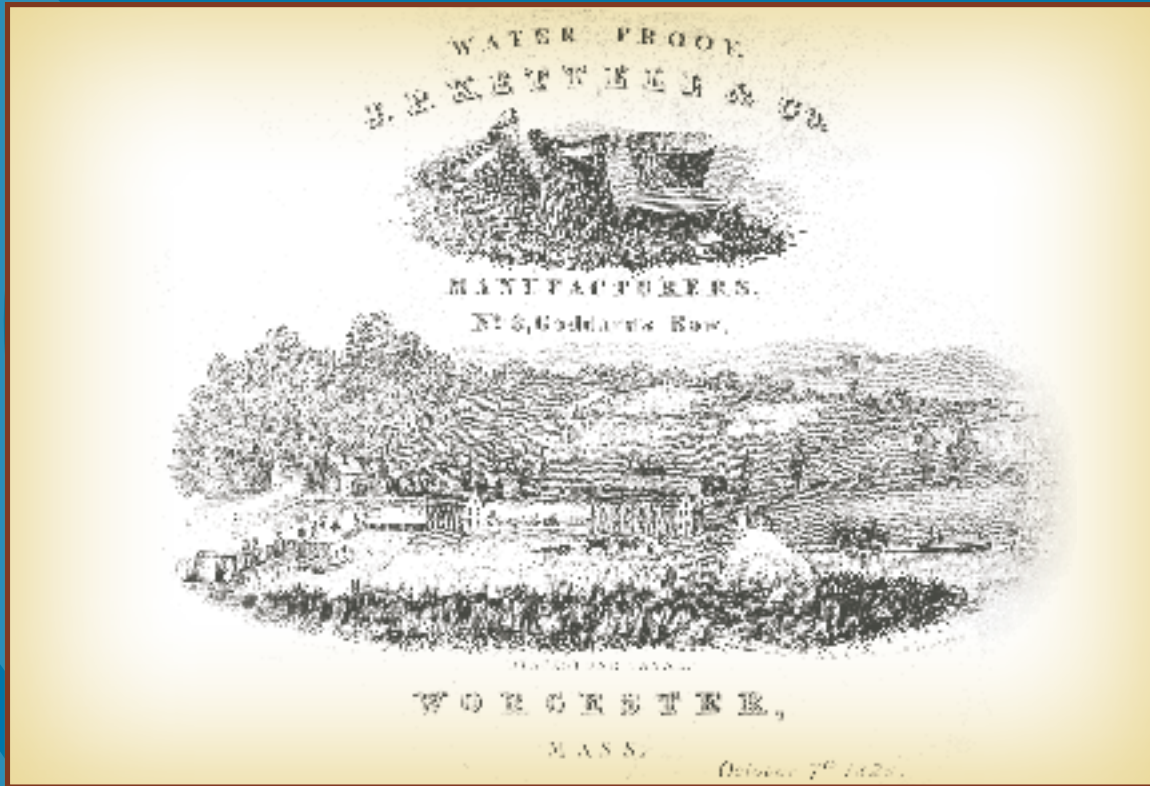


# Walking Tour

**WORCESTER, MA**



Hat box label from J.P. Kettell & Co., makers of waterproof hats in Worcester. Courtesy of the Worcester Historical Museum.

**Connecting a  
County Seat to the Sea.**

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**Blackstone  
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**WATER POWERED!**  
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# Worcester

Becoming a shire town in colonial times put Worcester on the map but the opening of the Blackstone Canal in 1828 set off the boom that made it a major industrial city. The Blackstone Canal Company, chartered in 1822, based its venture on three key factors: water, wealth, and marketplaces. The 3,000 residents in pre-canal Worcester were landlocked, the setting a mere speck on the landscape by comparison to the grand seaport of Boston. The spark of an “All-America City” began to glow with the Blackstone Canal.

**WATER** – It is one thing to propose the building of a navigable 48-mile waterway connecting landlocked Worcester at 450 feet above sea-level to the seaport of Providence, RI, at Narragansett Bay, but it’s another thing altogether to figure out where to get enough water to fill such a big ditch. Around Worcester, there were plenty of water resources. The watershed formed by the hills surrounding Worcester plus natural springs, filled several large ponds. The canal’s engineers were confident that the water supply would be enough for industry, transportation, houses and farms.

**WEALTH** - The Canal Company found ample financing for the deal. On May 7, 1825, more than two dozen Worcester businessmen, doctors and attorneys – residents of a place modestly described as a “sleepy rural hamlet” – bought up \$100,000 worth of canal stock in a matter of hours. Eventually, local investors bought about one-third of the canal’s \$750,000 initial construction fund. The boom of commerce and prosperity that followed the canal’s construction made Providence and Worcester the second and third largest cities in New England.

