

Blackstone River Valley



Wilkinson Mill (left) and Slater Mill, Pawtucket, R.I.

Birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution

The Blackstone River Valley illustrates a major revolution in America's past: the Age of Industry. The way people lived during this turning point in history can still be seen in the valley's villages, farms, cities, and riverways—in the working landscape between Worcester, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island. In 1790, American craftsmen built the first machines that successfully used waterpower to spin cotton. America's first factory, Slater Mill, was built on the

banks of the Blackstone River. Here industrial America was born. This revolutionary way of using waterpower spread quickly throughout the valley and New England. It changed nearly everything.

Two hundred years later, the story of the American Industrial Revolution can still be seen and told in the Blackstone River Valley. Thousands of structures and whole landscapes show

the radical changes in the way people lived and worked. The way people lived before the advent of industry also can be seen on the land, and the choices of the future are visible as well. For good or bad, each generation makes its choices and changes the character of life in the valley. Today, the rural to city landscapes tell the story of this revolution in American history. Native Americans, European colonizers, farmers, craftsmen, industrialists, and continuing waves

of immigrants all left the imprint of their work on the land. The farms, hilltop market centers, mill villages, cities, dams, canal, roads, and railroads are products of tremendous social and economic power. They show how the forces of technology and invention, labor and management, commerce and government, and pollution and recovery affect us today.



The Blackstone River meanders through the valley for 46 miles from Worcester to Pawtucket. High points provide scenic vistas such as this one from Lookout Rock in Northbridge, Mass.



The Eleazer Arnold House, a classic Rhode Island "stone-ender" built in Lincoln in 1687, served as a tavern along the Great Road.



In the fall, foliage adds a touch of color to the Blackstone River Gorge, one of the few remaining white-water stretches on the river.



Canoeists can use watered sections of the Blackstone Canal in the two Blackstone River state parks.

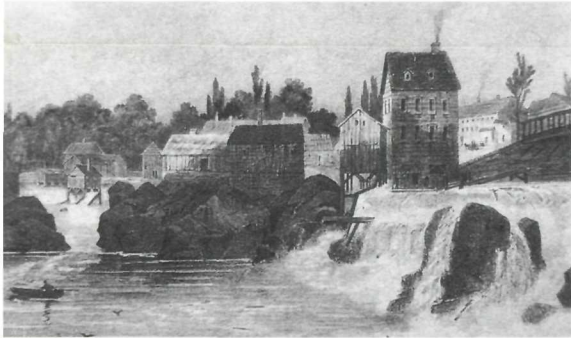


Old factory buildings and machinery relics recall the bustling days of the Age of Industry in the Blackstone River Valley.

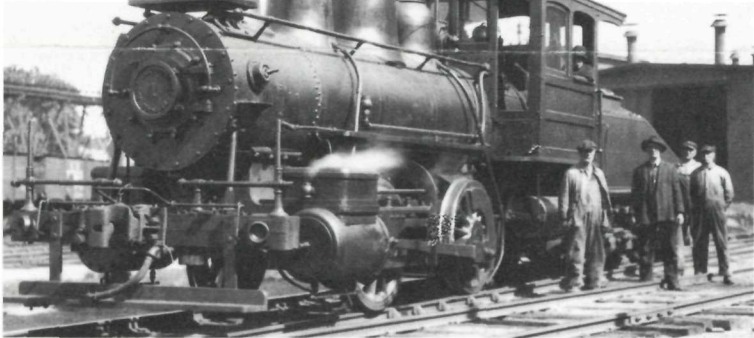


Chestnut Hill Meeting House, built in Millville, Mass., in 1769, served as a religious, social, and civic meeting place.

A Changing Way of Life



Pawtucket Falls at Slater Mill, ca. 1790.



The railroad soon made the canal obsolete.

