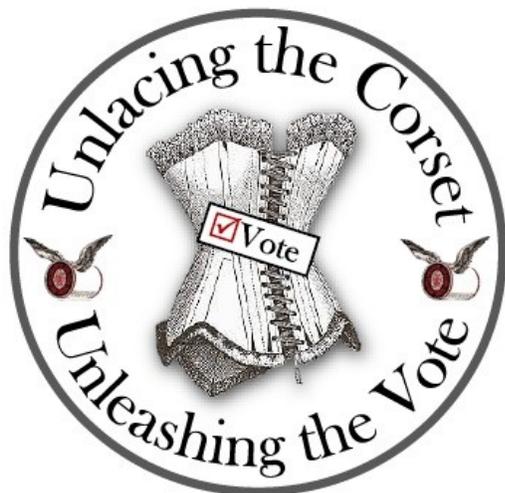
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## Unlacing the Corset, Unleashing the Vote

2020 is the hundredth anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment, which gave women throughout the United States the right to vote. Woman suffrage has been called the “longest revolution in American history,” a struggle that began in Seneca falls, NY, in 1848 and culminated in the Susan B. Anthony Amendment in 1920. It was a momentous achievement, and the entire State of Connecticut – the whole of the United States – will be celebrating.

The Mill Museum joins the celebration with a special temporary exhibit, *Unlacing the Corset, Unleashing the Vote*, that focuses on the changes that occurred in the lives of Connecticut women – especially women involved in the textile industry – from 1920 to 2020. The exhibit is scheduled to open February 8 and close May 31.

To accompany the exhibit, the Museum is putting together an exciting series of programs. Watch our website – [www.millmuseum.org](http://www.millmuseum.org) – for details.



Please Join Us at the

### 2020 Snow Ball

January 11, 7 p.m. – 11 p.m.

Help us Celebrate the  
**100th Anniversary  
Of the Passing of the  
19th Amendment**

In the elegant Betty Tipton Room in the Student Center of Eastern Connecticut State University  
Dancing to the swing, pop, R&B and rock 'n' roll of the all-female Flamingo Big Band  
savory hors d'oeuvres, a cash bar and silent auction  
On-line tickets: [/purplepass.com/snowball2020](http://purplepass.com/snowball2020)  
Call 860-456-2178 for questions - This is to benefit the Windham Textile Museum

## The 2020 Snow Ball is Coming

Willimantic's most elegant dress ball – the Snow Ball – is scheduled for Jan. 11, from 7:00 to 11:00 p.m., in the Betty Tipton Room of the Student Center at Eastern Connecticut State University. The Mill Museum's signature fundraiser, this year's theme is Celebrating A Century of Connecticut Women Voting. Dress in 1920s style. Dress in more modern style. Dress in black tie and gowns. Dress however you like. The all-female Flamingos will provide a big band sound. Hors d'oeuvres. Cash bar. Silent auction. \$75 per person. Proceeds to benefit the Mill Museum. Order tickets by sending a check to the Museum, or online at [purplepass.com/snowball2020](http://purplepass.com/snowball2020).

**Annual Appeal Issue**