

Walking

GEORGIAVILLE VILLAGE SMITHFIELD, RI



Stonemasons and Georgiaville Mill, courtesy of a private collector

Tour

Take a side trip off the Blackstone to the banks of the Woonasquatucket River.

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BlackstoneHeritageCorridor.org

Georgiaville

Practice saying “Woonasquatucket” before you head into Georgiaville Village – woo-naah-squaw-tuck’-et. The Woonasquatucket River is the reason that Georgiaville exists. In fact, it is impossible to find a hardworking 19th century factory community like this one that is not situated on a riverbank.

The natural flow of the river was less than mighty compared to the Blackstone, yet by the 1750s pioneer farmers in the wilderness west of Providence harnessed the Woonasquatucket to power early manufacturing sites such as iron forges and saw mills. The first textile mills on the river were built here and just downstream in Esmond in 1813. The village was called Georgiaville after the Georgia Cotton Manufacturing Company. Neither the business nor the settlement grew much, perhaps because of the limitations of the water power. Just 56 men and 64 women, and a handful of children, were kept on the mill’s payroll by mid-century.

Only a person with great economic ambition and an unstoppable creative energy would have seen the potential in such a gentle river. But, Providence industrialist Zachariah Allen (1795-1882) put hundreds of carding machines, spinning mules and weaving looms to work producing miles of cotton cloth.

Allen was already a textile manufacturer when he purchased Georgiaville in 1852. His

first action was to refurbish the old mill and build a bigger one. More production called for more water power, so he built a bigger dam, which enlarged the mill pond and reservoirs above it. He came up with a plan to raise the dam to 36 feet, doubling its energy output. When insufficient rainfall caused the river to periodically fail his demand for power, he installed a steam engine, and added even more machinery. He invented and patented many innovative systems, including pulley-free shafting. The 16,000 spindles and 369 looms required more workers, so Allen built additional dwellings, a church and a school. More jobs meant more immigrant arrivals into the rural factory village. By the 1870s, French-Canadian and Irish laborers, plus a handful of Scotsmen and English workers outnumbered Georgiaville’s native born residents. The mill employed nearly 300 villagers.

Georgiaville is a prime example of a 19th century mill village. Preserved here, within a compact 62-acre area, are numerous types of employee residences. This walk will take you past rubblestone homes built for the workers of Georgiaville’s first cotton spinning mill in 1813, past the boarding houses and standardized tenements built as the operations expanded, and finally along tree-lined avenues where

the managers and their families lived in a somewhat grander style as the enterprise prospered. In this loop along one side of the river and down the other, you can still see the way 19th century factory workers lived along the banks of the Woonasquatucket.



Praised for being among the few men of industry with a social conscience, Zachariah Allen was above all a practical person. A thinker, theologian, lawyer, author, inventor, engineer, and tinkerer, he sought to improve everything and everyone. A prolific note taker, diarist and writer, Allen left an incredible record of his life and times complete with observations on the weather and drawings and calculations for his numerous inventions. Allen lived in Providence, and “rode out” to Georgiaville only on business. Although mill owners were often accused of paternalism in a derogatory way, Allen’s version of benevolence took the form of pragmatic good deeds, such as building things and making improvements. He believed that his domination over the village he created would ensure a good quality of life, fostering a strong sense of community among strangers with no common heritage or culture. Word spread that Allen paid workers higher wages and offered merits, even cash, for their innovative suggestions.

Walking Tour

1 Georgiaville Pond
Walk into the recreation area to the shores of the pond. This is a man-made body of water, enlarged in the 1850s from a smaller mill pond created by a dam on the Woonasquatucket River in 1813. As an option, you can walk to the spillway by heading towards the beach areas to your right. At the gorge, the gate mechanism is still visible. This water powered the mill you will see later on your walk.

