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Williams Street Extension Historic District
Rockingham, Windham County, Vermont

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Statement of Significance

The Williams Street Extension Historic District is significant as a well-preserved unified collection of worker housing, necessitated by local industrial and commercial growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Constructed primarily between c.1880 and 1905, dwellings range from small single-family cottages reminiscent of national folk housing to large multi-level apartment houses. Buildings are simply and similarly styled, predominantly exhibiting Queen Anne and modest Greek Revival detailing. They are set on narrow lots of relatively uniform size, shape and setback – those on the northerly side of the street somewhat larger than those on the south. The period of significance for the district is from 1880 to 1930: the former being the date of the first building campaign on these streets, while the latter marks a shift and decline in the local manufacturing and papermaking era as well as the date by which the district had achieved its general present appearance. All extant dwellings in the district were erected by 1920, the majority by the turn of the century. Although some alterations have been implemented, they are largely limited to changes in exterior cladding, minor fenestration changes, window replacement and porch alterations and in 2008 the district appears much as it did in 1930. Three outbuildings added after 1950 have altered neither its appearance nor its character. As a whole the district retains a high degree of integrity, as do the majority of the fifteen historic structures individually. Although there have been several other National Register Districts established within the village, namely the Bellows Falls Downtown Historic District, the Bellows Falls Neighborhood Historic District, the Westminster Terrace Historic District and the George-Pine-Henry Street Historic District, none have such a cohesive concentration of a single building type: worker housing. Significant on a local level, the Williams Street Extension Historic District meets National Register eligibility requirements under Criterion A, for its associations with local commercial and industrial development, and also under Criterion C, as a distinct and unified late nineteenth-century working-class neighborhood.

Residents primarily rented rather than owned their homes or apartments, and worked in the thriving enterprises of the time as, to name just a few, train engineers for the Rutland Railroad, laborers for the Moore & Thompson Paper Company, and foremen for the Vermont Farm and Machine Company, as well as messengers, bookkeepers, electricians and carpenters for a variety of smaller establishments. Early residents also included, among the men, a post office clerk, roofer, department store salesman, telegraph operator and messenger. A substantial number of women also worked outside the home, one as a “table girl,” others as sales clerks and domestics, and several worked as box makers or finishers in the paper mills.

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Significant architectural patterns reflected in the district honor and evoke local continuous architecture of main house, wing and integrated barn and include unifying elements such as multiple single- and multi-story entry and side porches, single- and multi-story bay windows, Queen Anne detailing and stylistic features – including turned porch posts and balustrades, fishscale shingles, and multi-light, stained glass and leaded windows – slate roofs and shallow setbacks. Though they are distinctly buildings intended as worker housing, especially the large, multi-story apartment buildings, they nonetheless reflect and complement the architecture of higher-style dwellings of the village at large. In addition, they retain a high degree of integrity of historic materials – clapboard siding, slate roof coverings and wood windows – further contributing to the district’s architectural significance.

Historical Background:

Bellows Falls’ industrial and commercial development began in the late 1700s and experienced a great surge in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its proximity to the Connecticut River led to the creation and use of the Bellows Falls Canal as a major navigation route and the harnessing of the river’s waters for hydropower. Formed in 1791, the *Company for Rendering the Connecticut River Navigable by Bellows Falls* was the first canal company chartered in the United States. Financed by three Englishmen, brothers John, Francis and Hodgson Atkinson, the Bellows Falls Canal was constructed over an eleven-year period, was the first on the continent to be used for navigation and was a major influence in the development and growth of the village. Built to bypass the falls, it consisted of nine locks over half a mile. The canal, river and falls all provided an ideal location for water-powered industries and, with Bill Blake’s construction of the first paper-mill in 1802, Bellows Falls positioned itself to become an epicenter of papermaking. Rockingham’s population increased accordingly, rising thirty-six percent between 1791 and 1800, and an additional sixteen percent to a total of 1,954, by 1810. The village’s first bank, the Bank of Bellows Falls, was incorporated in 1831, and on January 30, 1834 the first village charter was adopted.

In the following two decades growth continued steadily, despite southern Vermont still generally being the most populous area of the state. The public water supply was initiated in 1848 and the following year the arrival of the first train from Boston and the completion of the Rutland Railroad between Bellows Falls and Burlington catapulted the community into a new era of expansion. The Connecticut River and Fitchburg railroads further increased access in and out of the village. Although the railroads replaced the canal as primary means of transport in the mid-1850s, by the turn of the century the waters were being harnessed for power generation. In 1868 the Vermont Farm Machine Company, which would become a major employer, was incorporated

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as the Hartford Sorghum Machine Company, and in 1870 the Moore paper mill was established, followed by the Robertson mill in 1872. Consequently, the village experienced a substantial housing boom between c.1860 and c.1900. By 1885 the first sewers were installed from Atkinson to the Square, the main commercial and municipal center of the community, with side streets completed over the course of the following decade, and in 1887 the town hall and opera house was erected.

