

# Walking Tour

## GRAFTON, MA



Grafton Common. Photos and graphics have been used with permission from the Grafton Historical Society, Worcester Historical Museum, and Worcester Public Library.

**Take a stroll through a classic New England town and imagine yourself transported through time. . . to the moment of the shopkeepers' millenium.**

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# Grafton

A visit to Grafton is a chance to see a wonderful example of an early 19th century New England town center. Most of the villages in the Blackstone Valley are based around large mechanized mills and rows of worker housing. Here in Grafton you can imagine yourself in an earlier time, when “cottage” industries clustered near the Center, fine homes arose gracefully beside more modest residences and farmers rubbed elbows with business owners on a regular basis. Today you can still tour Grafton’s original “walking community” with its park-like common surrounded by church spires, gracious structures, and an old fashioned general store.

What is now Grafton was once part of the lands of the Nipmuc tribe. Around 1660, several of the Nipmucs joined an English Christian “praying village” named Hassanamesit, established by famed missionary John Eliot. The Native American village was abandoned after King Philip’s War in 1675-1676. Today the Nipmucs own 4 acres of land in Grafton. In the 1720s, the region was sold to 40 investors from several towns, and a four-acre common was created at its center. Incorporated in 1735, Grafton became a prosperous farming community.

In the 1800s, Grafton built upon its agricultural base, developing its industry. It not only became a national leader in leather tanning and currying, but also in boot and shoe



Grafton Center, from South Street, in 1839.

production. Second only to Lynn, Massachusetts, Grafton specialized in coarse brogans, or work boots for slave use in the south. Where a shoemaker once worked alone in a small shop slowly making customized shoes in their entirety, early industrialization found entrepreneurs “putting out” quantities of shoe parts to farm families for binding and bottoming. Central shops and cottage industries rose around the Center and by 1837, 906 men and 486 women made over 671,000 pairs of shoes and 18,000 pairs of boots a year. A lack of waterpower at Grafton Center allowed the center to develop into what it is today. Grafton investors built mills on

the Blackstone and Quinsigamond rivers, creating new village centers in Fisherville, Farnumsville, Saundersville, Kittville, Centerville and New England Village. Each of these villages has its own fascinating story to tell, but it is also important to recognize how their existence shaped Grafton Center. While their labor and wealth enhanced Grafton’s development, the center remained largely free of the sprawling mills and worker housing associated with the modern industrial landscape. The result is the exquisite 19th century town center that you can still explore today.

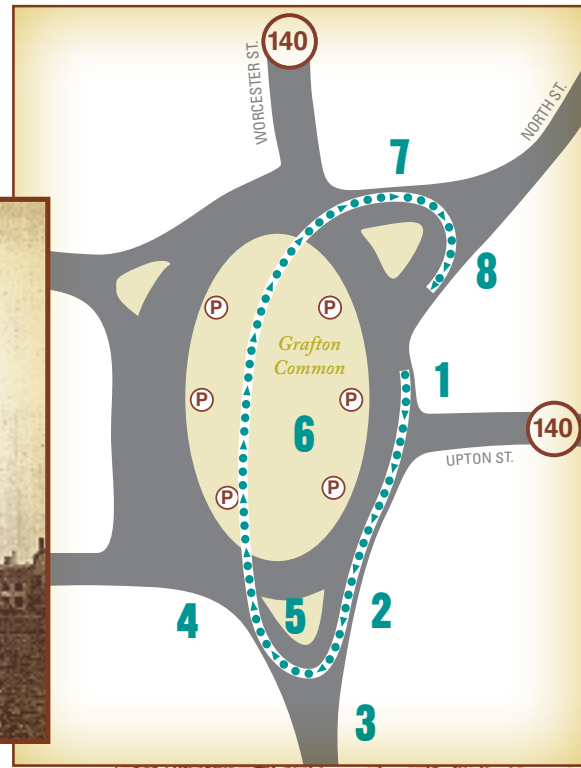
# Walking Tour

## 1 Grafton Inn

The Grafton Common has served as the crossroads of town since settlement. Shoe manufacturer Samuel Wood built the Grafton Inn, the oldest structure on the common, in 1805. The Inn is a reminder of the days when Grafton Center was the intersection of key stagecoach routes from Boston to Hartford and from Providence to Worcester. Stagecoaches were the first regularly scheduled source of overland transportation in the Blackstone Valley, providing a fairly quick trip for mail and passengers. The Inn was a popular stop for food, rest and for switching stages. The unknown designer of the Inn was obviously inspired by famous Boston architect Charles Bullfinch. The oldest structure on the Common, the inn acquired a rear ell (as large as the original building) and a two-story porch c.1865-1875. When A.J. Kirby ran it in the 1890's, it was said to be "strictly first class."



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# Walking Tour continued

## 2 Churches

The early 1800s were a period of religious upheaval across the United States, particularly here in Massachusetts where the state supported Congregational Church was being challenged after two centuries of dominance. Little had changed in the Congregationalist Church since its establishment by the Puritans, but immigration and industrialization had radically changed the religious mores of the population. New voices and ideas were yearning to be heard and church politics was often the focal point.