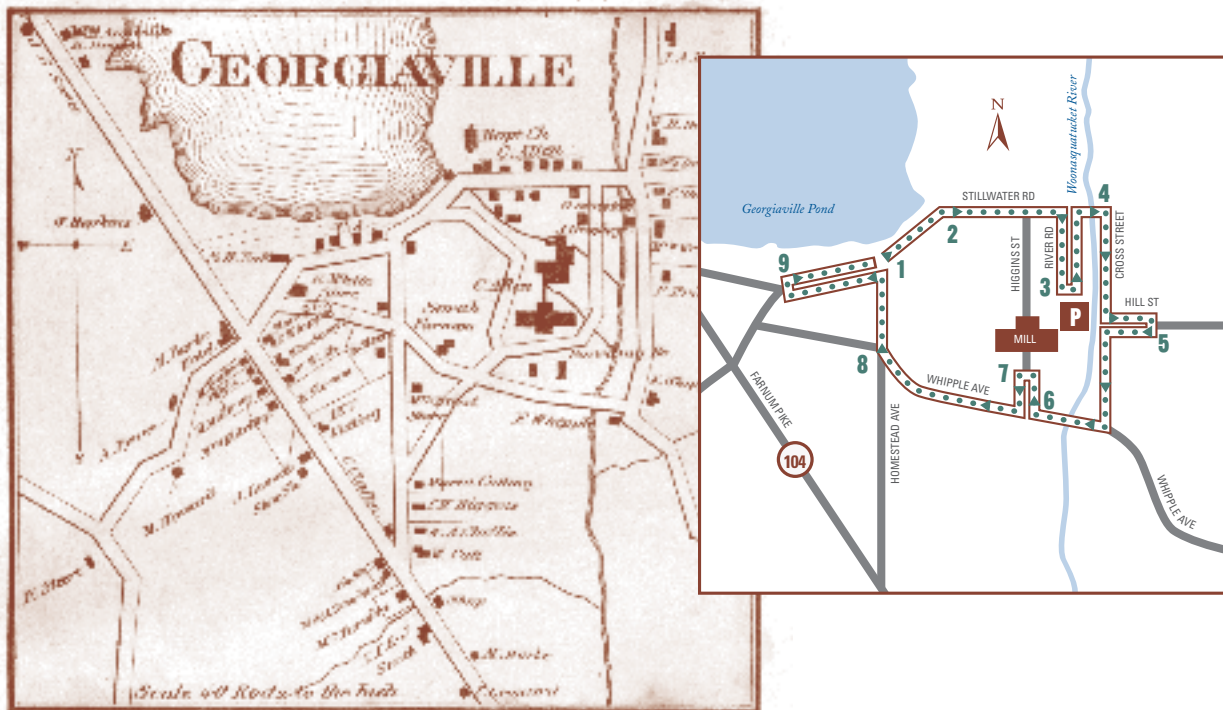
Leaving the recreational area, turn to your left and walk down Stillwater Road.

2 Courtyard Houses (1813)
23-29 Stillwater Road: It has been suggested that these three small 1 ½ story houses on the right-hand side were built in a cluster to mimic the close-knit living arrangements the workers had known in England or Ireland. This grouping is unusual for Rhode Island. The houses, now private residences, are made of rubblestone, covered in

stucco. Rubblestone is a far cheaper building method than either brick or quarried stone, and more fireproof than wood-built houses.

Turn right down River Road.

3 Dye House (1813)
55-59 River Road: This sturdy rubblestone building was a dye house, separate from the main mill. It is the only surviving industrial building from the 1813-era mill. The dye house needed to be on the riverbanks. Water from the river was used to make the dye solutions, to rinse the fibers and flush away the used chemicals. Depending on the color of the dye being used on a particular day, the water itself and all the riverbanks in the towns downstream were tinted likewise.



Although this was mill-owned housing, workers did not live here free. The bookkeeper of the mill in 1852 tallied that these and other worker tenements in Georgiaville, 41 units in all, netted the corporation \$917 in rent that year.

Walking Tour continued

Beware of poison ivy growing along the riverbanks and roadsides. Return along River Road to the footbridge over the river.

4 Woonasquatucket River

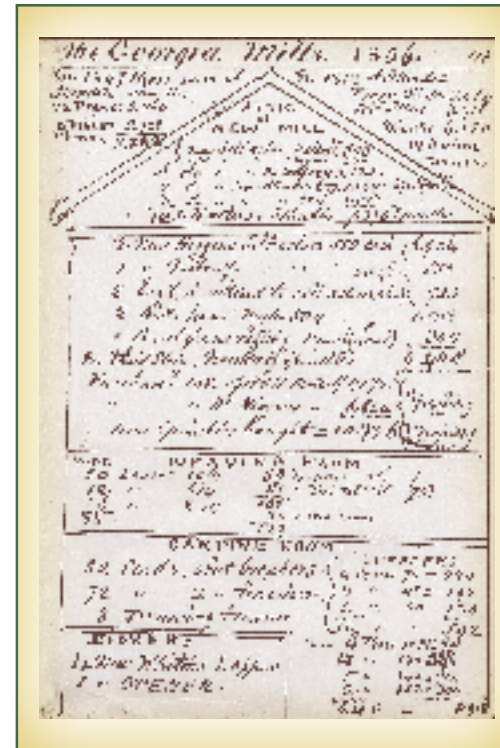
At times quite shallow, and non-navigable, the water passing under the footbridge is part of the 18 ½ mile long Woonasquatucket River. From the language of the Narragansett tribe, Woonasquatucket means “river where the tide ends.” The river rises from Primose Pond in North Smithfield and is fed by the Stillwater River, which Zachariah Allen dammed in several places to create reservoirs. Southwards, the stream joins the Moshassuck to create the Providence River, and then flows into Narragansett Bay and the Atlantic Ocean.

