

BLACKSTONE, MA

Walking Tour



The crossroads of the Blackstone Valley.

John H. Chafee

BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY

National Heritage Corridor



BLACKSTONE

The town of Blackstone serves as the Blackstone Valley's crossroads between Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and shows how the spirit of the valley extends across political boundaries. Blackstone's ties to its sister towns in Massachusetts have existed for over three centuries. Blackstone was originally part of the Town of Mendon. The first colonial settlers did not arrive here until after 1700, but by 1766 the population increase led to the creation of the new South Parish of Mendon, which included modern Blackstone and Millville. The South Parish was a farming community at that time, but a number of small grist and saw mills and an iron forge operated along the Mill River.




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During the 1850's, Monument Square became the commercial center for Waterford. In the foreground is the McMullen Block. To the left is the brick Blackstone Block and to the right is the Union Hotel.

Textile production began here in 1809, when the Blackstone Manufacturing Company (B.M.C.) opened a cotton spinning mill and built the village of Blackstone. The same year the first in a series of small mills opened at East Blackstone along the Mill River.

A third manufacturing district was established at Waterford by Welcome Farnum in 1825. The growth of these mill villages led to the incorporation of the South Parish into the Town of Blackstone in 1845.

Blackstone's first important tie to Rhode Island came from the Providence investors who owned the B.M.C., but new transportation systems led to further links. In 1828, the Blackstone Canal connected Blackstone with the rest of the valley, and made the town an important transportation center. In 1847, the Providence & Worcester (P&W) became the first railway in town, replacing the canal. Two years later, Welcome Farnum campaigned to have the Norfolk County Railroad, which led to Boston, connect to the P&W in Blackstone instead of Woonsocket. Eventually, three railroads and a system of streetcar lines served Blackstone.

Today, the mills and the rail station are gone, but Blackstone continues to act as a junction between Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Many residents of Blackstone work in Woonsocket, as has been the case for over a century. The most recent example of bi-state cooperation was the creation of Blackstone Gorge State Park in 1991. The park is jointly maintained by Rhode Island and Massachusetts, and is one of the best examples of the cooperation which has been integral to the success of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor. 

*This tour covers 1.3 miles and takes about an hour to walk.
All of the buildings are private residences unless otherwise noted.*

1 BLACKSTONE MUNICIPAL CENTER

The Blackstone Municipal Center was built in 1978. In 1825 Welcome and Darius D. Farnum built their Red Mill in the field behind the Municipal Center. By 1835, the Farnums had three mills in operation, and Waterford Village was thriving. The Red Mill was destroyed by fire in 1877.

While facing the Municipal Center, turn right and proceed along St. Paul Street.

2 MILL HOUSES ON ST. PAUL STREET

Most of the houses here were constructed c. 1840. Just before the turn onto Canal Street, you will be walking over a stone arch bridge built across the Blackstone Canal c. 1851 by Daniel Simmons, a Blackstone architect who was renowned throughout the valley for his bridges and dams.

In front of you are two railroad bridges. The nearest one was built in 1901 for the Norfolk County Railroad, while the other was built in 1913 for the Providence & Worcester. The railways were elevated to avoid grade crossings with the streets.

Turn right onto Canal Street.

Monument Square has been the town center for over 150 years.

Here we see the dedication of Blackstone's Civil War Memorial Monument in 1913. Of the 720 men from Blackstone who served during the Civil War, 46 were killed.



Blackstone Block (c. 1900)

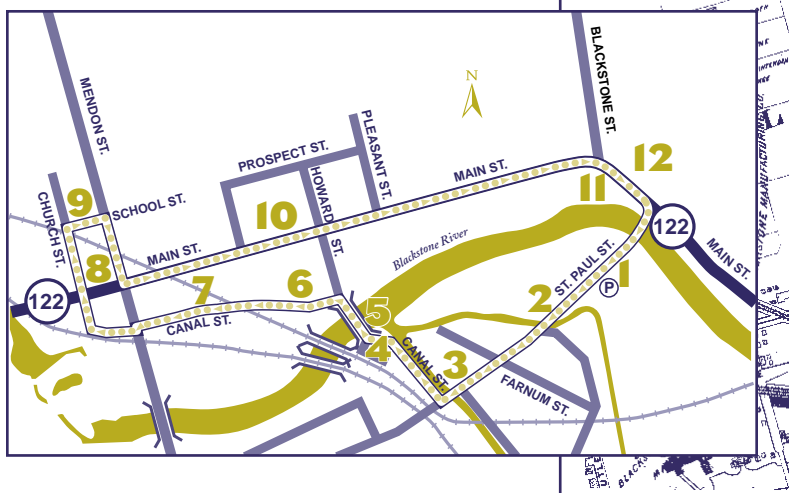
3 CANAL STREET

This section of Canal Street was built on top of the old Blackstone Canal tow-path. The canal is to your right. The canal opened in 1828 helping both Waterford and Blackstone grow by providing a cheap source of transportation. Welcome Farnum, who was on the canal's board of directors, made sure that it passed through Waterford, as opposed to the opposite bank of the river as originally planned. After the canal closed, Farnum used this section as a power trench for his mills.