The passion of this conflict is displayed here at the Grafton Common where three new churches were built around the Grafton Common between 1830 and 1833. The first was the Greek Revival style Baptist Church built in 1830. The Baptists had been meeting in Grafton since 1758, but were prevented by the power of the Congregationalists from building a church on the common for over 70 years.

A theological schism was also dividing the Congregational Parish here in town. When a new meetinghouse opened in 1832 on the northeast corner of the common, the Unitarian faction of the parish claimed it for their use. This building, which also served as the town meetinghouse for several years, burned in the “Great Fire” of 1862 and was replaced by the current structure the following year.

The remaining parishioners, who remained faithful to the traditional Congregationalist tenets, were now homeless. So in 1833, the Evangelical Congregational Church across the common was built at a cost of \$5,000. The steeple and gallery clocks of the Congregational Church were made by the Willard family, famed Grafton clock makers whose home and shop a few miles north of the common are now open as a museum.

The Second Great Awakening gave voice to those who criticized Congregationalism for focusing on a Scriptured, Heaven-bound elite, leaving the rest behind. The Baptists, emphasizing faith and universal salvation, tended to appeal to working people who hoped God cared more about piety than education and wealth. The Unitarians, stressing human reason and ability, often drew upwardly-mobile entrepreneurs who hoped “social engineering” would promote profits without worldly sin and conflict. When Grafton’s parish embraced Unitarianism in 1831, appalled church members withdrew, taking church records, furniture, and the communion plate.



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# Walking Tour continued

## 4 Shoe Industry/South Street

Grafton Center was once the site of a thriving shoe and leather industry. Unlike the massive water powered textile mills along the Blackstone in South Grafton, the leather manufacturers were located in small shops or houses particularly along South and North Streets where hand tools and muscle power did the work. In 1837, Grafton led Worcester County in boot and shoe production. In 1866, there were 10 shops making boots and shoes, two tanneries and several other leather goods establishments around the Center. These were small concerns, most employing 10-15 workers. Shoe and boot making continued to thrive here until the 1880s, but had ended by 1925 no longer able to compete with larger, more mechanized mills.



The handsome “50¢ houses” along the East Side of South Street, once the site of shoe mills and worker tenements, stand in stark contrast to the grandeur of the mill owner homes located across the street.

As you look down South Street, the economics of the leather industry can be readily seen. To your right on the west side of the street stand the impressive homes of many of the boot shop owners. Across the street to the east are many of the old shops, now converted to housing, along with the tenements that housed the workers. Locals often speak of these as the “dollar houses and the 50¢ houses.”

## 4 George W. Fisher House

The most grandiose home on the Common is the Victorian mansion of George W. Fisher. Built c. 1885, the Fisher House displays the wealth earned by Mr. Fisher at his textile mill in Fisherville, located along the Blackstone River in South Grafton. His workers lived much more modestly in company owned houses in the mill village. The Fisher family took over the mill at Fisherville in the 1840s and ran it for about 80 years, producing cotton cloth and toweling. In 1879 the mill produced 1.5 million yards of cloth and about 700 mill hands were employed there in 1930 just before the mill was forced to shut down during the Depression. The mill was lost in a spectacular fire in 1999. The grandeur and wealth of Fisher’s mansion reflects the growing importance of mechanized industry for the Grafton economy after 1880.



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## 5 Jerome Wheelock Statue

At the southern end of the Common stands a statue of Jerome Wheelock (1834-1902). Wheelock was a native of Grafton who earned fame and fortune as an engineer, particularly for his design of a steam engine valve system that revolutionized steam transportation. Wheelock bequeathed \$50,000 to the Town of Grafton on the sole condition that they erect a statue in his honor. This money was used in 1927 for the construction of the town library located to your left as you face the statue.

# Walking Tour continued

## 6 Grafton Common

In 1728, the original 40 proprietors of Grafton set aside 4 acres in the center of town as common land. In 1730 Grafton's first meetinghouse was built here. Over the next century, a large town center grew up around the common, and in 1845 a small portion of the original common was fenced in and planted with trees. Today the common is still a site for recreation and relaxation.

The town Common is a site so quintessentially small town New England that it attracted Hollywood's attention. The bandstand at the center of the common was built in 1935 by MGM who came to Grafton to film parts of Eugene O'Neill's *Ab Wilderness*. They left it behind for the people of the town to continue to use. The bandstand is built on the site of Grafton's first meetinghouse. An earlier bandstand was also located here.



## 7 Commercial Blocks

At the northern end of the Common are Grafton Center's two commercial blocks. They were situated to take advantage of the transportation crossroads here, as well as the growing importance of the common as a community center. There has been commercial activity here since the early 1700s. On the left is the Wheeler Block, opened by Jonathan Wheeler in 1806 and used by several merchants since that time. The third floor housed an assembly hall that was used as a social center for the town. On the right side of Worcester Street is the Warren Block or Town House, built in 1862 replacing an earlier commercial building that had been destroyed by fire. Purchased by the town of Grafton in 1885, the Warren Block was used for town meetings and as an exhibit hall as well as several store fronts.



