

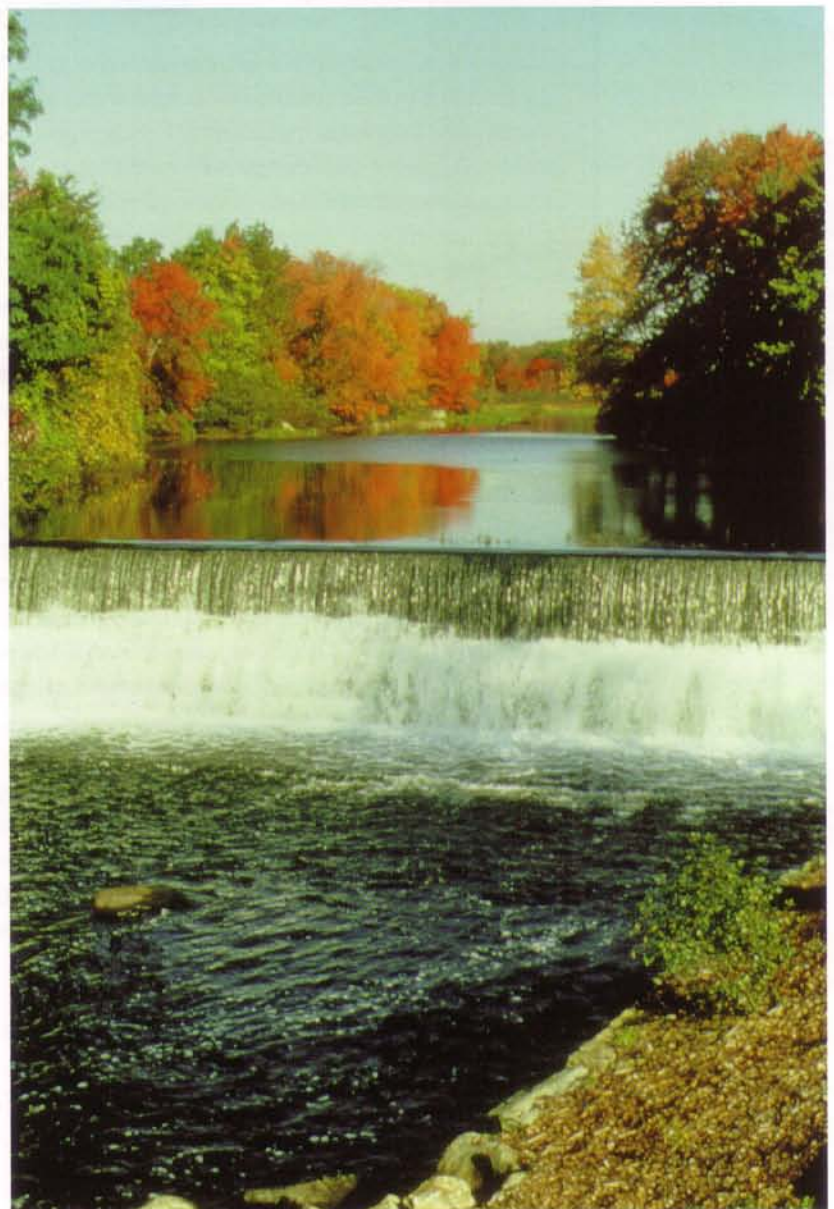
RENEWING A REVOLUTION: THE BLACKSTONE VALLEY NATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR IN MASSACHUSETTS AND RHODE ISLAND

THE PARTNERS

- > Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce
Northbridge, MA
www.blackstonevalley.org
- > 24 Blackstone Valley cities and towns in
46-mile region between Worcester, MA
and Providence, RI
- > Blackstone Valley Tourism Council
Pawtucket, RI / www.tourblackstone.com
- > Central Massachusetts Regional Planning
Commission
Worcester, MA / www.cmrpc.org
- > Massachusetts Department of
Environmental Management
Boston, MA / www.state.ma.us/dem
- > Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism
Boston, MA
<http://web.massvacation.com/>
- > National Park Service,
The John H. Chafee Blackstone River
Valley National Heritage Corridor
Commission, National Park Service
Woonsocket, RI / www.nps.gov/blac/
- > National Heritage Areas
Washington, DC
www.nrc.nps.gov/heritage/program.htm
- > Northern Rhode Island Chamber of
Commerce
Lincoln, RI / www.nrichamber.com
- > Rhode Island Department of
Environmental Management,
Division of Parks and Recreation
Johnston, RI / www.riparks.com
- > Rhode Island Tourism Division
Providence, RI / www.visitrhodeisland.com