**MARKETPLACE** - Originally on a Nipmuck trail, Worcester was a crossroads on the Bay Path between Hartford and Boston by 1700. In 1731, less than two decades after its permanent settlement, Worcester was chosen as the county seat because of its central location. Even people who had no transactions at the court house came into the shire town during court week for trading, for entertainment and to hear the latest news. Worcester’s small but hardworking manufacturers and fertile farms were eager to reach new customers for their products and produce through affordable means.



The ponds, brooks and streams that were dammed and channeled to fill the Blackstone Canal and power Worcester’s mills, met the Middle River at Quinsigamond Village – becoming the Blackstone River. Every time a boat passed through one of the 48 stone locks on the canal, more than forty thousand gallons of water flowed with it.

Pumping up Worcester’s prestige, the waterway gave the city its first port to the sea, its first low-cost means of transporting materials and manufactured goods to and from markets worldwide, and its first glimpse into the faces of its future generations with the arrival of immigrant workers. However, the canal’s moment of glory was brief. By 1835, competition from the railroads shrank the cargo shipped by canal barges and swelled the company’s losses. Ironically, in 1848, as Worcester reincorporated as a city, the canal venture was deemed a financial failure and soon dissolved.

# Walking Tour

*Directions to start: Junction of Humboldt Avenue and Salisbury Street, Worcester, MA.*

*Along this 2.5 mile route through downtown Worcester are some surprising bits of evidence that tell the story of how Worcester was changed by the Blackstone Canal during the 1830s and 40s. The driving tour begins at the corner of Salisbury Street and Humboldt Avenue. Canal stories on wayside exhibits at tour stops marked “i.”*

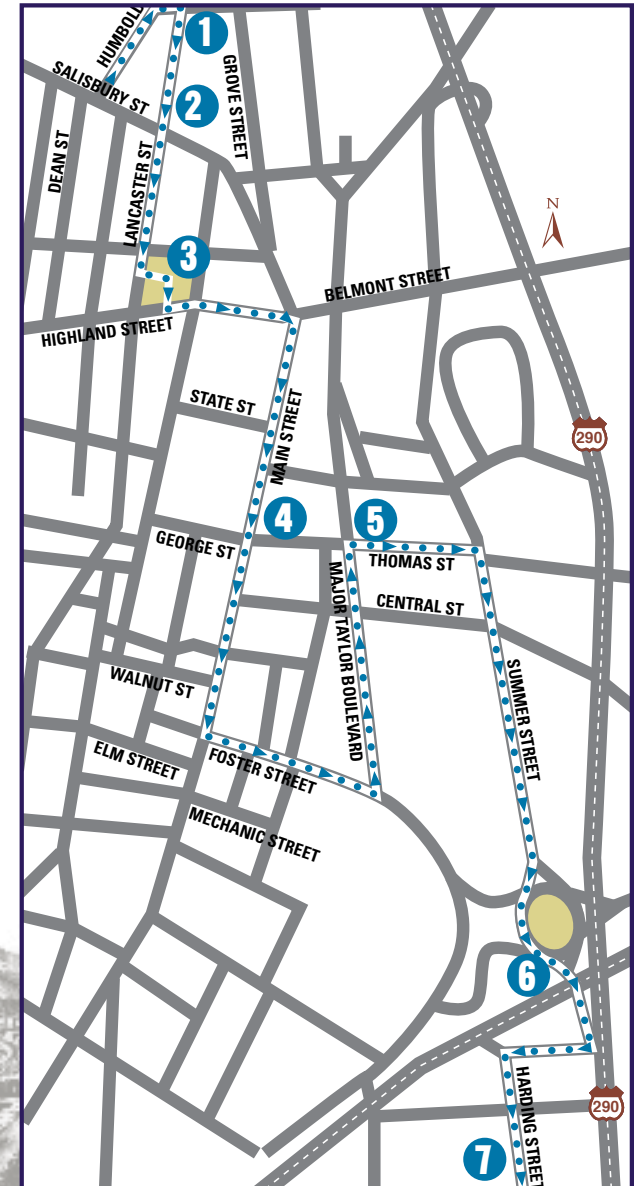
**1 Mill Brook at Institute Pond**  
(0.0 mi) Thousands of workers poured out of the nearby factories on their noon hour break to gather here, seeking “refreshment and cheer” as Stephen Salisbury, III, the city’s most generous benefactor, proposed it should.

