Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers Valley

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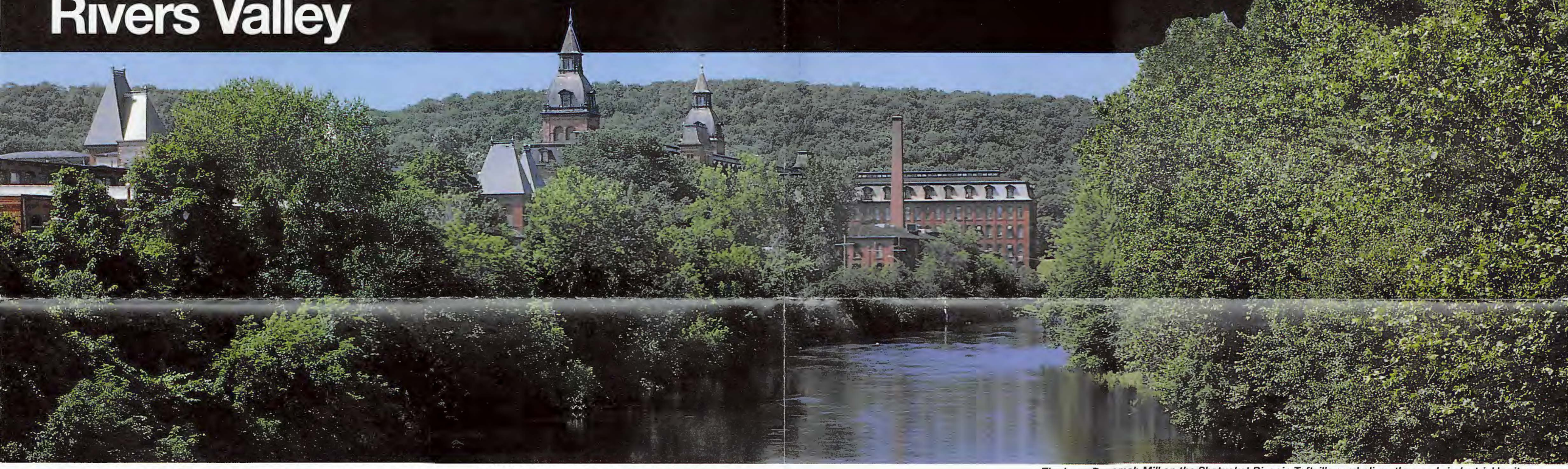
National Heritage Corridor
Connecticut

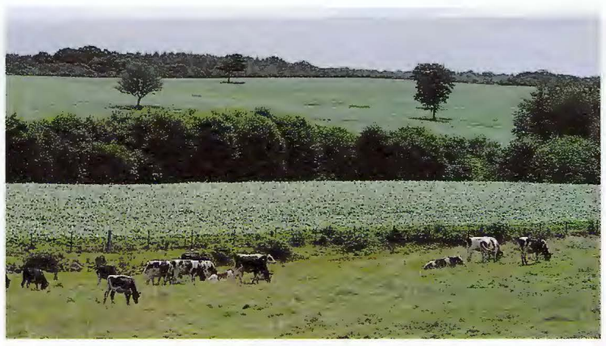
National Park Service



The huge Ponemah Mill on the Shetucket River in Taftville symbolizes the area's industrial heritage.

The Last Green Valley

The Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers Valley in northeastern Connecticut has been called "the last green valley" in the Boston-to-Washington megalopolis. Close to Hartford, Providence, and Worcester but far enough away to avoid the urban sprawl of recent years, this 850-square-mile region remains predominately rural. Roadways winding through the rolling hills link the region's many small towns, villages, farmlands, and forests. Old mills dot the lowlands along the Quinebaug and Shetucket rivers and their tributaries. In the past 50 years, many changes have come to this area. Many of the farms and factories have been put to new uses, such as housing, antique and craft shops, recreation, and high-tech industry. Amid these economic changes, this region has retained its fundamental attributes of lush woodlands, clean streams, rivers, ponds, and lakes; authentic sites representing distinct periods in American history; and opportunities for individuals and families to enjoy a rural small-town life-style. Various civic groups, businesses, and local and state governments have banded together, with technical assistance provided by the National Park Service, in an effort to protect the region's distinctive character and to prepare for the valley's future. Welcome to the Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers Valley National Heritage Corridor.