*"Tourism work is not just about growth in numbers.
We will be measured in how much richer people's lives
will be in the years ahead."*

— Bob Billington, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council president



The Setting

IN A PLACE WITH NO HISTORY OF TOURISM, A PLACE THAT CONSIDERED TOURISM A POOR RELATION TO MANUFACTURING, A PIONEERING SPIRIT AND ENTREPRENEURIAL INSIGHT BROUGHT TOGETHER

DISPARATE INTERESTS TO FORGE A NEW FORM OF INDUSTRY THAT IS REBUILDING THE REGION'S ECONOMIC STRENGTH—HERITAGE TOURISM



Industrial development in the Blackstone River Valley can be traced to the founding of this mill by Samuel Slater in the 1790s.

Residents and elected officials laughed at Bob Billington in 1985 when he suggested that tourism could play a role in revitalizing the Blackstone River Valley's flagging economy. This was, after all, the corridor along which the Industrial Revolution had taken root and prospered in America some 200 years earlier. The 24 towns between Worcester, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island, had once boasted the lion's share of industrial output so that around the world, Blackstone Valley became synonymous with manufacturing innovation and excellence throughout the 19th century and into the next. But that was then and this was now.

After decades of shifting industrial trends that caused a steady attrition of manufacturers from the valley, the Blackstone communities were at the tail end of every economic resurgence that touched New England. Nothing seemed to work; the region had no apparent means of putting itself back into the economic and cultural mainstream. But while the jobs went south along with the economy, the physical legacy of industry remained along the Blackstone: the canal, hundreds of multi-story brick mill buildings, mill housing and towns, mill institutions such as hospitals and schools, and dozens of small lakes, ponds and dams created to power the historic mills. The physical evidence of the people who formed the valley's culture was deteriorating as was the enthusiasm of their descendants for this once-proud region.

In the 1980's, Bob Billington worked in his family's gift products factory, and there he saw the need for new retailing opportunities. He formed an outlet association with other Rhode Island manufacturers and, before he knew it, became involved in tourism. Soon, Bob realized that he had discovered his calling and cobbled together the money to devote all his time to the newly formed Blackstone Valley Tourism Council (BVTC). Two years later, Rhode Island ushered in a new tourism era when it levied its first room tax, and the council was designated as a regional tourism agency. Despite these advances, there was much skepticism among local residents for the idea that heritage tourism could really work.

But Billington and an increasingly larger number of other individuals knew there was treasure hidden beneath the years of disuse and neglect in the valley towns. In tandem with the council's efforts, a valley-wide movement to create a National Heritage Corridor got underway. The partnership between Massachusetts and Rhode Island to create the heritage area became formidable with the respective state legislative and congressional delegations supporting the effort. Groups on both sides of the state line became active proponents for the designation. Finally, these new heritage partners succeeded in getting the area from Worcester to Providence designated by Congress as a National Park Service (NPS) National Heritage Corridor in 1986. The area is managed by a commission that unifies the work of the NPS, two state governments, dozens of local municipalities, businesses, nonprofit historical and environmental organizations, educational institutions, and private citizens. Blackstone Valley thus became the second such designated area in the country and, believe it or not, was on its way to becoming a tourist destination.

"During the 1980's we spoke hundreds of times to dozens of different groups and at each engagement, there would always be some snickers from the audience when we talked about tourism in the Blackstone Valley. Today, it's different. Local officials use the word themselves in their policy discussions and in the press."

— Bob Billington, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council president

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

With the National Heritage Corridor designation in place, a new tone emerged in the valley. People began to see the region from a new perspective; the Blackstone River Valley suddenly became a place of national significance. The Department of Transportation in both Massachusetts and Rhode Island erected the well-known brown public resource signs along the nearby Interstate highways. Visitors' curiosity was aroused and residents were also influenced by this tangible recognition.

The NPS began its work by listening. It held workshops and public meetings and gave presentations all around the valley to understand what it was that valley residents wanted and to convey to residents the impressive value of the corridor's resources. Early on, according to Michael Creasey,

executive director of the Corridor Commission, it became clear that infrastructure investment would be one of the Park Service's main goals. "We focused on things we could build that would make a difference for residents and visitors," says Creasey. This approach has resulted in

more than \$18 million of federal investment, but more impressive, that \$18 million has been matched 10-to-1 by local and regional support. Projects have included visitor centers, rehabilitation of old mill buildings, new parks and recreational facilities.