The Blackstone River—winding 46 miles from headwaters near Worcester, Mass., to Narragansett Bay—is the force that powered this early center of American industry. Native Americans and early settlers used the Blackstone for drinking water and fishing. Eventually, the river's steep and constant drop in elevation attracted craftsmen and would-be industrialists. They built diversions or dams at every drop to harness the water's power. Rushing water turned wheels that drove gristmills, iron forges, and other small-scale rural industries that utilized local leather, wood, and metals. In the 19th century textile mills, with their spinning machines and looms, spread throughout the valley, followed by other industries. By 1880 the river was considered "the hardest working river"—one of the most thoroughly exploited and polluted rivers in America.

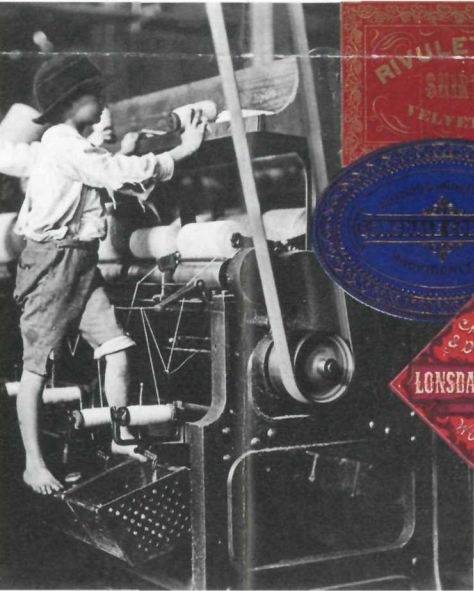
This 1891 bird's-eye perspective shows Manchua, a typical mill village located in Sutton, Mass. Mill complexes included work and home sites, churches, and stores surrounded by woods and farms. Mill villages are a defining characteristic of the Blackstone Valley.

Farm to Factory
Eighteenth-century life in the valley centered around farming, but small industries were on the rise. When the British lost political control in the Revolutionary War, they tried to prevent the export to America of the new technology and skilled technicians that had made England the world's first industrial power. In this climate Samuel Slater, an ambitious manager from England's trend-setting Arkwright Mills, arrived in the United States. With money from Providence merchants and skill from local craftsmen, Slater engineered America's first successful water-powered cotton spinning mill in 1790 in Pawtucket, R.I. This marked the birth of the American Industrial Revolution and the transformation of America into an industrial society.

As the 19th century began, investors raced to establish small mills with new water-powered production technologies. Cotton and wool textiles predominated. Other industries, such as tool manufacturing, hat and shoe making, and textile machine building, also flourished. The valley became a place of business competition, innovation, and technological imagination.

In the early days, mill workers were recruited from area farms. Mill owners provided and controlled the jobs, housing, schools, roads, churches, stores, and recreation facilities in exchange for 60-hour work weeks and more security. Advocates insisted that industry would ensure American independence. Critics called it "wage slavery."

Ethnic Diversity
The first colonial settler in the valley, the Anglican Rev. William Blackstone, arrived in 1635, followed by Quakers, Baptists, and others. Puritan congregations established themselves primarily in the Massachusetts part of the valley. They were followed by Catholics, Jews, and others. The Irish arrived as cheap labor in the 1820s to help construct the Blackstone Canal. In the 1850s French Canadians by thousands fled famine in Quebec for jobs here. Close-knit neighborhoods preserved cultural identity. Some immigrants, including Germans and Dutch, established farms and made a living feeding mill workers. Many Swedes were steel workers and precision toolers. Later,



Children worked in mills.

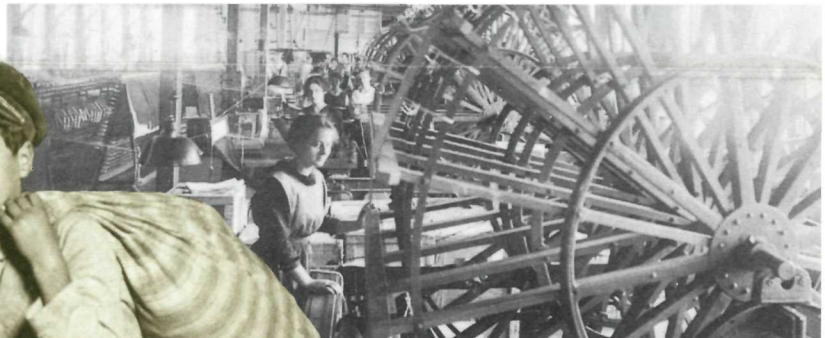


Product labels from Blackstone River Valley mills.