A larger version of this manmade pond provided water power for mills along Mill Brook, including the Washburn & Moen wireworks in the 1830s. At times of drought or during a winter freeze, the flow of water was barely enough for the mills to operate. Yet the canal company planned to use these same water sources. As the company sought rights to water sources around the town, it also had to guarantee existing mills their fair

share. The mills and the canal company depended on each other but their relationship was wrought with costly lawsuits, endless negotiations and complicated contracts over control of the water.

Mostly unseen and entirely channeled as it flows southward through the city, Mill Brook becomes the Blackstone River in Quinsigamond Village, at the site of the Visitor Center.

*Turn right on Humboldt Avenue. Turn right on Lancaster Street. There is free parking for the North Works shops and restaurants directly in front of the mill.*



# Walking Tour continued



There are thirteen historic mill buildings on the 23-acre North Works complex in various stages of rehabilitation and reuse since manufacturing ended here in 1943. Washburn & Moen, the company that “barbed-wire fenced the American West,” became the largest industrial enterprise in Worcester in the 1800s. At the close of that century, it merged as American Steel & Wire, then in 1901, U. S. Steel.

## 2 North Works

(0.1 mi) The North Works wire mill is the typical scene of enterprising Worcester hard at work. Along the front foundations, one can see Mill Brook entering through sluiceways and gates. The marriage of water and mills did not end until the 1850s, when steam engines made it possible for factories to set up shop using less water while generating “power to let.”

The metals industry used Mill Brook and other waterways as handy catchalls for waste for over a century, causing some of the long-term contamination of river sediments as the water flows on its way south into Rhode Island’s Narragansett Bay.

*Continue on Lancaster Street through two lights. After Institute Road, turn left into driveway of the municipal parking lot. There are a few free parking spaces reserved for visitors touring Salisbury Mansion.*

## 3 Salisbury Mansion (1772), 40 Highland Street, moved from Lincoln Square in 1929

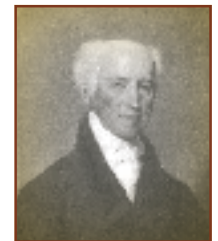
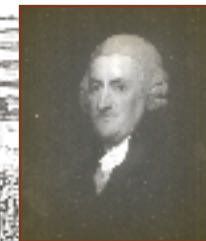
(0.4 mi) Twenty-one-year-old Stephen Salisbury opened a Worcester branch of his brother Samuel’s Boston dry goods store in 1767. After the venture proved itself, the brothers built this handsome building and the store filled two-thirds of it. When it stood on nearby Lincoln Square, Mill Brook babbled alongside.



The painstakingly researched interiors show the lifestyle of a wealthy family in the 1830s – the heyday of the Blackstone Canal. Elizabeth and Stephen Salisbury remade the vacated store space into two formal parlors, decorated with the finest furnishing, carpets and wallpaper money could buy.

When the Blackstone Canal Company sought Worcester investors, cash resources flowed like water. Stephen Salisbury (1746-1829) bought 40 shares of stock. His only child and heir, Stephen, II (1798-1884), invested more money. Already regarded as a shrewd businessman, Stephen, II was elected an officer of the canal corporation in his 30s.

The Gilbert Stuart portraits at Salisbury Mansion of Samuel and Stephen, and Stephen’s wife Elizabeth Tuckerman were meant to document status as well as capture likeness. Because Stuart (1755-1828) painted many distinguished individuals, including U.S. presidents and British royalty, the paintings tell us much about the confidence of Worcester’s elite regarding their position in genteel society in the early 1800s.



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# Walking Tour continued

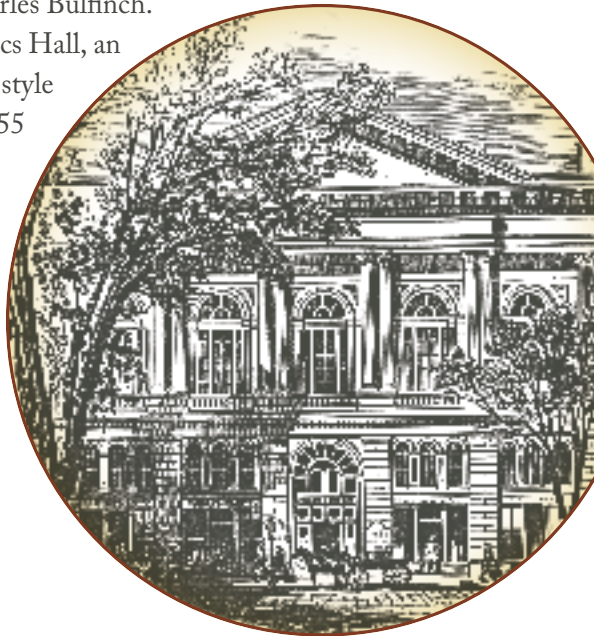
*Exit at Lancaster Street. Turn left on Highland Street. At the first light, turn right onto Main Street.*