The BVTC took a similar approach in its work as it pursued something that, at the time, seemed like a wild idea: boat rides on the Blackstone Canal. "We needed to define the valley for the visitor and it seemed that connecting them to the Blackstone River and Canal was the most important thing," says Billington. Maybe so, but it wasn't an easy sell since the waterways flowed past industrial development, not bucolic fields and woods. This was not a river with a romantic or recreational reputation. Still, the BVTC with the support of the Park Service raised the necessary funds, designed, and, in 1993, built the *Blackstone Valley Explorer*, a light, low-draft riverboat able to be moved easily by land from point to point and also able to move through the often shallow waters of the river and canal. The council began offering scheduled exploration cruises and chartered events. They parked the boat prominently and promoted it to everyone within earshot. Soon, it was a hit. The *Explorer* began to demonstrate to residents that people would actually pay to see the Blackstone and could have some fun along the way.



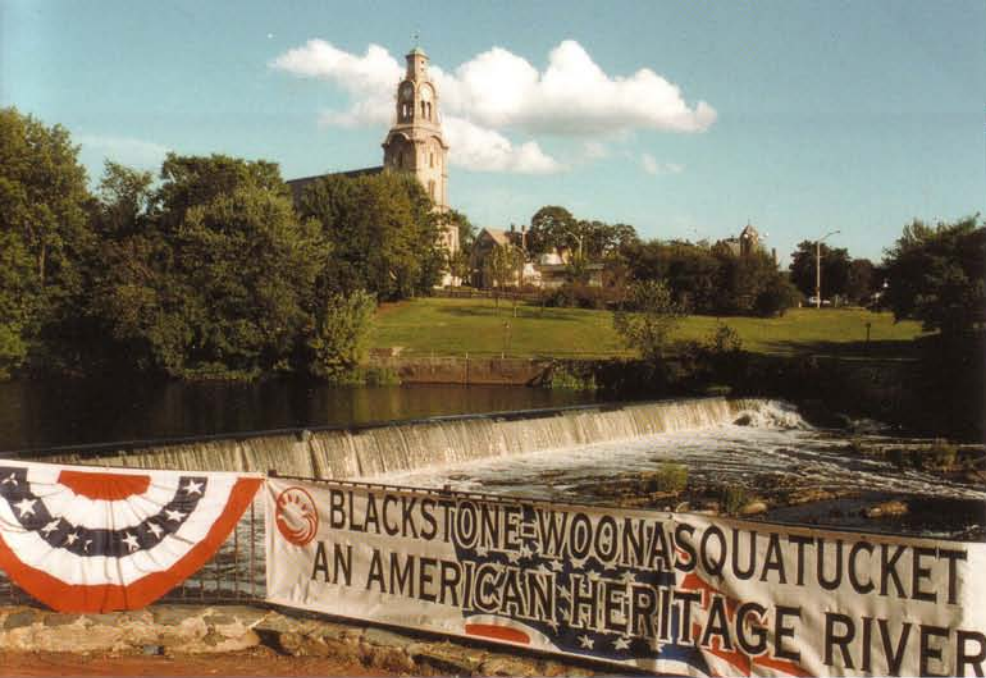
The Blackstone Valley Trolley has become a common sight on Sunday afternoons, wandering through the historic neighborhoods of the Blackstone Valley communities.

Building on that success, BVTC purchased an old trolley car in 1996 from a Providence company, refurbished it, and renamed it the Blackstone Valley Trolley. With its brightly painted advertising, the trolley began to appear up and down the valley. It has become a favorite for its Sunday afternoon wanderings through the historic neighborhoods of the Blackstone Valley communities.

In 1997, BVTC launched its second vessel, the *Spirit of the Blackstone Valley*. Built on a relationship that began during Slater Mill's 200th anniversary in 1993, the council began a relationship with the community of Belper in the Amber Valley of Derbyshire, England, the first industrialized town in the world and ancestral home of Samuel Slater, founder of the first textile mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island in the 1790s. This connection resulted in the Valley's first international marketing and tour package. It took the Council until May of 2000 to raise the funds to launch an authentically



Since 1986 when the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor was established, millions of federal dollars have been invested in bricks-and-mortar projects such as new visitor centers and the rehabilitation of historic mill buildings.