Newspaper ads lured farm families and immigrants.

Italian, Portuguese, Greek, Ukrainian, Polish, Armenian, and Syrian immigrants came seeking work. After World War II, a new wave of African Americans was followed by South and Central Americans and Southeast Asians. These infusions of different groups made the Blackstone River Valley the first ethnically and religiously diverse area in New England.



Women tend warping creels, ca. 1910-17.

Transportation Revolution
Mill owners had an inexpensive power source in the Blackstone River, but they still needed a cheap way to send their goods to market. Boats could not navigate the many waterfalls, and the poor roads were no answer: it cost as much to haul a ton of goods 30 miles overland as to ship it to England. In 1828 the canal was opened to transport goods between Worcester and Providence. In 1847 Providence & Worcester Railroad opened, carrying goods faster and more reliably. The canal was obsolete. Road improvements in the valley continued in the middle to late 19th century, and modern highways were built in the 20th century.

Growth, Decline, and Rebirth
By the second half of the 19th century, Blackstone Valley mills were setting international standards in size and output. But the textile industry began to move to the South to new mills often financed by valley capitalists and outfitted by valley engineers. By 1923 the South produced 50 percent of the nation's cotton textiles. Outdated plants and machinery, labor troubles, and climate were blamed for this trend. More mills closed in the 20th century, and many people left the region in search of work. Of the valley's woolen and worsted mills operating at the end of World War II, about 90 percent have closed. Fortunately, adaptive reuse of these industrial reminders has preserved many mill structures.



Exploring Blackstone River Valley

A New Type of Park



The John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor encompasses some 450,000 acres between Worcester, Mass., and Providence, R.I. The Federal Government does not own or manage land as it does in most national parks. Instead, people, businesses, non-profit historic and environmental organizations, 24 local and two state governments, the National Park Service, and a unifying commission work together to protect the corridor's identity and prepare for its future.

Stop at the Blackstone Valley Visitor Center in Pawtucket, R.I., or other sites marked with a question mark on the map below, to pick up additional information on places to visit. You can walk along sections of the Blackstone Canal and Towpath at the state parks along the Blackstone River in Lincoln, R.I., and Uxbridge, Mass.

John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor
One Depot Square
Woonsocket, RI 02895-9501
401-762-0250
www.nps.gov/blac/home.htm

Reading the Landscape

"There are places in this country that we look at every day, but we never really see. They are the landscapes of heritage; places that seem so natural that they often go unrecognized, misunderstood, and mismanaged."

—Robert Melnick

The Industrial Revolution changed the landscape of the Blackstone River Valley and trans-

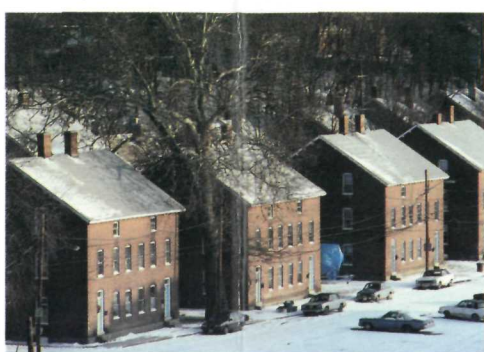
roads, trails, dams and mill ponds, agricultural and natural landscapes, and ethnic or Yankee traditions in neighborhoods, languages, and foods, plus scenes recalling the Age of Industry.

Distinctive places all over America are being lost to placeless suburban sprawl. Efforts are underway in the Blackstone River Valley to protect the remaining

Mill Villages
Mill villages are easy to recognize. They were built along riverbanks to harness the power of falling water. Look for a dam backing up the mill pond—the water supply—with a factory or mill, smokestack, and mill housing nearby.