The village also played a significant role in the state's agricultural history. In the 1880s, apple growing as a major agricultural activity in the state was advanced through the manufacture of apple driers, or evaporators in Bellows Falls. These machines significantly accelerated the drying process, formerly accomplished through hearth, sun or kiln drying, and allowed Vermont apple farmers to export greater quantities of the fruit. The local dairy industry too owed a portion of its success to the village and its access to outside markets: in 1890, before the invention of the refrigerated rail car, the first of Vermont's shipments of fluid milk to Boston was by train from Bellows Falls.

The most populous of Rockingham's five hamlets and villages, and its political hub since 1869, Bellows Falls' expansion is reflected in the Williams Street Extension Historic District. East of Atkinson Street, Williams Street is named for prominent financier James Henry Williams who came to Bellows Falls in 1834 and built his own home here. A c.1872 subdivision plan shows the extension of Williams Street west of Atkinson, on land formerly owned by the Bellows Falls Canal Company, and its division into twelve rectangular lots. On the northerly side of the street, lots were uniformly 56 feet wide and 134 feet deep. On the southerly side, lots were significantly smaller: the two lots east of Myrtle Street were 51½ by 114; those west of Myrtle Street measured 50 by 112. Twelve of the present fifteen historic structures were erected between 1880 and 1900. Two additional buildings appeared in 1905, and the last in 1920.

L.R. Burleigh's lithograph of the village in 1886 gives what is perhaps the first visual representation of the district, showing four buildings approximately where properties #1, #2, #6 and #12 are located today. At the time there were five paper mills in operation within the village (Moore, Arms & Thompson; John Robertson & Son; Willard Russell & Co.; Wyman Flint & Sons; and John T. Moore), along with a grist and flour mill, a planing mill, Derby & Balls' scythe snath factory and the Vermont Farm Machine Co., as well as a saw mill at North Walpole. By 1891, the district density had doubled with the addition of five additional single-family dwellings: a small house where #3 now stands, along with properties #8, #9 and #13.

The c.1880 house at 65 Williams Street Extension (#2) was likely built for Michael Diggins, a

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railroad roundhouse night watchman, whose family lived here throughout much of the twentieth century. The Diggins household was a large one, consisting in 1900 of Michael, wife Maria and their three sons, Joseph, James and John, as well as nieces Ellen and Anna Hackett and nephew William Hackett. Maria's sister, May Hackett, came to live in the home in 1910, following Michael's death. James Hackett and Anna (Hackett) Boland, who lived directly west, at 67 Williams Street Extension (#1), may also have been related to Maria Diggins.

Also among the earliest buildings on the street were properties #8 and #9. An early two-story carriage house fronting Myrtle Street may have been associated with #9 – along with a small shed to the dwelling's west. This was removed by 1912 however.

The small house originally on the site of #3 was replaced with a new, two-and-a-half-story dwelling with canted bay window on the east c.1895, presumably for carpenter Frank Moriarty, wife Johanna and their four children. Frank maintained a small carpentry shop on the property, possibly in a small, square outbuilding directly behind the house. Both first generation Americans born to Irish parents, the Moriartys rented out a second unit in the home for added income. Tenants included the families of Edward Ahern, a clerk for one of the railroads (1900), Arthur Trombley, a trainman for the Boston and Maine Railroad (1901) and Patrick C[urtin], who worked in the shipping department for a local creamery (1930). Minor modifications to the building c.1900 included squaring off of the bay window on the east elevation, and the addition of a porch to its north. A second, smaller outbuilding was also constructed to the east of the earlier shed, both of which were removed by 1927, and the two-story porch was added to the front façade of the home c.1912.

Opposite the Moriarty House, the property at 64 Williams Street Extension (#12) was erected c.1880 as a two-story dwelling with a one-story rear addition. C.1900 an entry porch was added, the rear addition raised to two-stories, and a new, two-story addition attached to its rear. At the same time, a rear outbuilding was removed as an adjoining property on Myrtle Street was expanded west. The building may have been converted into apartments at the same time, although this wasn't designated on Sanborn maps until 1947.

1896 saw the formation of the Casein Company of America, which erected a large plant at the south end of the village and became a major employer until its reorganization and relocation in 1904. At around the same time, in 1898, fourteen New England paper-making operations merged to form the giant International Paper Company, which grew to be one of the largest in the world with holdings of an estimated \$40 million at the time of the merger. With some of the company's most substantial mills situated in Bellows Falls, comprising \$4,500,000 of its holdings,

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Rockingham's population reached almost 6,000 by 1900.

