

# Walking Tour

**HARRISVILLE  
BURRILLVILLE, RI**



The Stillwater News, February 1955.

**Preserving a  
Mill Village Lifestyle.**

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# Harrisville

“Not worth surveying for settlement purposes since these outlands are too far from Providence” was more or less the opinion people had of the northwest corner of Rhode Island in the mid-1600s. Yet, by the end of that century, homesteads dotted the wilderness. The point where the Clear River and the Nipmuck River flowed together became a small village by 1800. Non-navigable except by canoe, the swift current provided sufficient water power to run sawmills and gristmills.

The village was originally called Rhodesville, named for Captain William Rhodes (1743-1823), it was one of fourteen villages in the town of Burrillville. Not much was documented about Rhodes’ high seas adventures as a privateer during the Revolutionary era, but it is known that he owned large parcels of land here, as well as some of the first mills. He was prosperous, as was his tiny village.

Andrew Harris purchased Rhodesville and renamed it Harrisville in the early 1800s. In 1825 he opened a factory to make spindles and flyers for the cotton industry. He later built a cotton mill that he leased to other operatives. William Tinkham of nearby Harmony village, and his brother-in-law, Job Steere, bought the mill site in 1856. Their success at increasing production dramatically shaped Harrisville over the next quarter century.

A mill village is a unique kind of community, in that much of its character is the result of a clearly defined relationship between the factory and the town. As Tinkham’s mills increased production during the Civil War economic boom, the need for a stable labor force residing within walking distance to the workplace grew also. Therefore, the company bore the responsibility of housing their employees since workers themselves earned too little to afford their own.

Here, as elsewhere, mill owners molded the community by extending their business-like influence beyond the factory walls and into the daily lives of their workers. In the worst examples, corporate paternalism spawned unenlightened despotism, but fortunately in Harrisville, it did not.

Working with a commission board, between 1933 and 1937, mill owner Austin T. Levy privately funded and coordinated the Town Buildings Project, a village beautification campaign. Many mid-Victorian era structures and homes were demolished,

remodeled or moved for the simple reason that at the time they seemed to be on the far side of a generation gap between the “old fashioned” taste of the 19th century and the “modern” 20th.

What is unique about Harrisville, is the extent to which the evidence of the mill village lifestyle has been preserved. For that reason, Harrisville was placed on National Register of Historic Places in 1984. Although Harrisville’s residents in most instances now commute many miles to their jobs, this charming village set in the middle of a largely reforested area is - as it has always been - a fine neck of the woods.



Top left: Born in Providence, James Burrill, Jr. (1772-1820) graduated from Brown University at the age of sixteen. He was a respected politician whose career culminated in election to the US Senate. After serving as the state’s Attorney General for nine years, Burrill was paid a handsome tribute by having this town named after him in 1806. In the town’s possession are ledgers with an inscription by Burrill, yet nothing suggests he ever visited his ville.



Bottom left: From the time he acquired the Harrisville mill complex and housing in 1912, New Yorker Austin T. Levy (1880 -1951) began a personal campaign to better the quality of the worsted woolens Stillwater Mills produced.

Simultaneously, he bettered the quality of life for workers. His producers, as he called them, enjoyed frequent pay increases, profit sharing (initiated in 1916), paid vacations, a company nurse, affordable housing and access to literature, entertainment and culture. Rather than firing workers when orders occasionally slacked off, Levy stockpiled the factory’s output until market conditions improved.