The Arcade (1843)

This granite store block was the first shopping center in Blackstone Village.





4

WATERFORD DEPOT

To your left are the embankments that elevated the railroad tracks above street level. The Waterford Depot was located on top of this embankment, where the two lines intersected. From this point it was possible to get a train to Providence, Worcester, Boston or New York. This intersection made Waterford one of the valley's most important rail links.



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MONUMENT SQUARE

Monument Square, built just after Blackstone became a town in 1845, was the town's first true center and commercial district. This area was originally known as Central Village, but was renamed in 1913 when the Civil War Monument was erected. The first structure here was the Blackstone Block, built by Welcome Farnum in 1849 to house a bank, post office and other businesses. During the late 1800s the town offices and county courthouse were located here as well. On the eastern end of the square is the Union Hotel, which opened in 1853 to serve travelers who came to Blackstone on the railroad. The third building on the square is the McMullen Block, which was built c. 1854 to house more offices and stores.

The rock cliffs of the Blackstone Gorge as seen from the water below.

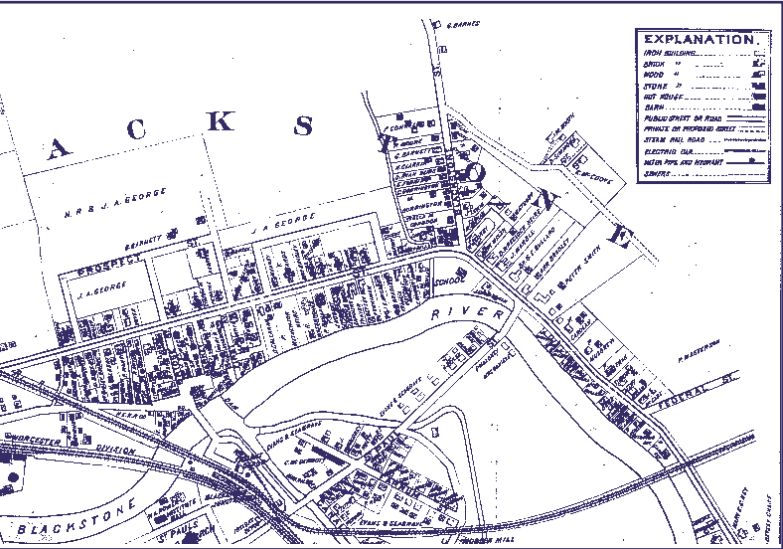
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SARANAC DAM

While crossing the bridge you can see the Blackstone River and the Saranac Dam below. The dam was built by Daniel Simmons in 1856 to power the Waterford Mills. The canal and the river intersected at this point, and there was a small bridge used by the horses that towed the barges to cross the river here.



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BLACKSTONE, MA



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The Rolling Dam was built by Daniel Simmons in 1886 to power the B.M.C. mill. Simmons, a well known local engineer, also built the Saranac Dam at Market Square. Simmons worked for mill companies throughout New England, including the B.M.C.'s sister company, the Lonsdale Company, building dams, houses and other mill structures.

**CANAL STREET WEST
OF MONUMENT
SQUARE/TUPPER
PARK**

This section of the street is built on top of the old canal. As the canal flowed along here it went through a series of three locks before it passed through the river at Monument Square. On the left is Tupper Park, which was built by the Tupperware Company as a recreation facility for their workers' children. Now it is run by the Boys and Girls Club. Inside the park is the last remaining building from the B.M.C. mill complex, a two-story stone storehouse built c. 1820.

At the park, Canal Street ends and intersects with Church Street.

**8
CHURCH STREET/
THE ARCADE (1843)**

Along Church Street are several mill houses built by the Blackstone Manufacturing Company. #6 was built c.1840, but the seven duplexes between # 10 and # 25 were built c. 1820. At the corner of Church Street and Main Street is the Arcade. Made of granite and rubble stone, the Arcade was built by the B.M.C. in 1843 to house the company store. A large room on the upper floor, known as Arcade Hall, was used as a social hall and community center. The Arcade has been recently restored and reopened as a church.

Continue up Church Street to School Street.