Development of the northerly side of the Williams Street Extension was complete by 1901 with the addition of properties #4, #5 and #7 and the construction of the triple-decker (#6) on the site of a smaller, earlier dwelling at the easterly end of the street. At the west end, c.1900, #14 was erected for carpenter Cyrus Campbell and flats (#13) were constructed on the site of an earlier dwelling.

Renting the large apartment house (#4) to the east of the Moriarty House (#3) were three families: David Sensabough, a machine tender at one of the papermills, lived here with wife Anna and their three young children; railroad conductor Frank Witherbee maintained his residence here with wife Katie and toddler Marguerite; and John Hayes, another papermill worker, occupied a third unit with his wife Margaret and adolescent children Jennie and John. Built for this purpose, the building nonetheless evokes local continuous architecture of main house, wing and integrated barn, by which it may have been influenced. Indeed, some twenty years prior, Henry Street Extension, several blocks to the south, was developed almost entirely with this type of building, as two-family housing, and may have influenced the design of this apartment house.

The c.1900 apartment house directly east (#5) was similarly designed and was occupied by three young families. Daniel and Nellie Sullivan had three children under the age of four, whom Nellie cared for while her husband worked as a locomotive engineer. In the other two units were the families of blacksmith Harry To[lerton] and carpenter A. Allen. With a very similar footprint to its western neighbor, the building appears to have changed little over the years, save for the application of vinyl siding and removal of the easterly section of the entrance porch.

Among the first residents of the c.1900 triple-decker (#6) anchoring the eastern end of the district were the families of papermill foreman John Gately, railroad engineer Norris Ross and papermaker William Smith. A later resident, Wallace Buskey, who worked as a machinist for the Vermont Farm & Machine Company and, later, for Fifield's Garage, lived here for several years with his wife and two children before purchasing and moving into the small house to the east (#7) c.1915. The building's three-story rear porch was added c.1910. A c.1920 one-story outbuilding, spanning the width of both the apartment house and the Buskeys' house, is no longer extant.

C.1905, the large, two-and-a-half-story Queen Anne building (#11) at the corner of Myrtle and Williams Streets was erected as a two-unit dwelling. Around the same time, the one-and-a-half-

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story stable west of property #9 was moved and/or rebuilt further south, in order to accommodate the new bottling plant for the New England branch of the Los Angeles Olive Growers' Association (#10). Managed by Charles W. Butterfield, who maintained a home on School Street, in a wealthier neighborhood closer to the village center, the plant was in operation until the late 1920s. Built as a two-and-a-half-story building, it originally had a one-story addition on the south. Charles, a florist and gardener, owned much of this block between Atkinson and Myrtle Streets, upon which were also a large hot house and stable. His wife Helen later developed Butterfield Avenue in this location. Charles was also active in town affairs – serving as Constable in 1877 and Selectman between 1888 and 1891.

The Los Angeles Olive Growers' Association bottled olive oil pressed by its subsidiary Sylmar Olive Company which had at one time maintained one of the largest olive groves in the world, 2,000 acres in California's San Fernando Valley. The company bottled up to 800 gallons of oil a day, or 50,000 per year. How much was bottled in this packing plant in Bellows Falls, or why this location was chosen for the operation, is not clear. However, by 1927 the L.A. Olive Growers' Association had vacated the premises and the building was converted to use as a second-hand furniture store and electrical shop on the street level and a community hall on the second. By 1947 the rear addition had been removed and the building was functioning as an auto body repair shop.

The last building to be constructed in the district was a small one-story house, built into the bank at the southwest corner, c.1925 (#15). It was raised to two stories by the mid-1940s, with the addition of a concrete block first floor. This unusual treatment may have been implemented to combat moisture run-off from the adjacent slope. By the time of the home's original construction, Rockingham's population had peaked, reaching 6,231 in 1920, and had begun to decline. This was attributable, in large part, to changes in international trade and competition from Canadian paper mills, along with a 1921 strike requiring National Guard intervention, which forced the reorganization of International Paper. Within a decade it had departed from Bellows Falls along with 15% of the population and many of its former buildings demolished to make way for New England Power Company's new hydro-electric power plant.

The Williams Street Extension Historic District exists as a remarkably intact late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century working-class neighborhood which continues to convey its associations with Bellows Falls' industrial, commercial and manufacturing past. Although the district is comprised of structures of varying sizes, it has many unifying features – both in materials and design. Exterior walls are clad principally with clapboard, and roofs with slate. Porches especially were integral to the design and function of the neighborhood, providing outdoor

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extensions of living areas and opportunity for a variety of household uses. As with other developments during this time period, when healthy living conditions and sanitation were increasingly recognized as vital to personal, community and commercial well-being, urban housing nationwide had begun adopting these ideals. The lack of garages is also consistent throughout the district – only two exist in the neighborhood, both of which were constructed after 1950.

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