On the northern side of the Grafton Common is the commercial center, anchored by the Town House, seen here with the Unitarian Church. Along with its businesses, the Town House also is home to the Grafton Historical Society where more of the town's fascinating stories can be learned.



This engine from the Grafton & Upton RR was named after William Knowlton, whose hat factory in Upton was one of the lines major customers.

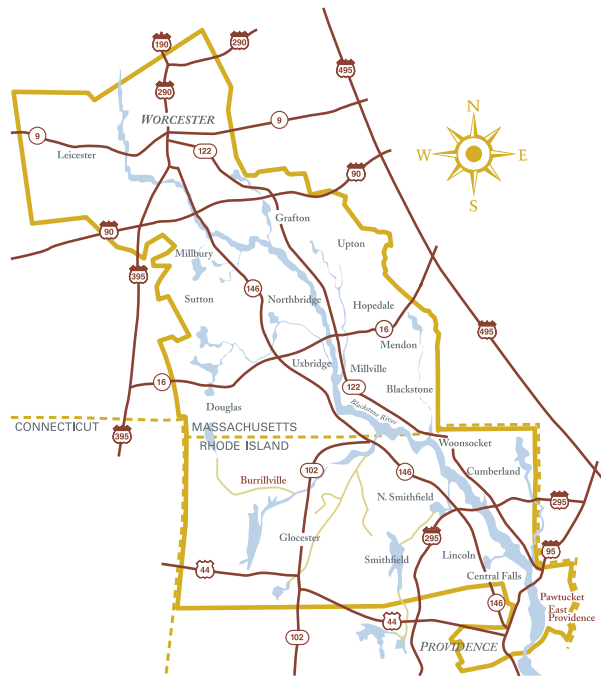
## 8 Grafton & Upton Railroad

The crossroads at Grafton Common finally entered the steam age in 1874 with the inauguration of the Grafton Center Railroad. This was a light rail commuter line that only ran about 3 miles from Grafton Center to the main tracks of the Boston & Albany Railroad in North Grafton. The depot for this line was located behind the Town Hall and the Unitarian Church. This allowed Grafton residents to commute to jobs in Worcester or points east, a tradition that continues today.

In 1887 the railroad added freight service and extended its track through Upton and Hopedale to Milford. The name of the line was changed to the Grafton and Upton Railroad. The new track connected several mills with the main B & A line, including the massive Draper Loom Corporation in Hopedale. A new depot was built along Upton Street behind the library. A fire started by a lightning strike destroyed that structure in 1940. It was replaced with a cinder block building that still stands today, but no longer belongs to the Railroad. On rare occasions a freight train will still ride these rails.

# Directions

Exit 11 off Mass Pike (Route 90). Right on Rt.122 south. Merges with Rt.140. When Rt. 140 and Rt. 122 divide keep left on Rt.140 uphill to Grafton Center. Exit from Route 122: Proceed into Grafton. Turn onto Church Street, and follow to Common. Parking is available around Grafton Common.



## Along the Way

- For a historical museum in a 1718 farmhouse, visit the Willard House and Clock Museum at 11 Willard Street in North Grafton. The museum contains 60 fine Willard clocks. Admission charged. Guided Tours. Reservations required for large groups. Open Tuesday-Saturday, 10 AM to 4 PM, Sunday, 1-4 PM. 508-839-3500.
- To see some of the mill villages of Grafton visit either New England Village on Main Street (Rt. 30) in North Grafton, or Farnumsville along Rt. 122 in South Grafton. Both contain not only extensive mill complexes, but also much of the original worker housing.
- For examples of preservation and adaptation of historic sites, visit the old mill in Farnumsville (South Grafton) on Depot Street. You can see the dam, waterfall, and pond.
- To see a historic working mill museum, visit Slater Mill Historic Site in Pawtucket, RI. For hours and fees, call 401-725-8638 or visit [www.slatermill.org](http://www.slatermill.org).
- To learn more about the mill workers of the Blackstone Valley, visit the Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket, RI. For hours and fees call 401-769-9675 or visit [www.rihs.org](http://www.rihs.org).

- For information on other tours, special events, and more in the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, visit the Riverbend Farm Visitor Center, off Route 122 in Uxbridge, MA. Free maps, trail guides, brochures, and interpretive exhibits with videos, and more. Free parking and admission. Open seven days during daylight hours. 508-278-7604.
- **Additional Information:** Visitor information on lodging, restaurants, events, as well as free maps and brochures are available by contacting the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce at 508-234-9090 or visit [www.blackstonerivervalley.com](http://www.blackstonerivervalley.com).

**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.**

Special thanks to Mildred and Benjamin Bean and the Grafton Historical Society, and to John Stephens of the Willard House and Clock Museum.