To this day, pollutants from nearly two centuries of industrial discharge into the waterway remain in the bottom silt. Poor water quality in the Woonasquatucket is one of the sadder legacies of the great era of 19th century American industry. However, the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project has unified 17 public and private groups to develop a plan of action aiding the river’s recovery. The US Environmental Protection Agency calls this “a river on the rebound.”

This beautiful historic iron truss bridge that once spanned the river here is currently preserved at the Valley Falls Heritage Park in Cumberland, RI.

5 Mill Tenements (1871-1896)

1-16 Hill Street: Turn right at the end of the footbridge and walk along Cross Street to Hill Street where you will see eight 4-family tenements. All but gone by the time these dwellings were built is the idealistic notion among industrial corporations that workers should be given housing that is appealing and attractive as an enticement or reward. These plain wood-frame buildings are as basic and standardized as residential architecture can be. Social critics of the time declared that housing like this was proof that desensitized mill owners considered their workers as just another replaceable piece of their machinery.



Courtesy of RIHS.



Walking Tour continued

Turn right onto Whipple Avenue and cross the Woonasquatucket River again.

6 Mill Boarding Houses (1854, 1855)

These rubblestone buildings, built by Zachariah Allen, are a pair; one for male workers and the other, with the raised columns on the façade, for the female workers. He could not have placed them any closer to his mill. Efficient and in an odd way elegant, these are both Greek revival style, with their gable ends to the street.

The mill owners' account books for the decade after these two buildings were built record \$200 for grading streets and moving houses, \$2,500 for building 24 new houses, \$125 for five new privies, \$1,000 for fencing lots and improving streets, \$750 for re-siding five houses and \$650 for improvements on tenements.

Compare the lifestyle of worker families living in a rustic stone-cottage to that of workers living communally in a boarding house built like a classical temple, to that of workers occupying the wood-built tenement houses you saw previously on Hill Street. Which would you prefer? In some cases, families had part of a house, and in other cases they lived among single workers, sleeping in a room with many beds and sharing common rooms together. As you stroll along and discover the different kinds of mill houses, keep in mind that if employees lost their jobs, the families lost their houses.

7 Homestead Mill Condominiums

The original stone mill on this site, built by Samuel Nightingale, Samuel Arnold and Thomas Thompson, was one of 140 textile mills within a 30-mile radius of Providence by 1815. It was torn down in the late 1960s. Parts and pieces of the complex you see now date to 1828, 1846, 1853 (the largest part now visible), 1865, 1970, and 1989. The 1853 mill building, designed by Zachariah Allen himself, was considered to be one of the most impressive of its day. At one entrance, nicely preserved in the pediment above the doorway, are the date and the initials, Z.A.

Textile manufacturing went on here until the 1930s. More recently, this was the Industrial Machine Tool Company. Throughout the Blackstone River Valley, many solidly built mills like this one were torn down after years of abandonment, vandalism and neglect. Here, however, the mill complex was converted to residences, an excellent example of the creative reuse of an industrial site. From 1987 to 19889, a Boston-based corporation redeveloped the complex into The Homestead Mill, a 125-unit condominium village.



Courtesy of RIHS.

There is ample evidence in Zachariah Allen's papers that he believed Georgiaville was a rural worker sanctuary set in a peaceful river valley. The label on his bolts of cloth shows romanticized park-like scenery surrounding his factory, complete with a manicured lawn, chestnut trees, and a perky picket fence as if it were no different than a cozy country cottage. The gritty truth is industrialization is rarely pretty. Allen attempted to improve the quality of life for his employees by adding rudimentary plumbing in their homes, and keeping the landscape picturesque. Allen even preserved a corner of the millpond and river as a natural cascade tumbling through a shaded glen for his workers' benefit. However the soul-soothing retreat was too far away for them to enjoy on their half-hour lunch break.

Though Allen considered Georgiaville to be a model mill village, large textile complexes where housing and stores stood side-by-side with factories were noisy, smelly and unsanitary environments. The settlement may have been remote from coarse urban influences, but tranquil it was not.

Walking Tour continued

Just before you turn to your right and walk down Homestead Avenue, look up across the intersection towards your left.

8

Superintendent's & Manager's Houses

22 and 24-34 Homestead Avenue.

22 Homestead Avenue, an ornate two-story Italiante-style house, built about 1860, was the mill superintendent's residence. Its imposing presence, and especially its location atop the hill above the mill and workers' houses, paints a clear picture of the exalted status of the occupant. From this vantage point, there was nothing the overseer could not oversee. Nonetheless, the superintendents was still a hired hand of the corporation that owned and operated the mill and the entire village.