"Orchards...everywhere meet the eye. Herds of cattle are seen grazing the rich pastures, or quietly ruminating in the shade. Neat farmhouses standing on the hills, a succession of pretty villages with their churches ornamented with steeples...lend the last touches of art to a picture so finely drawn by the hand of nature."

—Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York,* 1822

Connecticut has changed in many ways since Dwight, the president of Yale University, wrote about his travels, but his words still capture the essence of the countryside greeting today's traveler in the northeastern corner.

From green pastures and rolling hills to stark white churches and solid old gristmills, the region reflects the New England character.

Here and there visitors are given opportunities to pick fruit and berries or even to heave a few bales of hay.

From Howling Wilderness to Quiet Corner

Northeastern Connecticut's seemingly gentle hills are responsible for much of the region's historical identity. While Connecticut's initial European settlement took place along the coast and in the central valley, the interior gained a forbidding reputation as a "howling wilderness" inhabited by the Mohegans, Narragansetts, Nipmucks, and Pequots. Non-navigable rivers, poor roads, and hilly, rocky terrain made early settlement difficult, and the lands were crossed by colonists with trepidation.

King Philip's War ended Native American power in southern New England in 1676 and opened the eastern highlands to Europeans. In little more than a generation the uplands were carved up and settled.

Frontier conditions prevailed. The independent-minded settlers resisted outside control and often governed themselves in vigilante fashion. The Puritan authorities did not have as much influence in the Quinebaug-Shetucket Valley as they did in the earlier-settled areas of New England.

After decades of challenging the establishment, many of the region's inhabitants found it easy to transfer their hostility to the distant British government. The story of Israel Putnam leaving his plow in Brooklyn to lead militiamen to Lexington in those stirring April days of 1775 symbolizes the free-thinking attitudes that had been brewing in the Windham hills. During the American Revolution there were no actual battles in the region, but raids and threatened raids by the British caused frequent alarms. As the war dragged on, Connecticut earned a reputation as the "Provision State" providing food and other supplies for the troops.

Subsistence farming had turned into general farming, but the land was running out. Eastern Connecticut residents were drifting to new lands in the north and west.

Cotton-Mill Mad

Providentially for those who stayed behind, the Industrial Revolution was beginning. Small industries had flourished in the area since the earliest settlers set up seasonal gristmills, sawmills, and fulling mills. In 1833 some 75 gristmills and 115 sawmills were located in the Quinebaug-Shetucket region, but few men were full-time millers.

Christopher Leffingwell of Norwich might have taken the lead in industrialization, but almost simultaneously Providence merchant Moses Brown and his son-in-law William Almy were experimenting with cotton thread manufacturing. They had little success until 1790, when they contacted Samuel Slater, who recreated a water frame for spinning and carding thread that he remembered from his English apprenticeship.

Early settlers cleared forests for pastures and crops. In the 1800s factory villages—depicted above in a painting by Connecticut impressionist J. Alden Weir and below in a lithograph of Willimantic's Windham Mill (American Thread)—sprouted up along the rivers. Many women were employed in the mills.

With Slater's innovations, the infant textile industry was free to grow and soon spread from the Blackstone Valley of Rhode Island and Massachusetts into eastern Connecticut. The area exemplified Slater's Rhode Island System of manufacturing which was focused around a small group of family members and friends experienced in management and textiles and which hired families as laborers. The alternative Waltham System, which reached its fullest expression at Lowell, Massachusetts, relied on large groups of investors and brought farm girls to the mills to work.