Mill houses are usually in small clusters of simple, often striking buildings of similar design and size. The mill, the largest building in town, also may have a straightforward design, but you will see many with elaborate architecture.

The first mills were generally wooden structures, not much bigger than barns. Stone mills, which were more stable and fire resistant, became popular in the early 19th century. By the mid-19th century, mill builders generally turned to brick for the increasingly larger factories. Reinforced concrete supplemented these materials by the early 20th century. Workers lived within easy walking distance of the mills, with foremen and managers often living in more substantial homes higher up the hill. Mill owners' grand homes commanded the highest ground in town.



Ashton mill housing, Cumberland

The map shows the locations of many of the valley's mill villages. Some, such as Berkeley and Ashton, have an English look; others, such as Slatersville and Whitinsville in Massachusetts, were built according to a visionary plan.



Kelly House, Lincoln

Mill Housing
Most workers lived in neighborhoods of similar buildings clustered together. Most buildings housed two to four families. In urban areas, you will see many wooden "triple deckers." Other areas have one- to two-story duplexes, or long row houses, made of wood or brick. Generally mill housing has simple ornamenta-

tion, but sometimes it has elements of higher architectural styles. Look for Cape Cod-style houses in Rogerson's Village; Greek Revival in many places, including Whitinsville; and mansard-roofed housing suggesting Second Empire in Albion, R.I.

Hilltop Villages
Nonindustrial villages were not built on the river. Before the Industrial Revolution, settlers established hilltop villages such as Mendon and Sutton, Mass., to serve as their centers of



Grafton Common

religious, governmental, social, and economic affairs.

Villages such as Union Village, R.I., and West Sutton, Mass., grew at road intersections and are known as "cross-roads" villages. Villages such as Grafton Common, Mass., have well-defined central greens or commons, which together with adjoining churches, shops, homes, and, in many cases, a town hall, form a dis-

tinctive architectural and spatial pattern recognizable as a typical New England town center. In Rhode Island this pattern is rare; within the Blackstone Valley it is found only at Slatersville.

and are characterized by open fields, orchards, stone walls, farmhouses, barns, and other outbuildings. Many roads, first laid out in colonial times, follow ridgelines that pass through farmlands. Often these roads are scenic with good views. They are not designed for fast automobile travel but for an earlier and less hectic way of life.

Industrial development actually strengthened farming in the valley. Farms provided food and other products for mill workers. Clustered mill villages allowed farmlands to exist between villages. By 1860, 70 percent of Worcester County was cleared open fields. In many places, forests have reclaimed



Jencks Store Museum



View from Waters Farm, Sutton

farmlands, but stone walls separating former agricultural lands and pastures can be seen running between trees.