## 4 Main Street

(0.6 mi) During its 20-year run, the Blackstone Canal was like a second main street. Even before the canal era, Worcester had a lively Main Street. The 1829 Village Directory listed 4 printers, 16 taverns, and 27 stores. Along or near the tree-lined boulevard, there were seven blacksmith shops, six machine shops, more than dozen carpenters and masons, plus tinsmiths, rope makers, brick makers, paper makers, coach and harness makers, clock and gun makers, and distillers.

At 2 Main Street, stood the 1802 Neo-Classical-style county court house designed by famed Boston architect Charles Bulfinch. 321 Main Street is Mechanics Hall, an Italian Renaissance Revival-style performance hall built in 1855 and restored in 1975. It is open for visitors.

*After the fifth light, turn left on Foster Street. At the second light, turn left on Major Taylor Boulevard. Continue to third light at Thomas Street.*



## 5 Thomas Street

(1.5 mi) The Site of the Canal Basin.

The formerly landlocked village officially became a port at this spot on Tuesday, October 7, 1828, when the packet barge the Lady Carrington tied up her bowlines to the snubbing posts at the basin. The exciting two-day voyage from Providence ended with the peals of bells and cannon fire. The newspaper debuted a column called the “Marine News,” trumpeting the cargo arriving in the Port of Worcester.

Canal barges moved during daylight hours only. Traffic leaving this northernmost terminus at dawn spent at least half the morning slowly dropping down,

one at a time, through Worcester’s five locks. Between locks, the 30-ton barges were pulled southwards by a team of hardworking horses, led by a man or boy walking the 10-foot wide towpath. The boats entered the somewhat swifter current of the Blackstone River where its course naturally swelled and deepened more than five miles from here. In all, the river drops 438 feet on its 48-mile run to Providence.

*Turn right on Thomas Street, turn right on Summer Street. Continue straight through second light into Washington Square. Continue towards Union Station, off Grafton Street.*



321 Main Street is Mechanics Hall, an Italian Renaissance revival-style performance hall built in 1855 and restored in 1975. It is open for visitors.

# Walking Tour continued

## 6 Union Station, 1910 (Re-opened 1999)

(2.0 mi) Summer Street parallels the first leg of the canal trench as it left the city. To read the cityscape and “see” its route through Washington Square, look for the railroad tracks of the Providence and Worcester line. Lock No. 49 was about where the stone supports for the railroad are today. Since there were usually several boats in a “lay-by” near the locks waiting for their turn to be raised or lowered, basins were natural gathering places, typically with a locktender’s house, loading docks, stores, repair shops, taverns and inns.

Before the red ink had a chance to dry on the canal company’s debts, stock-rich railroad men bought up the assets. In a pattern repeated elsewhere, the next chapter of the story is the filling-in of canals to lay rails.

*On Grafton Street, immediately after the corner of the Union Station building, turn right on Franklin Street. Turn left on Harding Street. Continue to Kelley Square (2.2–2.6 miles)*

## 7 Harding Street to Kelley Square

(2.2 to 2.6 mi) Why was the waterway dug here? Remember Mill Brook? The water flowing through Institute Park and the North Works eventually forked when the stream ran its natural course. One leg swept farther west. In order to meet the Blackstone River on the shortest possible route, it made sense to dig the channel

along the easterly flow of Mill Brook in a more direct line through this neighborhood.

Irish-born Tobias Boland, the canal contractor in Worcester, bought the floodplain between the two forks. As a veteran of the Erie Canal project, he knew it would be transformed into prime real estate as soon as the swamp-water was drained into the new artificial waterway.

In the 1830s, Boland built four-family tenements on the land between the trench and the river. He was landlord to mostly Irish immigrants, who he had brought to Worcester years earlier to dig ditches and build dams. Worcester prospered as a result of the canalers backbreaking effort and thousands more Irish-Catholics and their families found permanent homes and jobs in, what had been until the mid-19th century, a predominately Protestant town.