# Walking Tour

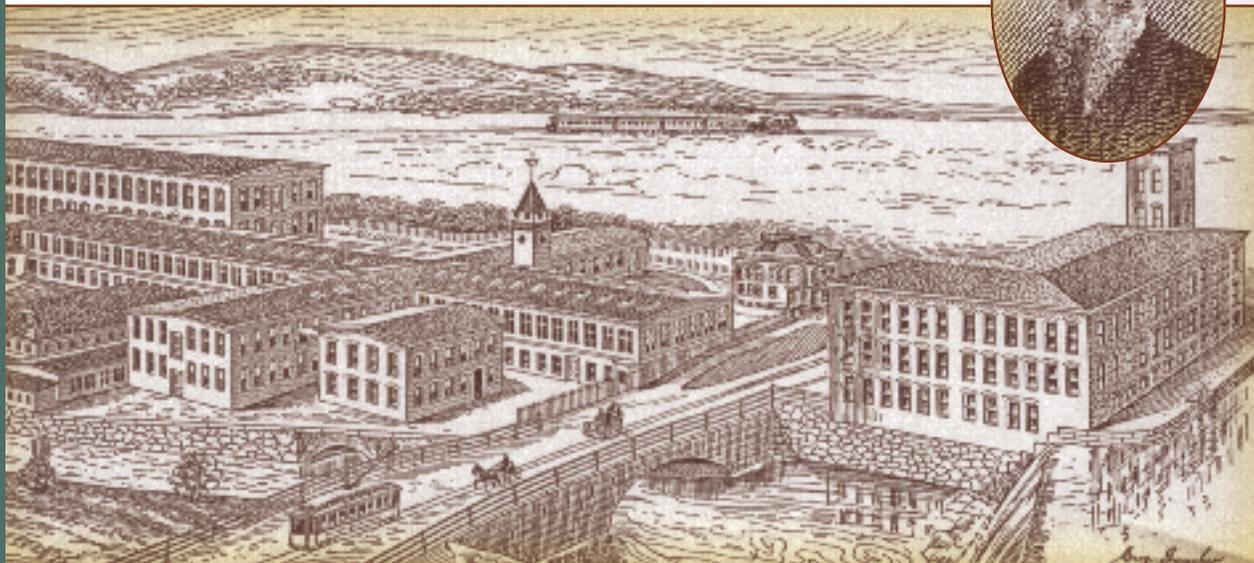
## 1 Mill Dam and Falls

Standing on the footbridge below the falls you have a good view of the dam, built in 1857. Depending on recent rainfall, the river either roars or whispers over the spillway. When the mills were in operation, the flow was carefully controlled by gates and gear works, still visible in places.

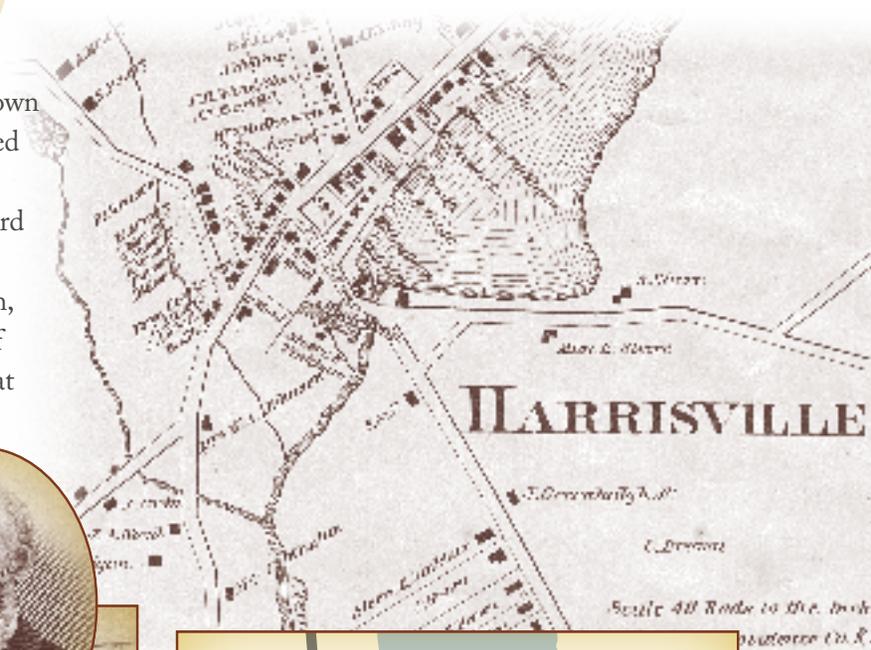
The granite barrel-vaulted bridge was built in 1902 and has a keystone in the center of the span naming its local builder.

Above the dam, the Clear River fills Harrisville Pond. It originates at Wallum Lake,

and grows as tributaries throughout the town feed into it. At Oakland Village, it is joined by the Chepachet River and becomes the Branch River. From here it flows northward and merges with the Blackstone River in North Smithfield, RI. It then surges south, into Narragansett Bay. The mill history of all of these hardworking waterways is what ties the course of events and the economy of Harrisville to other manufacturing centers some twenty or more miles away.