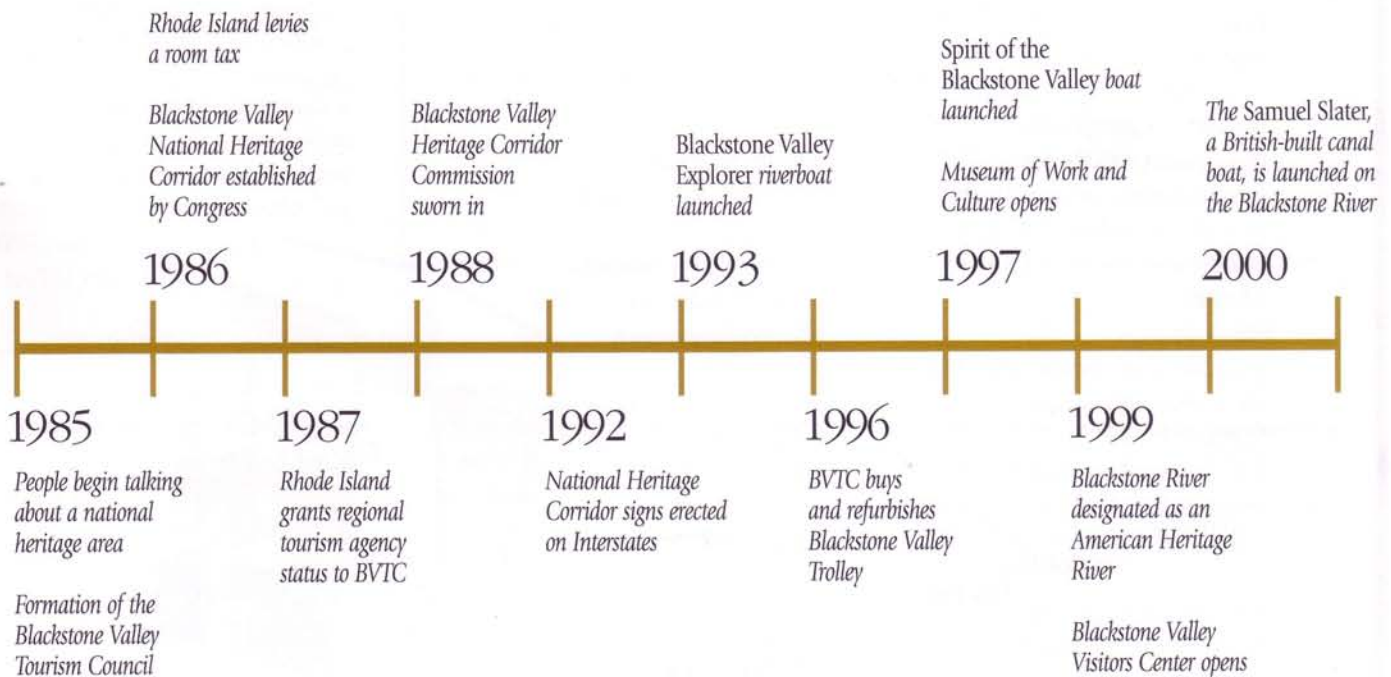
Human history in the valley has depended on the Blackstone River, which, in the past, has provided food, energy, and transportation. Today the river is a source of pride and a focal point for a growing tourism industry.

built English canal boat named the *Samuel Slater* in honor of the father of the American Industrial Revolution. Now, all three boats ply the waters of the Blackstone throughout the visitor season. Through the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor, the NPS has become an active player in the valley's economic development. The NPS has supported the development of visitor centers in Uxbridge, Massachusetts, and in Woonsocket and Pawtucket, Rhode Island. In Woonsocket, the visitor center is

in the newly developed Museum of Work and Culture. The museum, a joint project of the NPS and the city of Woonsocket, focuses on the traditions and implications of work in life.

Finally, the NPS has played a key role in assisting local communities with a wide variety of resource protection and management projects. Part of the corridor's annual budget is devoted to grants to local communities to help them move their own

projects forward. The Corridor Commission did much visioning work with communities in the early days, creating 14 vision plans for the region. To date, 10 of those plans have been implemented. "This process encouraged people to blend heritage resource management with more current or modern forms of economic development," says Executive Director Creasey.