The impact was explosive. New textile mills sprang up at choice water-power sites throughout the region. The first mechanized silk mill in the U.S. opened on Hanks Hill in Mansfield in 1810. Noting that the number of mills in the area had increased dramatically, a Windham newspaper in November 1811 wondered whether "the people are not running *cotton-mill mad*?" The surge of energy inspired advances in many fields. Transportation was improved first by turnpikes, then by railroads. The Norwich & Worcester Railroad, one of the pioneer railroads of New England, began operation in 1840 and is still running.

The new industries were seen as positive economic forces. People disturbed by the outflow of Connecticut's sons and daughters welcomed the employment provided by the mills. In the early stages most of the unskilled labor inside the mills was performed by children. There was some initial grumbling, but the income proved irresistible. Men served as mechanics and supervisors.

Some men continued to run family farms, which usually contained 100 or more acres bounded by stone walls. These farmers, according to Yale University President Timothy Dwight, were "more generally wealthy than those of other parts of Connecticut." Dairying flourished, and Pomfret became known for "export butter and cheese of superior quality."

By 1836, Killingly, with its miles of mill streams, was said to be the leading textile town in Connecticut. Willimantic grew from less than a dozen houses in the early 1820s to a settlement of 2,000 in 1836. Textiles became the largest industry in the state by 1845, and it was centered in the eastern part.

The adoption of steam power removed the site limitations inherent in water power. After the Civil War came perhaps the supreme expression of the industry, the mammoth Ponemah Mill in Norwich's Taftville section.

New Villages Created

In most cases the local labor force and housing were not adequate to meet the needs of the classic mills. Entire villages had to be created. One source calculates that Connecticut had 203 mill villages. Thompson alone counted seven within its 59 square miles. Starting in the second half of the 19th century, immigrants supplied the bulk of the labor force, with various nationalities clustered throughout the region.

Textiles were dominant, but other products were produced for short periods in various communities: shoes in Chaplin and Lisbon; spectacles in Brooklyn; firearms in Norwich; and cartridges in Coventry.

In the early 1900s huge textile factories were built by Connecticut Mills at Danielson and by Harold Lawton in Plainfield. These plants relied exclusively on steam power and were innovative in other respects, but their time eventually passed. Since the 1930s, most of the textile mills have closed. Some of them moved to the South. A few have stayed open and many have been converted to other uses.

As the textile industry rose and fell over the years, the decline in the region's agricultural population became catastrophic. From 1830 to 1880, 12 of the 25 towns in the region actually lost population. Expressing it more personally, the famous minister Henry Ward Beecher wrote that "The gods of the valley are mightier in New England than the gods of the hills; the loom is too strong for the plow. Indeed, farmers' boys are the most profitable crop that New England farms can now produce."

Sometimes a startling contrast was created within the same town, as in Thompson with its seven industrial villages strung out below a dignified old common. But still, the air of rural somnolence appealed to some who chose to vacation in northeastern Connecticut as exemplified by merchant-publisher Henry C. Bowen's pink, gingerbread Roseland Cottage in Woodstock.

Today, there are still dairy farms, but some people have switched to raising beef cattle, fruit, berries, flowers, herbs, and timber, and to producing wine and maple sugar. Visitors can see a rich array of agricultural and industrial activities in the still-rural landscape of Connecticut's Quiet Corner.

The Factory Village. J. Alden Weir (1852-1919). Jointly owned by The Metropolitan Museum of Art (through Gift of Cora Weir Burlingham), and The Weir Farm Heritage Trust, Inc., 1979. (1979.487)
John W. Barber, Connecticut Historical Collections,1838.
All photography courtesy of Tom Gray.
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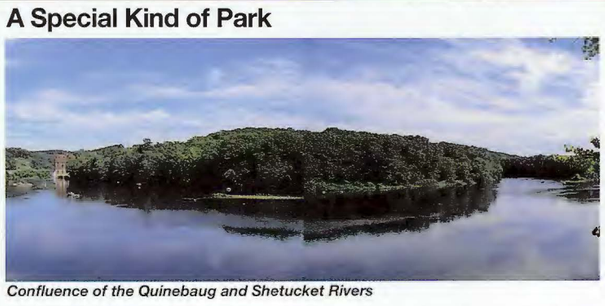
A Special Kind of Park



Confluence of the Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers

The Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers Valley National Heritage Corridor encompasses about 544,000 acres in northeastern Connecticut. The area stretches from Norwich north to the Massachusetts border and from Coventry east to Rhode Island.