Standing side-by-side with Irish and French-Canadian immigrant workers more skilled than he, mill owner William Tinkham (1823 - 1914) worked on the production line to learn the ins and outs of the textile business. When orders for satinetts and cassimeres ebbed, he kept the machines running by hitting the road as one of his own salesmen.



HARRISVILLE

# Walking Tour continued

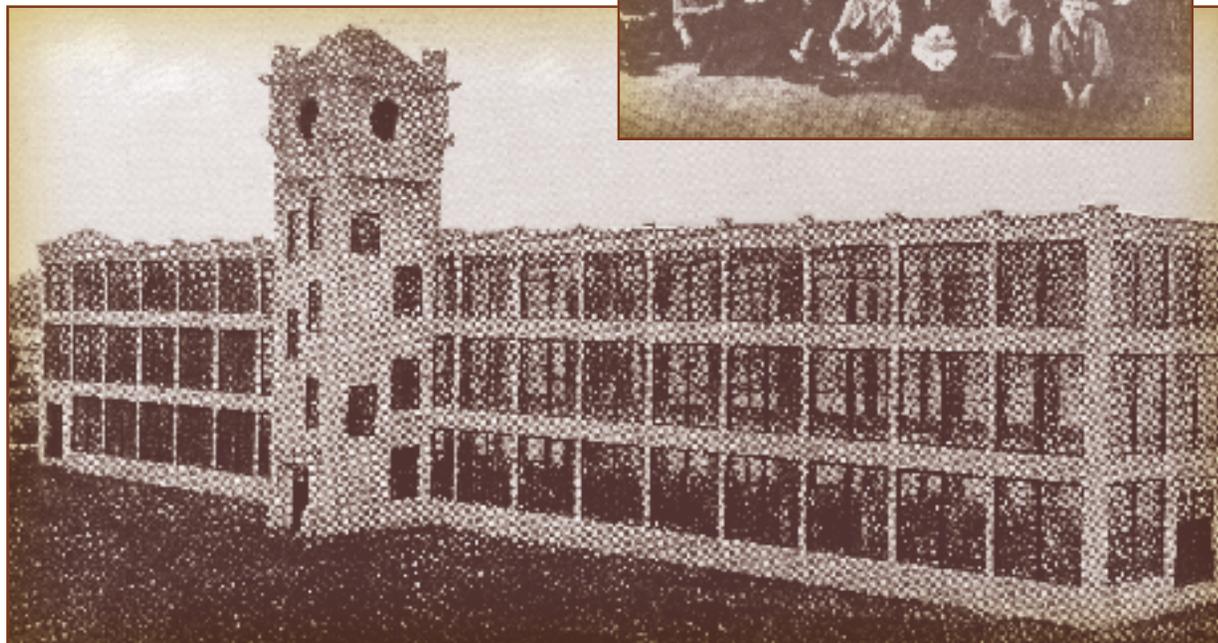
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## Stillwater Worsted Mill Complex

The bridge is a good place to ponder the fate of the mill complex. Textile operations ceased here in 1972, but parts of it are occupied by various businesses.

When earlier mill buildings on this site burned in 1894, owners William Tinkham and Job Steere rebuilt. The largest structure remaining is the No. 4 Mill, built by Boston architect Adolph Sückin 1911. For its day, the reinforced concrete building was a reassuring marvel of fireproof engineering.

Mill sites like this one are the largest structural artifacts we have to show the big picture of New England's vast textile heritage.



Above: The striking #4 Mill has now been restored to its former glory as part of its transformation into housing.

Above right: Men and women operatives pose with their employer Ernest Tinkham, in the second row, sixth from the left, at the Harrisville No. 4 Mill about 1912.

They demonstrate the success of 19th century manufacturing on a scale that seems unattainable even now.

In 2008 part of the mill complex was torn down and the new Jesse N. Smith public library was built in its place. The remaining portion of the building is being renovated into apartment buildings.

*Return up East Avenue.*



Above the falls, The Assembly and Jesse N. Smith Library.

