

Walking

VALLEY FALLS

CUMBERLAND & CENTRAL FALLS, RI



Cumberland Town Hall. Photo courtesy of Kevin Klyberg.

Tour

**Building a textile
empire- leading a
moral crusade.**

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Valley Falls

Valley Falls is the site of the most extensive textile activity in the town of Cumberland. The first textile mill here opened in 1818, but development of modern Valley Falls did not begin until 1839 when Oliver Chace purchased the mills on both the Cumberland and Central Falls sides of the river. For the next seventy-three years the Chace family, specifically Oliver's sons Harvey and Samuel B. Chace, built a textile empire here in Valley Falls. They began with two midsized stone mills but eventually built two massive brick textile complexes on either end of the Valley Falls dam. The influence of the Chace family, however, went beyond providing jobs for the workers of Valley Falls.

The Chace brothers were active Quakers, and both were committed to reform movements, including abolition. Samuel's wife, Elizabeth Buffum Chace, was one of the leaders of Rhode Island's anti-slavery movement and even ran a stop on the Underground Railroad from the family home on Hunt Street in Central Falls. In her diary, Mrs. Chace remembers shuttering the windows whenever they harbored fugitive slaves. She and her husband feared they would be arrested, leaving their children alone. Within her own community, Mrs. Chace tried to improve

the lives of the mill workers by starting evening classes for adults, and opening a reading room and an activity room. She also began a day care center and a kindergarten for the workers' families.

As the Valley Falls Company grew, the village expanded to support it. By the 1860s, the village had become urbanized and was the seat of town government. Other manufacturers came to the village as well to take advantage of the labor force and the infrastructure, including the Rhode Island Horse Shoe Company and the Cadillac Textile Mill. Gradually, Valley Falls became Cumberland's downtown, and most of the houses on Broad Street were replaced by businesses.

The Valley Falls Company Mills shut down in the 1930s, ending an important phase in the history of both the village and the town of Cumberland. Despite this loss, Valley Falls continues to be the urban center of Cumberland. So while the site of the old mill has been turned into a park, the thriving business along Broad Street and the presence of the active Portuguese community here provide a taste of what Valley Falls was like during the textile boom years.



Elizabeth Buffum Chace was one of Rhode Island's leading reformers during the 19th century. Her earliest activities were in the abolitionist movement, inspired by her strict Quaker beliefs. Later she became active in campaigns for women's suffrage and temperance and also played a key role in reforming the state's prison system.

Walking Tour

1 Heritage Park

Valley Falls Heritage Park is built amid the ruins of the Valley Falls Company mill complex. For over one hundred years a massive mill operated here, but in 1934 the owners demolished it to avoid paying the property taxes. This site remained vacant until 1991 when the Town of Cumberland and the Heritage Corridor began to transform what had been a local eyesore into an historical park. Walkways, ramps and bridges allow you to tour the foundations of the mill complex. A series of informational signs tell the story of the Valley Falls Company as well as other mill topics. The tour begins at the Broad Street entrance, and continues along the trails to the Mill Street entrance.

2 Valley Falls Railroad Station and Rail Yard (c.1895)

This small wooden train station was built by the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad in the mid-1890s. Rail service first came to the valley when the Providence & Worcester Railroad (P&W) opened in 1847, leading to a new period of mill expansion as it became possible to ship larger amounts of raw material and finished textiles between the mills and the docks of Providence. The P&W was leased by the larger New Haven Railroad from 1892 to 1968. In 1973, the P & W reopened as an independent freight line and still uses this site for a switching yard.



Valley Falls



Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor



Valley Falls Heritage Park has been one of the most popular relaxation sites in Cumberland since its opening in 1993.

Walking Tour continued

3 Valley Falls Post Office (12-14 Mill Street, c.1890)

This building has served many different purposes over the past century. It was originally built as the Valley Falls Post Office, and later housed Cumberland's first library. Then, throughout much of the early 1900s, a grocery store operated on the first floor of this building and the upper floor was a residence.