North Grosvenordale

The Heritage Corridor is a special type of park in that it embraces 25 towns with numerous villages and a total population of about 200,000. The Federal Government does not own or manage any of the land as it does in

Ponemah Mill tower

traditional national parks. Instead, citizens, businesses, nonprofit cultural and environmental organizations, local and state governments, and the National Park Service are working together to preserve the region's cultural history and to perpetuate its natural heritage.

Today the Quinebaug and Shetucket rivers and their tributaries are much cleaner than they were in the 19th century and early 20th century when mills and factories lined their banks. Residents and visitors now enjoy these riverways for fishing, boating, canoeing, and swimming.

Besides water activities, the National Heritage Corridor provides recreational opportunities for history buffs, hikers, equestrians, bicyclists, antique collectors, fall leaf peepers, and families out for a pleasant excursion.

For general information, write to the Quinebaug–Shetucket Heritage Corridor, Inc., P.O. Box 161 Putnam, CT 06260.

For information on tourism write to: Connecticut's Quiet Corner, P.O. Box 598, Putnam, CT 06260; or call 860-928-1228, or visit www.webtravels.com/quietcorner on the World Wide Web.

Exploring Northeastern Connecticut

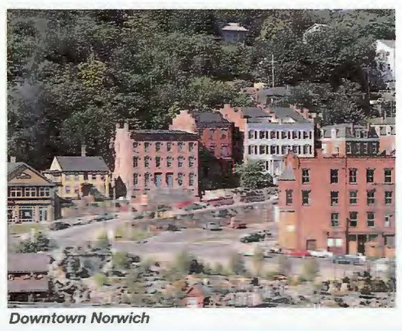
There are many ways to tour the Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers Valley. Visitors are encouraged to use the map below to plan their travels and to enjoy—at a leisurely pace—the region's historic sites, museums, natural areas, country fairs, festivals, and other activities.

Sites mentioned in this brochure are open at least seasonally for 20 or more hours per week. You will find many other delightful sites that are open periodically. Inquire locally about them and about restaurants, lodging facilities, campgrounds, and antique and craft shop opportunities.

Annual Events

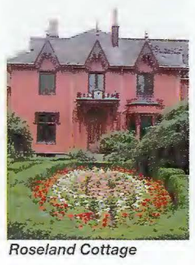
During the Walking Weekend each year, more than 50 guided walks are offered at historic, natural, and cultural areas throughout the 25 towns in the valley. These special events are held during the Columbus holiday weekend. In August and September, agricultural fairs are staged in various communities. An Antiquing Weekend is held the first weekend of November. Each year Norwich holds a Rose Arts Festival in June and an Oktoberfest.

Antique shops



Downtown Norwich

Historic Sites And Museums



Roseland Cottage

Roseland Cottage on Conn. 169 in Woodstock was the summer home where Henry C. Bowen entertained U.S. presidents and other dignitaries. The 1846 pink, Gothic Revival house and adjacent gardens, maintained by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, are open seasonally.

The William Benton Museum of Art at the University of Connecticut serves as the state's art museum. Exhibits of American and European artwork are changed periodically in the museum's two galleries located at 245 Glenbrook Road in Storrs.

The Connecticut State Museum of Natural History at the University of Connecticut features exhibits about the state's native inhabitants, minerals, and animals. Also at the university is the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry which features puppets from around the world.