Continue towards your right along Homestead Avenue past the row of houses on your left, built c.1871. It is not actually clear who would have called this block "Boss Row" – the bosses or the workers – but it is referred to by that name because these are the residences provided for mill managers. Moving up the ranks within the organization had obvious benefits, and the mill owners knew that there was no greater motivation for workers performance or obedience than better housing for their families.

Turn left on Stillwater Road, and look towards your right.

9

Mill Houses (1813)

6-18 Stillwater Road: This is another group of early mill houses dating from the era of Georgiaville's first textile mill. Each is slightly different, but all are rubblestone construction. These buildings house more than one family or groups of workers living together. All have been converted into apartments or private residences.



Note the two simple amenities that housing for workers lower on the employment hierarchy did not have — a postage-stamp sized lawn and a covered front step. There is something of the American Dream in the neat white-clapboarded managers' houses with their simple architectural details, porticoed porches, bay windows and hip-roofed dormers. These houses sit slightly higher in elevation than most of the operatives' dwellings, and lower than the superintendent's.

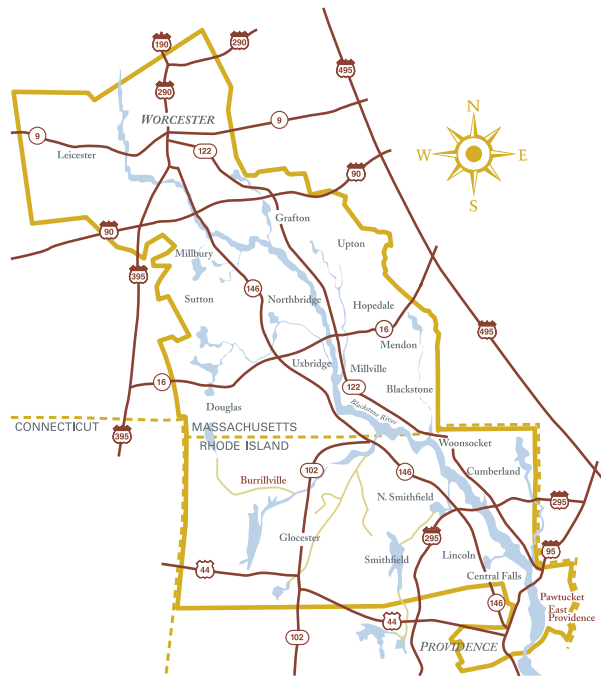


The Farnum Homestead, (1770) 18 Whipple Avenue

Around 1755, John Farnum came from Uxbridge MA, and bought land on the banks of the Woonasquatucket River from an earlier settler, Thomas Owen. Along with his sons, Farnum established a blacksmith shop and iron forge. At first, Farnum's clients would have been the farmers in the surrounding hills and valleys. One of Rhode Island's early toll roads to Providence, now Route 104, was improved in 1808 making it easier for the Farnum family to market their iron goods to a wider circle. The thoroughfare was not called Farnum Pike until after 1900. The house pre-dates the mill village by 43 years and is the oldest in Georgiaville.

Directions

Georgiaville Village is on RI Route 104 in Smithfield. From Interstate 295, exit at Route 44 East. Turn left at the traffic light onto Esmond Street. Turn left on Route 104, the Farnum Pike. A short distance ahead, bear right onto Homestead Avenue. Turn right onto Stillwater Road. Park at Homestead Mill.



Along the Way

Almost all of the sites in this walking tour are private property, so be sure to respect the privacy of the residents of the village.

- Parking is available at the Homestead Mill.
- Restrooms are available during business hours at the Smithfield Town Hall Town Hall, 64 Farnum Pike, Route 104, 401-233-1010.
- Learn more about Georgiaville and the early farm families of Smithfield by visiting the Smith-Appleby House Museum, the Historical Society of Smithfield, 220 Stillwater Road, Smithfield, 401-231-7363.
- Take a walk on the wild side at the Powder Mill Ledges Wildlife Refuge. The 77-acre sanctuary has more than two miles of trails. Audubon Society of RI, 12 Sanderson Road, Smithfield, 401-949-5454.
- For information on events, restaurants and lodging in Smithfield, call or visit the Visitor Center at the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council. A National Heritage Corridor Visitor Center with additional information, free maps and tour brochures. Free film shown all day. Open seven days, year round. Picnic area, restrooms, museum store, free parking. 175 Main Street, Pawtucket. 401-724-2200.

- Exhibits and artifacts tell the story of factory life at the Slater Mill Historic Site, a working textile mill museum. See a working water wheel and learn how a river powers a mill. 67 Roosevelt Avenue Pawtucket. 401-725-8638 or visit www.slatermill.org

Congress established the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor 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.

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