4 Cumberland Town Hall (1894)

The town offices moved to Valley Falls in 1868, but the current Town Hall was not built until 1894. At that time it was considered to be the "town house" and included the town jail and library, besides the town offices. Today, Town Hall houses only the town offices. Town Hall has been recently renovated to its original historic character. Particularly attractive are the clock tower and cupola that top the building.

Turn left onto Broad Street and continue across the bridge into Central Falls to the intersection with High Street.

5 Valley Falls Company Mill (1849)

This mill complex was built in 1849 by the Chace family as part of their expansion of the Valley Falls Company. Though parts of the exterior have been covered with stucco, this complex provides an excellent idea of what the original mills looked like. Notice how the power canal flows in between the two wings of the complex. In this way two separate drive systems could be powered by the same canal.

Several years ago this mill was renovated and converted into senior citizen's housing for the City of Central Falls. This is one of the best solutions to a problem that has been plaguing the communities of the Blackstone Valley for the past 50 years: What is the best use for old textile mills? Many are still being used by a wide variety of businesses or for warehouse storage, while others, like this one, have been converted into public housing, or private condominiums.

6 Gatehouse (1854)

This building houses the gate controls which directed the flow of water into the power canals that served the mill on this side of the river. Most of the original machinery is still intact inside. A similar structure originally stood in the park on the Cumberland side of the River, where the gear wheels can be seen along the river today.



Walking Tour continued

7 The Broad Street Bridge (1915)

In 1812 Issac Wilkinson built the Valley Falls Turnpike from Pawtucket to Lonsdale so he could ship goods from his mill in Valley Falls to market. This was the earliest bridge to cross the Blackstone in the area and made Valley Falls an important transportation center. Since Valley Falls was not connected to the Blackstone Canal, it was not until the advent of the railroad that the Turnpike was replaced as the primary transportation link to Pawtucket and Providence. The current bridge, built in 1915, continues to connect the two halves of Valley Falls. While facing upstream, to your left is the American Supply Company building, built in 1875. The company produced supplies for textile mills, including belts, gears, shuttles and loom parts.

Proceed ahead and make a left onto Meeting Street

8 Cadillac Textile Mill:

One of the other major manufacturers in Valley Falls, this mill was in operation as a textile mill until 1985, most recently producing nylon cloth for safety flags. Notice the saw-tooth design on the roof. They are fairly common in the Valley, and are built oriented to the north. This provides a steady source of sunlight without glare, which is necessary for quality weaving. Currently, several small companies are operating here.

Return down Meeting Street and make a left onto Chase Street

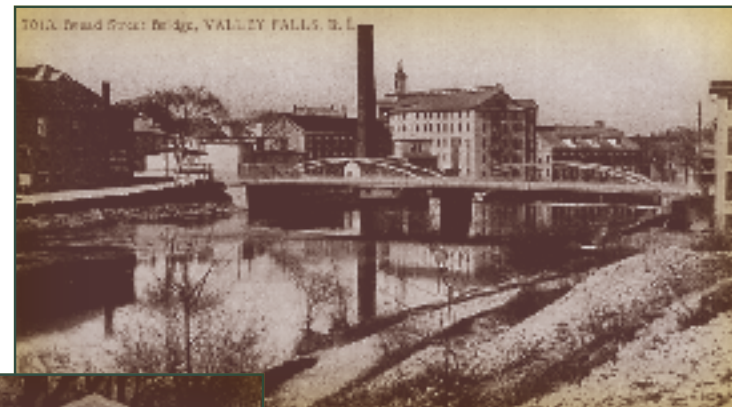
9 Club Juventude Lusitana

Immigrants from many different nations have come to the Blackstone Valley over the years to seek employment in the mills. One of the later groups to arrive were the Portuguese who began to come to the valley in the 1920s. At that time, there were already many Portuguese immigrants living in southeastern New England, mostly working in the fishing and whaling fleets. Today, the Portuguese community is still vibrant in Valley Falls, and its center is the Club Juventude Lusitana. The club sponsors numerous cultural activities and festivals as well as a Portuguese school.

