

# Walking Tour

**UPTON, MA**



*Margaret and Viola Inman. All photos courtesy of Upton Historical Society.*

**Discover Yankee ingenuity in the height of fashion.**

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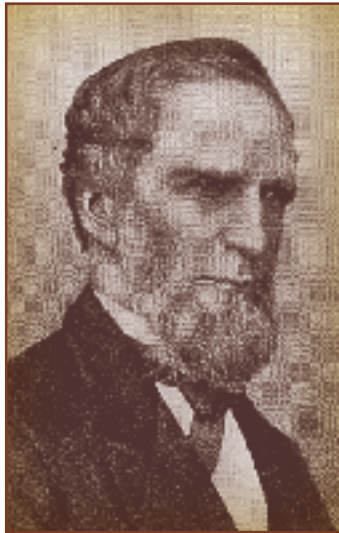
# Upton

It was shoes and boots that gave Upton a foothold in the Industrial Revolution, but it was hats that would take it to the top.

Upton was created in 1735 from the outlying areas of four towns: Mendon, Sutton, Hopkinton, and Uxbridge.

This patchwork community was typical of New England towns in the 18th century. Nuclear families worked small farms, with the women spinning wool, making candles, and preserving food, while the men plied some supplemental specialty such as blacksmithing, shoemaking, or repair work.

By the dawn of the 19th century, handcrafts began to develop into industries in New England. In Upton, a half dozen streams provided water power for small mills, but the power was not sufficient for the large scale manufacturing that was emerging in other towns in the Blackstone Valley. Undeterred, Upton proceeded to build a prosperous boot and shoe industry.



William Knowlton founded what was to become the world's largest women's hat factory. He was a benefactor to the town and a founder of the University of Massachusetts Agricultural School.

Growing side-by-side with Upton's shoe trade was the straw hat business. Upton women had been braiding straw for hats in their homes for many years, and small hat shops dotted Upton's streets. But it would take an entrepreneurial genius, William Knowlton, to make Upton the home of what would ultimately be called the largest women's hat factory in the world.

Born in Hopkinton in 1809, Knowlton had been apprenticed to a cooper at an early age, following the death of his father and two older brothers. At the age of twenty he arrived in Upton, determined to make his fortune. He took an early interest in the manufacturing of straw goods, and soon focused his considerable energy on building a ladies' hat business.

Knowlton established his company in West Upton. It remained in family hands until 1926. In 1956, New York hat manufacturer Charles Kartiganer

bought the operation. But changing fashions brought the demise of large scale women's hat manufacturing and the plant closed in 1973.

Upton today has become a bedroom community for employees of high tech industries. The former hat factory has been converted to apartments. But, continuing the tradition begun by housewives of long ago who braided straw for hats in their homes, many Upton women still make hats at home for wholesalers and for retail sales to buyers who use them for decoration and display.

As Kartiganer said in an address to the Upton Historical Society in 1974, "There's nothing like this Upton. [It has]...the finest hands in the world."

# Walking Tour

## 1 Common Area

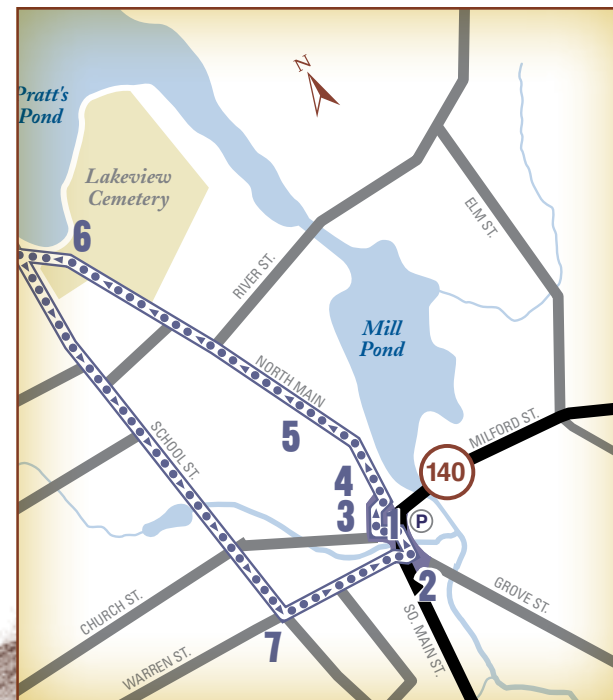
Your tour begins on Upton's town common. Here was the town's center of social, religious, and economic activity for much of its history.