Looking around one will see the kind of diversity that makes any city interesting. The neighborhood known as Green Island and Harding Street are the nucleus of the Blackstone Canal Historic District.



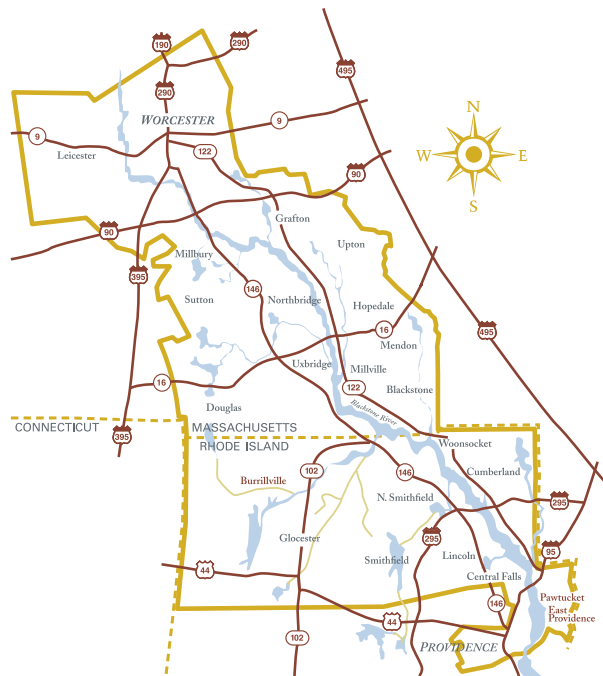
When the Blackstone Canal Company folded, parts of the abandoned trench deteriorated into rank open sewers. During the 1890s, they were sensibly integrated into Worcester’s underground waste water system. Dressed granite blocks from the 13-foot walls of the 82-foot long locks were sold and carted away to become parts of new buildings. During deep excavations, the city’s highway department even now sometimes uncovers the canal.



Worcester’s second transportation revolution occurred less than a decade after the first. On the 4th of July 1835, the first locomotive from Boston steamed in to town. Significantly for Worcester, trains would not be seasonal transportation, and cease to operate every time a river froze or ran dry. In a heartbeat, or so it seemed, the scenario of slow-moving boats, plodding tow horses and slack water canals became a distant memory – something from an era soon to be romanticized.

# Directions

From I-290 through Worcester, Eastbound, take Exit 17, turn left on Belmont Street; Westbound, take Exit 18, then Concord Street – both exits indicate Route 9 West. At traffic lights, bear onto Lincoln Street, following signs pointing to Route 9 West and Salisbury Street. Continue straight through traffic lights to Institute Park, on the right-hand side. (The campus of Worcester Polytechnic Institute is on the left.) To begin, turn right on Humboldt Avenue. The tour starts at the intersection of Humboldt Avenue and Salisbury Street.



## Along the Way

- Learn more about Worcester: the story of Worcester's industrial heritage told through exhibits, interactive displays, films, audio presentations and a historic house museum. Admission fee for non-members. Worcester Historical Museum, 30 Elm Street. For more information call 508-753-8278, or visit [www.worcesterhistory.org](http://www.worcesterhistory.org).
- Join a guided walking tour. Annual summer series. Admission fee for non-members. Preservation Worcester, 10 Cedar Street. 508-754-8760. Meander southward through the Blackstone Valley. Maps, self-guided tours and information about the National Heritage Corridor are free at the Visitors Center at Broad Meadow Brook Conservation Center and Wildlife Sanctuary. Visit the website at [www.massaudubon.org/Nature\\_Connection/Sanctuaries/Broad\\_Meadow/index.php](http://www.massaudubon.org/Nature_Connection/Sanctuaries/Broad_Meadow/index.php).
- Learn about canal construction and how a canal boat is raised and lowered through locks on a self-guided walk along an unspoiled section of the Blackstone Canal and towpath. Tour the exhibits about the transition of life from farm to factory in the early 1800s. Visitors Center and the Blackstone River and Canal Heritage State Park, 287 Oak Street, Uxbridge, MA. Free admission. Open seven days, year round. Hiking trails, picnic area, canoe launch, free parking. 508-278-7604.

- For information on events, restaurants and lodging in Worcester, call or visit the Central Massachusetts Convention and Visitors Bureau, Worcester. Free 30-minute parking. 508-755-7400.

**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 Worcester Historical Museum in partnership with the Heritage Corridor Commission.**

Special thanks to NPS Ranger Ray Boswell, Massachusetts DEM Ranger Val Stegemoen, The Blackstone Canal CDC and Preservation Worcester.