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## The Assembly

The Assembly, a performing arts space, and the nearby 1934 town library, now town offices, date from the era of the Town Buildings Project in the 1930s. Levy intended to give Harrisville the look and feel of a "traditional" colonial-era town - envisioning, no doubt, a romanticized heritage based on stoic "Yankee" virtues and values. His intention was to enhance community life with some of the features he applied to the factory floor - efficiency, order, and safety.

The Harrisville theater company was known as The Village Players. They were a box-office success season after season.

*The Stillwater News*, June 15, 1948 - *The 1947-48 season just completed had been the most active one since the foundation of the Village Players in 1934. Four major productions were presented, and also two programs of one-act plays.*

Diagonally across from the old 1934 library is the Harrisville Post Office, a 1950 Levy project. It was the first time a private citizen had personally built a United States post office wanting to make a gift of it to the federal government. This, of course, befuddled the nation's bureaucrats, who sought Congressional approval on the simple matter of accepting the key to the front door.

# Walking Tour continued

Turn left at the corner of Main Street.

## 4 176 Main Street

The Stillwater House was a tavern in the 1840's, and later a boarding house. After 1919, the Stillwater Company bought it to use as a community center and dance hall. The building has been rehabilitated into apartments.



## 5 173 Main Street

Once known as the Central Hotel, this was run by the Stillwater Company as the Loom and Shuttle Inn after 1919. As it was a long ride back to Providence or New York City, the hotel was a convenient stopover for salesmen on business with the mill. The back ell on the 1837 building was for horse stalls, and the second floor had a dance hall. It is now apartments.

Turn around and walk North on Main Street.

*The Stillwater News*, October 15, 1951 ...*the tavern was the site of many happy and hilarious occasions. However, during the last thirty years it has been operated as a well conducted Inn for the Company's employees...and the building has lost a lot of the atmosphere of frivolity of its earlier days to assume one of New England dignity*

## 6 First Universalist Church

How old do you think this quaint colonial style meeting house at 134 Main Street actually is? Take a closer look. It was built in 1886. This Victorian-era church was made to look older than it is during the Town Buildings Project. In the early 20th century, the architectural detailing common on Gothic Revival, Italianate or Queen Anne-style buildings went out of style. "Beautification



committees" nationwide peeled off the picturesque trimmings on their once-fashionably ornate buildings. They substituted simpler colonial-type doors, and small paned-windows. Generously applied coats of brilliant white paint gave everything a uniform "New England look."

Luckily, the scale and proportions of this building held up well to the adaptations it was given in 1933. The Berean Baptist Church, 1878, which you can see just down Chapel Street to your left, was also given a makeover.

*The Stillwater News*,  
October 15, 1944  
*On Friday August 19th,  
His Royal Highness Duke of  
Windsor, visited Burrillville...*

*(To the tune of Yankee Doodle)*  
*The Duke of Windsor rode  
through town  
In Mr. Levy's Packard,  
And all the people  
flocked around  
But not to see Jack Stafford.*

*CHORUS*  
*Duke of Windsor – fancy that!!*  
*We think he's a dandy –*  
*Eyes of blue and cheeks*  
*of tan,*  
*And wavy hair – so sandy!*



## 7 Levy Memorial

Just past the church, set back a few paces from the street, is an unassuming memorial to town-benefactor Austin T. Levy.

An idealist, Levy's goal of running a model American factory would not have been complete without a model American town to go with it, apple trees and all. As a result of Levy's Town Buildings Project, Harrisville has the look and feel of a planned community.

The fortune made by Levy's textile empire – encompassing mills in Harrisville, Ashaway, Greenville, Glendale, Mapleville, Nasonville, Rhode Island, plus one in Connecticut, and three more in Virginia – now endows The June Rockwell Levy Foundation, an ongoing multi-million dollar philanthropic fund in the name of Levy's wife.

# Walking Tour continued

## 8 Joseph Clarke House

Built about 1845, the house at 116 Main Street is a precious example of domestic Greek Revival-style architecture. Classical designs, especially these petite temple forms were considered a civic ideal in the first half of the 1800s for houses, banks, schools, town halls, courthouses and churches. All across America, new gable-ended buildings, were being set on their lots “end-on” to the sidewalk so that they could have a perfect Parthenon-like portico tacked on.