9 BLACKSTONE FEDERATED CHURCH (1836) / GRAMMAR SCHOOL (1867)

At the end of Church street is the Greek Revival style Blackstone Congregational Church, Now the Blackstone Federated Church. It was built in 1836 by the B.M.C. to provide for the religious needs of its employees. The Church's original steeple, like many others in New England, was destroyed during the 1938 hurricane, but was replaced by a close replica. Next to the church is the Grammar School, which was built as Blackstone's first High School in 1867 before being converted into a Grammar School in 1920. It is now used for apartments.

Proceed to the end of School Street and turn right onto Mendon Street. At Main Street, turn left.

10 MAIN STREET

As you walk along Main Street you will notice a number of homes that are quite different from the mill houses seen earlier. That is because Main Street was home not to mill workers, but to mill owners and managers, doctors, lawyers and businessmen. Most striking are the number of Greek Revival style houses built in the 1840's and 1850's. One particularly well-preserved example of this style is Dr. William Kimball's house at 127 Main Street.



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In 1809, the first of several small cotton mills was built at East Blackstone along the Mill River, which had been harnessed in the 1700s to run an iron forge, sawmill and a grist mill. None of these mills remain, but the village's commercial and social center, the Stone Store (c. 1800), still stands at 120 Elm Street. It remained opened as a store until 1912 when it was purchased by the East Blackstone Grange which used it for a dining room and meeting space.

11 WELCOME FARNUM HOUSE (C. 1840)

The brick Federal-style building at 61 Main Street was the home of Welcome Farnum. The Farnums ran the Waterford Mills together until Darius died in 1845. Welcome Farnum's first action after his brother's death was to purchase the mills in nearby Millville, which raised the value of his investment in woolen mills to one million dollars. With his fortune in textiles assured, Farnum turned to railroads. He became the president and majority owner of the Providence & Worcester Railroad, as well as a major investor in the Norfolk County Line. It was through his influence that Blackstone became a major rail junction.



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A number of railroad bridges have been built and demolished over the years in Blackstone. At one time, all of the rail and street bridges in town were wooden, but these have long since been replaced by stone or steel bridges.

12 FARNUM'S GATE

This stretch of Main Street is known as Farnum's Gate, after a small bridge where cattle crossed the river to graze in the meadow located here before Waterford was built. These houses were built between 1840 and 1850 during the peak of activity at the Farnum mills. The wealthiest residents of the village lived here, including several members of the Farnum family. Most of the houses are Greek Revival style, but the house at #64-66 Main Street is a Second Empire style. As you return to your car, compare these homes with the worker tenements built along St. Paul Street at about the same time.

DIRECTIONS

BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY NATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR

From Route 146 A: Proceed to intersection with St. Paul Street (at light next to North Smithfield Volunteer Fire Department). Drive east on St. Paul Street for about 1.5 miles. Blackstone Municipal Center is on right. From Woonsocket: Take Route 122 North across state line into Blackstone. At first light, take a left onto St. Paul Street. The Municipal Center is on left.



ALONG THE WAY

- ✓ Parking is available in front of the Blackstone Municipal Center and the facilities inside are open during business hours.
- ✓ Refreshments are available at several stores and restaurants at Monument Square and along Main Street.

Other Sites in Blackstone:

- ✓ Blackstone Gorge Trail: Perhaps the most breathtaking section of the Blackstone River is the Blackstone Gorge, the last wild stretch of the river left today. The most dramatic views along the trail are found at the overlooks located every few hundred feet. Here you can stand on rocky cliffs looking down at the river 80 feet below. At the end of the trail, you will come to an old baseball field. To the right is the confluence of the Blackstone and the Branch River, which flows in from the west.
- ✓ Directions to Blackstone Gorge State Park: Take Main Street (Rt. 122) to County Road. The turn is marked with a Heritage Corridor site sign. Follow County Road to its end. There is a small parking lot at the park. The trail is about a mile and takes about forty minutes. The trail begins just to the left of the Rolling Dam. It is well maintained, but it is necessary to wear sturdy walking shoes. The overlook at the Rolling Dam is also a good picnic spot.
- ✓ Enjoy a boat ride on the Blackstone River. The Blackstone Valley Explorer visits Blackstone and Millville. Contact the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council for more information at 401-724-2200 or 800-454-2882.
- ✓ Visit the Museum of Work and Culture. Learn about the lives of the French Canadians who left the farms of Quebec for the factories of New England. 2 miles south to 42 South Main Street, Woonsocket. Open weekdays 9:30AM-5PM, Saturday 10AM-5PM, Sunday 1PM-4PM. 401-769-9675.
- ✓ Additional Information: Visitor information on lodging, restaurants, events, as well as free maps and brochures are available by contacting the Blackstone River Valley Visitors Bureau at 508-234-9090. 9:00 AM-4:30 PM.

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 Rhode Island Historical Society in partnership with the Heritage Corridor Commission.

www.nps.gov/blac/home.htm