Most of the buildings around the common date to the mid-19th century. East of the common stands the Holy Angels Catholic Church, built in 1848 as the First Unitarian Society in Upton. The Catholic bishop of Springfield purchased the building in 1874 when the Unitarians moved to a new church in West Upton. Parishioners remodeled the building, lowering the steeple and adding large stained glass windows imported from Germany.

To the right of the church is the center's main commercial block, built in 1836. Over the years

it has housed a dry goods store, the town post office, a barber shop, and a florist shop.

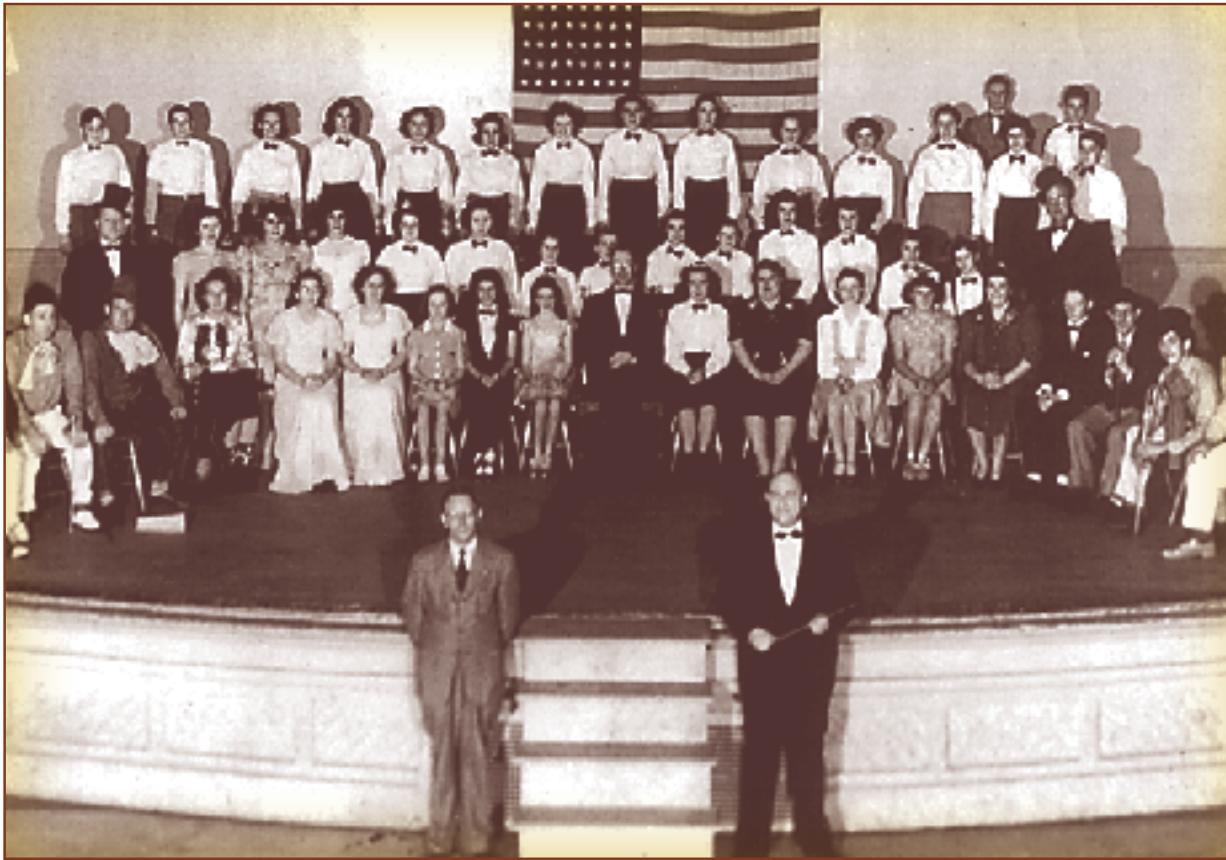
Just south of the block, facing Grove Street, is another, smaller commercial building. Built as a store in 1833, the structure for a short time served as the meeting place of the Sons of Temperance.



UPTON



# Walking Tour continued



Upton Historical Society. The Society has on display local artifacts and historical memorabilia, and is open to the public.

**3**

## United Parish Church

West of the common, on the corner of Church Street, is the United Parish Church. This church boasts what is probably the most famous steeple in the Blackstone Valley. Ironically, the steeple is a transplant from nearby Oxford.