Even diminutive Greek revival-style buildings like this one with their sturdy columns and precisely calculated proportions, always seem to have a resolute, monumental air about them.

## 9 Town Office Complex

Visitors are welcome at the Town Office at 105 Main Street. If there is no meeting in the chamber room, take a look at the wall mural of Burrillville. Burrillville was established in 1806, set apart from Gloucester, because area residents had complained for years that it was too far to travel for town meetings. Although it was not the largest village in the new town, Harrisville became the administrative center.

The Town office building and the now attached Ninth District Court building were two other components of the mid-1930s Town Buildings Project.



*The Stillwater News*, February 15, 1959 – *You are looking at the Harrisville Grammar School team of 1929, and there wasn't a snappier outfit in the league.*

## 10 Mill Houses

Scattered throughout the center of the historic district are mill houses built by the Harrisville mill owners between 1870 and 1895. At the time of the 1875 census, the population of Harrisville had already swelled to 605 residents, many foreign-born.

Like some other mill owners of their time, local proprietors understood that dependable operatives with families could not easily be recruited to towns with bad tenements and rough reputations. While a decent paycheck was a priority, small town life was cherished by both native and immigrant laborers. Separated by driveways and side yards suitable for small garden plots, the one and one-half story duplex-type mill house, despite the monotony of repetition, made neighbors out of new comers in no time.

## 11 Harrisville Pond Overlook

On the right-hand side of Main Street is a good resting spot on the benches at the back of the parking lot across from St. Patrick's Catholic Church. An earlier wood-frame church once stood where the parking lot is, but it was demolished by the 1938 hurricane.

Contemplating the serenity of this idyllic little lake, it is easy to forget that this body of water is also one of Harrisville's most important industrial artifacts. A man-made pond is a vital clue in piecing together the story of a mill village's past. Mills used water for spinning waterwheels, boiling into steam, washing wool and dyeing cloth.

There was plenty of working water in Burrillville, but then, as now, some ponds are just for fun.

*The Stillwater News*, June 15, 1944 – *Well, it's warm again and there are times we all wish we could just leave everything and go up to the lake for a swim.*

# Directions

Harrisville Village is in the Town of Burrillville at the junction of RI Rt. 107 (East Avenue) and Rt. 98 (Main Street). From Route 146 North or South – Exit at Route 5 Forestdale / Route 102 Slatersville. Park Free in lot at corner of East Avenue and Main Street.



## Along the Way

- Restrooms are available during business hours at the Burrillville Town Hall, 105 Main Street. 401-568-4300.
- More about Burrillville’s history is available at the Jesse N. Smith Public Library. 100 Tinkham Street, Harrisville. 401-568-8244 or through the Burrillville Historic and Preservation Society at 16 Laurel Hill Avenue in Pascoag, 401-568-8534.
- Free film shown all day at the Visitors Center at the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council. 175 Main Street, Pawtucket. 401-724-2200.
- Learn more about the transition from farm to factory in the Blackstone Valley in the early 1800s. At the Blackstone River and Canal Heritage State Park. Free admission. Family-oriented. Open seven days, year round. Hiking trails, picnic area, canoe launch, free parking. 287 Oak Street, Uxbridge, MA. 508-278-7604.
- See exhibits about a mill worker’s life in a company town. The Rhode Island Historical Society’s Museum of Work and Culture. More walking tours, maps and information are free at the National Heritage Corridor Visitors Center. Admission fee for nonmembers to museum. For hours and admission fees, call 401-769-9675 or visit [rihs.org/mowc.htm](http://rihs.org/mowc.htm). 42 South Main Street, Woonsocket, RI. 401-769-9675.

**Congress established the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission in 1986, recognizing the national significance of the region between Providence, RI and Worcester, MA—the Birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution. The John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor is an affiliated area of the National Park Service.**



**This brochure was developed under the direction of the Worcester Historical Museum in partnership with the Heritage Corridor Commission.**

*The Stillwater News* was published six times a year from 1942 until 1960. Its original purpose was to keep boys and girls of the “Stillwater family” who were overseas in wartime service during the 1940s “in touch with the folks.” The entire run of the company newsletter is in the collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

Special thanks to Patricia Merhtens and the Jessie N. Smith Library.