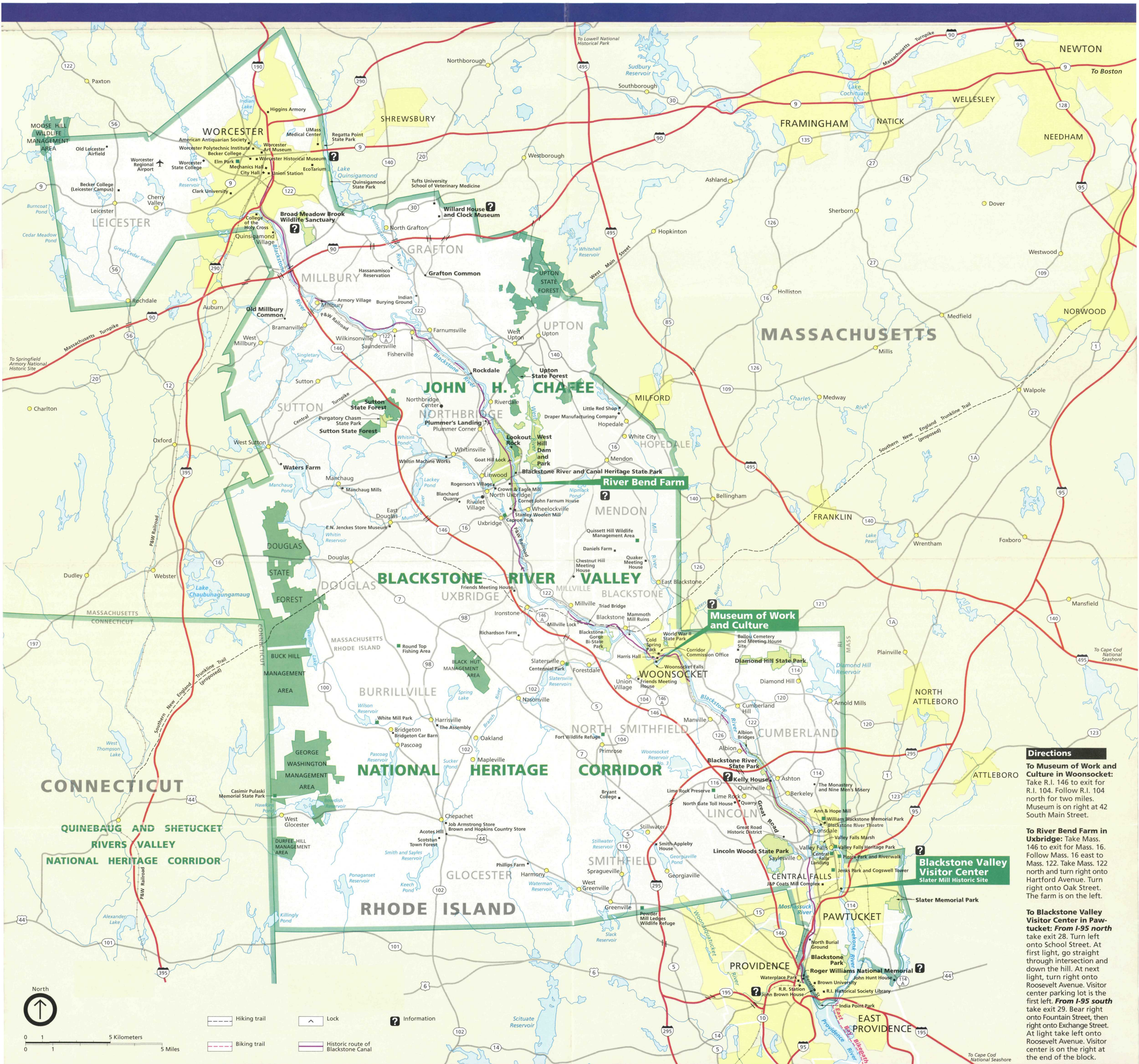
Cities
The six cities in the Blackstone Valley are, of course, the major population centers. Some cities, such as Woonsocket, R.I., grew out of several small mill villages that came together over time. Mill villages can still be seen within these cities. Other cities, such as Worcester and Providence, were legal or commercial centers.

City architecture is often highly stylized and confident, showing the importance of commerce and finance to industry. Buildings were densely



Canal Route, Providence

packed on the river's waterfront, giving the Blackstone River a hard edge as it flows through its cities. Worcester, once a port city, is now rediscovering its buried canal. Names such as Green Island and Water Street are the canal's visible remains there.



Directions

To Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket: Take R.I. 146 to exit for R.I. 104. Follow R.I. 104 north for two miles. Museum is on right at 42 South Main Street.

To River Bend Farm in Uxbridge: Take Mass. 146 to exit for Mass. 16. Follow Mass. 16 east to Mass. 122. Take Mass. 122 north and turn right onto Hartford Avenue. Turn right onto Oak Street. The farm is on the left.

To Blackstone Valley Visitor Center in Pawtucket: From I-95 south take exit 28. Turn left onto School Street. At first light, go straight through intersection and down the hill. At next light, turn right onto Roosevelt Avenue. Visitor center parking lot is the first left. From I-95 south take exit 29. Bear right onto Fountain Street, then right onto Exchange Street. At light take left onto Roosevelt Avenue. Visitor center is on the right at the end of the block.