

August 22



Introducing a History of Connecticut Industry During Times of War

Firstly, I would like to extend my gratitude to the Eastern Connecticut Center for History, Art, and Performance in appointing me as the curator of the Gardiner Hall Jr History Museum. During my time here, I plan to reach out to knowledgeable local speakers and historians for EC-CHAP's Historical Lecture Series. In addition, the Gardiner Hall Jr History Museum is always looking for new artifacts and pieces to display. The museum focuses on the enterprises that have operated at The Mill Works, their connection to the local community, and on the Hall family. If you have something that you're interested in putting on display, please contact me at ryan@ec-chap.org.

Since childhood, one of my strongest passions was history. I can vividly remember myself in the Somers Elementary School Library flipping through the DK Eyewitness Books each time I was there. Who can forget such classics such as *Viking*, *Arms and Armor*, *Titanic*, and *Ancient Egypt*? Just seeing the cover of these books brings back a wave of nostalgia. Their format of large diagrams and photos accompanied by small, albeit relatively informative, snippets of text served as a fantastic introduction to a wide variety of topics. I would wager that the Eyewitness Books, since their start in the 80s with topics spanning from History, to Sports, to Cars, Artists, and Space, have acted as the spark for many individual's sources of interest today.

My interest in history simultaneously became stronger and more specific over time. One look at my bookshelf and you could easily ascertain that my primary area of interest was military history. For the past few years, this interest in military history has taken me down two niche paths. One being the recreation of a Swiss infantryman's complete uniform in the Swiss Armed Forces during the late Second World War period using all authentic pieces. Indeed, the small neutral nation of Switzerland had an extensive conscription program and undertook thorough preparation for a potential invasion of their country. The second of these niche interests involves a deep dive into literature surrounding the Second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945), what led up to it, and its expansion into The Pacific War. Of particular interest to me are the memoirs of the Japanese people during that time period; Not exclusively a soldier's thoughts, but also the personal opinions, mindset, and experiences of the machine shop laborer, the doctor pressed into service, the baker attempting to continue working through extreme rationing, and many others. Wartime accounts are comparatively rare in Japan. Personal accounts translated into English are even scarcer. As Americans we, understandably, focus on our side of the conflict. However, I believe we cannot earnestly attempt to understand a topic without considering multiple points of view or the zeitgeist of the period. History is often colored by the lens of our ideals and attitudes of today. Many would argue that this should be the way that the past is analyzed. Even so, I think we would all agree that personal

accounts and oral histories act as an interesting time capsule to a historical event, as disagreeable as they sometimes are.

Using this space in the Neighbors Paper, I would like to further explore my interest in military history and how it interacts with my burgeoning interest in regional history. Over the next couple of months, I plan to do a “series” in which I discuss Connecticut’s industry and how it supported the United States’ war efforts. Connecticut has a rich history and it comes as no surprise to any Connecticut resident that mills and factory industry were vital in the development of our state. Many towns and villages owe their existence to the fact that there is, or was, a mill to act as the area’s life center. I am hopeful that this series will span the Revolutionary War, Civil War, First World War, and Second World War. Although the mills and industries of Connecticut before the height of the industrial revolution are not typically what we think of as “industry” today, they still served an important role. Connecticut grew from supporting George Washington’s Army with small home shops and some mills to an industrial powerhouse in the 19th century. Truly, Connecticut played its part throughout our country’s history and became a symbol of America’s growing industrial might on the world stage. Our first revisit to Connecticut’s industrial past will be the Revolutionary War.

Ryan Elgin serves as EC-CHAP Assistant Director, Curator of the Gardiner Hall Jr History Museum, and Volunteer Coordinator. He may be contacted directly at ryan@ec-chap.org.

The Gardiner Hall Jr Museum is open to the public Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. For more information, please call 518-791-9474.