10 Mill Houses (c. 1895)

These two duplexes at 33 - 39 Titus Street, featuring gambrel roofs, were built for mill workers during the late 1800s. Unlike most other villages, the houses in Valley Falls were not owned by the company, but built by landlords who rented them out. They are now private residences.

Take a right down Titus Street and return to parking lot on Broad Street.



Above: This postcard from the early 1900s shows the old iron Broad Street Bridge. In the background is the Valley Falls Company.



Left: The Reverend William Blackstone, the first English settler in the Blackstone Valley, built his home along the banks of the river in what is now the Lonsdale section of Cumberland in 1635. Blackstone, who was also the first settler of Boston, came here after falling into disagreements with the Puritans. His home, known as Study Hall, was burnt during King Philip's War, shortly after his death in 1675. A granite marker that is said to have marked Blackstone's grave now stands across the street in the William Blackstone Memorial Park.

Below: The mills along the Blackstone have caused many problems for the river's fragile ecosystem over the past two centuries. However, the Industrial Revolution has also led to a few improvements for the river's wildlife. The Valley Falls Marsh, created by flooding caused by the Valley Falls Dam, is the largest fresh-water marsh in Rhode Island. The marsh is an important stopping point for migrating birds on one of the great northeast fly ways, and each spring several breeds of waterfowl, including Canadian Geese, Mute Swans, and Mallard Ducks, use the marsh for their nesting grounds.



Directions

From Route 295: Take Exit 11 to Route 114. Follow Route 114 south to Valley Falls. Take right onto Mill Street and right onto Broad Street. Town Hall will be on right at intersection. From Route 95: Take Exit 30 to East Street/Central Falls. Follow signs to Central Falls along Roosevelt Avenue. Take right onto Charles Street. Proceed to Broad Street and take right. Proceed on Broad Street for about 1 mile. Town Hall on right.



Along the Way

- Parking is available at Town Hall lot and along Broad Street.
- Facilities are located in Town Hall and picnic sites are located at Valley Falls Heritage Park.
- The Blackstone Valley Explorer sails the Valley Falls Marsh during the spring. For information call the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council at 1-800-454-2882 or 401-724-2200.
- Blackstone Valley Visitors Center—175 Main Street, Pawtucket. Free maps and information, videos, exhibits and more. Restrooms. Free parking. Open seven days. 401-724-2200 or 800-454-2882. Directions: Follow Rt. 114 South to Rt. 15 East (Main Street). Center is about 1/4 mile on left.
- The Blackstone River Bikeway is a 11.6 mile by 12-foot wide scenic bike-path that can be accessed at the Valley Falls Heritage Park. For more information visit www.dot.ri.gov/community/bikeri/blackstone.php.
- Visit a historic working mill museum, just two miles south of Valley Falls. Slater Mill Historic Site, 67 Roosevelt Avenue Pawtucket, RI. Free parking. Restrooms. Admission charged. For hours and fees please call 401-725-8638 or visit slatermill.org/visit.

Other sites in Cumberland

- Cumberland features a chain of mill villages along the Blackstone: Lonsdale, Berkeley and Ashton.
- A popular recreation area in town is the old Monastery on Rt. 114. Cistercian Monks lived here from 1900 until 1951 when a fire damaged much of their complex. The town library is in one of the remaining buildings, and the grounds contain an attractive walking trail. Along the trail is the Nine Men's Misery Monument, where nine colonial soldiers were executed by Native American warriors during the King Philip's War.
- Blackstone River Theatre, 549 Broad Street (next to Blackstone Memorial Park). Located in a restored Masonic Temple, the BRT offers a wide variety of live music performances. For information on performances, please call 401-725-9272 or visit www.riverfolk.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 Service.



This brochure was developed under the direction of The Rhode Island Historical Society in partnership with the Heritage Corridor Commission.

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