"No one person has made the Blackstone Valley Heritage Corridor a success. This project brought a multitude of people together to build the Heritage Corridor from the ground up. Thanks to these dedicated 'believers,' together we have been able to accomplish what no one could have done on their own."

— Michael Creasey, Executive Director, Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor

MAKING THE MOST OF OPPORTUNITIES

Collaborate: "What one person can do to affect the world is small. We need a lot of collaboration to make it all happen," declares Billington. Putting minds and efforts together has, indeed, resulted in strong tourism and economic development in the valley. Local businesses, organizations, communities, volunteers, regional and state tourism and planning agencies, and state and federal agencies have all come together to forge a new industry to rebuild the Blackstone River Valley into a thriving area.

Find the Fit between the Community and Tourism: A critical aspect of the Heritage Corridor program is the idea that communities are taking the lead in project development with the state and federal agencies backing them up. This has allowed cities and towns to decide whether and how they want more tourism.

Make Sites and Programs Come Alive: The tourism organizations in both Massachusetts and Rhode Island have made it easier—and more fun—for visitors and local residents to get around and enjoy the attractions of the valley. Cruises through historic waterways on replica riverboats take visitors into the moment, helping them experience an older, slower way of life, work, and transportation.



Collaboration between the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, the National Park Service, and regional and state political leaders brought about the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor, a place where a wealth of historic structures are receiving the care they need to stand as a reminder of the past for many more years.

Focus on Quality and Authenticity: A key to the valley's success has been working with the authentic resources in place in the corridor. Being selected as a National Heritage Corridor early on created pride and desire among local activists to live up to that honor by approaching all their tourism-related goals with quality in mind.

Preserve and Protect Resources: Protection of historic structures, stone walls, open spaces of important farming landscapes, and the adaptive use of old mills and downtown structures have all ensured that the Blackstone of the future will resemble the Blackstone of today.

RESULTS

➤ During the first 10 months of operation beginning in September of 1999, the Blackstone Valley Visitor Center in downtown Pawtucket, Rhode Island attracted more than 75,000 visitors.

➤ In its first year of operation in 2000, the Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, took in 35,000 visitors, and the visitor center at Riverbend Farm in Uxbridge, Massachusetts, drew 30,000 people.

➤ BVIC board of directors established the Blackstone Valley Legacy Trust to obtain private and public financial support for future development projects for the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council. The Trust invests funds for the benefit of the valley.

➤ BVIC joined other tourism and environmental groups in supporting passage of a \$50 million Rhode Island state bond issue for open space protection. During the last 15 years, the river's environmental health has improved so greatly that the number of fish species has soared from just two to the 33 species that now are present.

➤ The *Blackstone Valley Explorer*, the *Spirit of the Blackstone Valley* and the *Samuel Slater* have provided interpretive, cultural, environmental and recreational boat tours on the river to more than 150,000 people from 1993 to 2000.



ALLIANCE
of
NATIONAL
HERITAGE
AREAS

**BREAKING OUT OF THE BOX: THE
TOURISM ROLE OF HERITAGE AREAS**

County boundaries, state lines and city limits. All too often, collaborative tourism efforts are defined by these arbitrary political jurisdictions. These boundaries are meaningless for visitors and often make it challenging for sites in a region to work together. Heritage areas provide a mechanism to link communities and sites together based on geographical or thematic connections that make sense from the visitor's perspective. In this way, heritage areas provide a way to work across traditional boundaries to protect, enhance, and promote a region.

As of 2001, there are 23 National Heritage Areas in the U.S., each designated by an individual act of Congress. Almost all receive National Park Service funding to help get the heritage areas up and running so that they can become self-sustaining. The Alliance of National Heritage Areas estimates that there are another 170 local and state heritage areas across the nation. For more information on how to start a heritage area, order the Information Series booklet *Getting Started in Heritage Area Development* at www.nthp.org or find out about the Alliance of National Heritage Areas at www.cofc.edu/~heritage/



The Blackstone Valley Explorer brought tourism and life back to the Blackstone River and anchored this National Heritage Area's river-oriented tourism effort.



The Museum of Work and Culture, a collaborative project of the National Park Service, the city of Woonsocket and the Rhode Island Historical Society, opened in 1997 in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. Funding for the building restoration and permanent exhibit "La Survivance" came from a variety of sources including labor unions, local corporations, the Blackstone Heritage Corridor, city and state funds, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