A Georgian farmhouse is the main feature of the Nathan Hale Homestead at 2299 South St., Coventry. A month before the family moved into the rebuilt 1776 house, Hale was hanged by the British as an American spy after uttering his famous last words, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

Hale Homestead

The Prudence Crandall Museum building at the corner of Conn. 14 and 169 in Canterbury served, amid much controversy, as an academy for young black women in 1833 and 1834. It now houses exhibits on black history, abolitionism, women's rights, and related subjects.

Crandall Museum

The Leffingwell House Museum at 348 Washington St., Norwich, is the restored home of Christopher Leffingwell, an American Revolution supporter whose entrepreneurial pursuits included the state's first paper mill and a chocolate factory. It is open seasonally.

The Governor Jonathan Trumbull House, 169 West Town St., Lebanon, is the home of the only Colonial governor to support the American Revolution. The house, open seasonally, was built in 1735 and features period furnishings.

The Windham Textile and History Museum, 157 Union and Main St., Willimantic, tells the story of the textile industry in the region.

The Slater Memorial Museum at 108 Crescent St., Norwich, features a collection of Greek, Roman, and Renaissance casts, and art from around the world.

Windham Textile and History Museum

Yantic Falls

Natural Areas

There are many natural and man-made waterfalls along the Quinebaug and Shetucket rivers and their tributaries. They include Cargill Falls in Putnam, seven falls and dams along the Willimantic River and the Yantic Falls area in Norwich. Yantic Falls was a Mohegan outpost and is known also as Indian Leap. Here, according to a legend, a band of Narragansetts battling the Mohegans fell to their deaths in the gorge.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manages flood-control reservoirs in Thompson and Mansfield that are used for boating and fishing.

Parks and forests are located throughout the region. The Mashamoquet Brook State Park on U.S. Route 44 in Pomfret offers camping, swimming, picnicking, and fishing.

Cargill Falls

At Wolf Den, one of the park's three units, a trail leads to the cave where Israel Putnam tracked down and killed what was said to be the last wolf in Connecticut. Putnam later became more famous as a general leading Patriots in the American Revolution.

At Trail Wood, on Kenyon Road off Conn. 97 in Hampton, three miles of trails wind through the 130-acre farm of the late naturalist author Edwin Way Teale. This Connecticut Audubon Society preserve offers guided walks, nature programs, and museum exhibits.

The 23,000-acre Pachaug State Forest off Conn. 49 in Sterling, Plainfield, and Voluntown contains an extensive system of hiking and equestrian trails, and a beach at Great Fall Pond. The forest is enjoyed by anglers and hunters.

The 12,000-acre Natchaug State Forest off Conn. 198 in Ashford, Chaplin, Eastford, Hampton, and Pomfret and the adjoining 2,000-acre James L. Goodwin State Forest on U.S. Route 6 in Hampton are enjoyed by anglers, hunters, hikers, equestrians, and campers.

At the Quinebaug Valley Trout Hatchery, on Trout Hatchery Road in Plainfield's Central Village, visitors can tour the facilities where 600,000 brook, brown, and rainbow trout are produced yearly.

The 385-acre Mohegan Park, on Harland Road (Conn. 169) in Norwich, has walkways, picnic facilities, and, off Judd Road, a rose garden that commemorates the city as "The Rose of New England."

Quinebaug and Shetucket Rivers Valley National Heritage Corridor

Major access roads are I-84 from Hartford and I-395 from the New London area and Worcester. Within the National Heritage Corridor, Conn. 169 is a national scenic byway and Conn. 49 is a state scenic highway.

This brochure was produced in 1997 by the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor, Inc., with the assistance of a grant from the Connecticut Humanities Council, and donations from Connecticut's Mystic & More Tourism District, Jewett City Savings Bank, and The Citizen's National Bank. Mapping data were provided by the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection-Resource Protection Project. For further mapping information, telephone (860) 424-3540x2875.

CONNECTICUT HUMANITIES COUNCIL