Erected in 1848 as the First Congregational Church, the church became nationally famous in 1949 when townspeople started an informal campaign to replace the steeple that had been destroyed by the 1938 hurricane. Residents sent out letters with a picture of the church as it once had been. Eight miniature white churches were set up in regional stores and post offices. The Worcester Gazette carried a front page story headed “Three Religions Join to Give Church New Steeple.”

The story went out over the national Associated Press wire on December 21. Contributions came in from around the country, including one with this note attached: “This is the type of togetherness that we think of as being really in the American spirit.”

Over the next few years, the steeple fund climbed to \$7,000. Then, in 1956, the Oxford Methodist Church was dismantled and parishioners donated their steeple to the cause. The new steeple, complete with a town clock, was raised the same year.

The church made news of another sort in 1970, when it combined with the Methodist Church to form the United Parish Church.



Clubs and social activities have formed an important part of Upton's heritage.

**2**

## Library

In the triangle formed by the junction of Main and Grove Streets stands the town library, built in 1876 as the Methodist Episcopal Church. The town bought the building after the Methodist and Congregational churches formed the United Parish in 1970.

Carpentry students from Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School remodeled the building, which today houses the public library and other town offices, as well as the

# Walking Tour continued

## 4 Polly Dean Bradish House

Once you leave the common area, turn left on North Main Street. The first house on the left is the Polly Dean Bradish House. Built In 1844 by locally prominent Harvey Bradish and his wife, Polly, the house soon became one of two known stations in Upton on the Underground Railroad.

This elaborate system of concealment moved slaves through designated houses in towns stretching from the Deep South to freedom in Canada. An outspoken abolitionist, Polly is said to have moved more than 500 slaves through her home, despite the \$1,000 fine imposed on anyone caught aiding slaves in this manner. The house contains a hidden staircase that leads to the room where the fugitives were concealed.



Polly Dean Bradish was among the many active abolitionists in Upton.

## 5 Dr. Josiah Dean House

Continue walking up North Main Street. Two houses beyond the Bradish house is the only remaining 18th century house in Upton center. Dr. Josiah Dean, an ancestor of Polly Dean Bradish, built the house in 1740. It continues to be a private residence.



Between 1730 and 1850, Upton was dotted with small shoe shops (pictured left), called ten-footers. These operations were gradually merged into large assembly-line manufacturing companies. By 1837, Upton produced 21.7 percent of the 542,154 pairs of boots made in Worcester County.

Historically, Upton has had two-wage-earner families, as women found ready employment in the hat business as pictured below.



# Walking Tour continued

## 6 Pratt Pond

As you continue up North Main Street, note the many 19th century houses along the way. At the end of the road is one of the most scenic sites in Upton center, Pratt Pond. Across North Main Street is Upton's second cemetery, Pine Grove. It contains some fine old headstones. Walk west through the cemetery and turn left on School Street. Use caution crossing the street. There is a sidewalk a few yards down the road. When you pass Stoddard Street, note the fine stone wall on the east side of School Street. The wall marked the boundaries of Upton's largest shoe manufactory. It was owned by Ezekiel Bates Stoddard, who prospered during and immediately after the Civil War.

## 7 Grange Hall

Just beyond the Upton police station, across Warren Street, is the Grange Hall. One of only a few still standing in the Valley, the hall is a reminder of the once mighty Order of the Patrons of Husbandry. Established in Washington, D.C. in 1867 as a social and educational organization for farmers, and popularly known as the Grange, the organization influenced Congressional approval of the Interstate Commerce and Sherman Antitrust acts and supported proposals that in time became part of the American political system, including direct election of senators, direct primaries, and the graduated income tax.



Beginning in 1850, Knowlton made many trips abroad, buying materials and machinery for his operation. He brought back skilled workers, notably patternmakers, dyers, molders, and others who helped him build his business

Young farmers in Upton began to meet informally after the Civil War and established a Grange unit that continues to be active to this day.

The Grange Hall was built as the Center School for primary and intermediate grades in 1863. High school classes were conducted intermittently on the building's second floor, but it was not until 1877 that Upton's first high school class graduated – with four boys and four girls.

*Head right on Warren Street, and take a short walk back to the town center.*



Broadway actress Gertrude Lawrence, who starred with Yul Brenner in *The King and I*, is buried in Lakeview Cemetery, bordering Pratt Pond. She rests in the family plot of her husband, Richard Stoddard Aldrich, whose first Upton ancestors came to the area nearly 200 years ago.

