

# Walking

WOONSOCKET, RI



These images of Woonsocket are historic post cards with actual messages transcribed exactly as written. All cards courtesy of The Rhode Island Historical Society.

# Tour

**Greetings from  
Woonsocket!**

**Intro**

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**Blackstone  
Heritage  
Corridor, Inc.**

**WATER POWERED!**

[BlackstoneHeritageCorridor.org](http://BlackstoneHeritageCorridor.org)

# Woonsocket

The Blackstone River makes several lazy bends as it curves through downtown Woonsocket on its way from Worcester to Narragansett Bay. Scholars debate the meaning and translation of the name Woonsocket, probably from “nisowosaket,” but the most popular choice is thunder mist, a good description of the roar from the river’s largest falls.

A plantation grant in the late 1600s from the Providence Committee to members of the Arnold family established the Rhode Island colony’s possession of this huge northerly tract of land. However, boundary disputes with Massachusetts, which escalated to the kidnapping of each other’s settlers and the use of armed forces by 1683, remained heated until the 1730’s. Over the next century, water-powered gristmills, a sawmill, a fulling mill, and an iron forge set up shop around Woonsocket Falls.

Woonsocket Falls was “on the map” by the early 1800’s as a crossroads along the Boston-Hartford Highway, and commercial activity increased when the Worcester- Providence Blackstone Canal opened in 1829. By 1850 the area was full of factories, mostly textile mills, and served by the new Providence & Worcester Railroad. Tapping into the hydro-energy required a complicated maze of sluiceways and power trenches to be fitted in between buildings and along the streets, walkways, railroad tracks, and bridges.

In 1888, the neighboring factory communities of Woonsocket Falls, Globe, Social, Bernon, Hamlet, and Jenksville incorporated as the City of Woonsocket. On this walk you will discover remaining hints of their separateness. As you walk along the city’s streets, you will find that you are criss-crossing the Blackstone River — once on your way from Market Square to old Bernon Village and again on your way back to Main Street in old Woonsocket Falls.

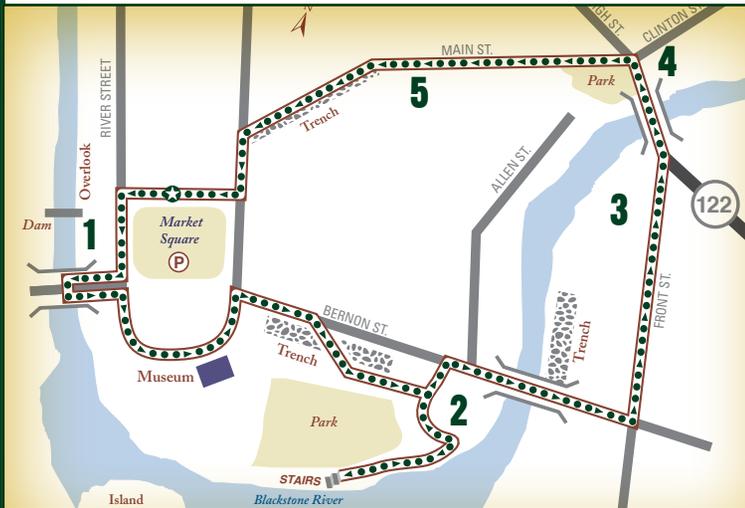
The nationwide economic boom after the Civil War spurred great growth for Woonsocket manufacturers who hired thousands of job-seeking immigrants from Quebec, Canada. Over time, the so-called melting pot tempered some of the



strong ethnic flavor of Woonsocket. The French-language daily newspaper, *La Tribune* was no longer published after 1942. The daily French-language broadcasts of WWON (now WOON) radio ceased in the 1960’s. Still, the second, third, and fourth generation descendants of these Northern American immigrants, continue to give Woonsocket a genuine “Canadien” taste, and enjoy listening in on weekends to music and commentary in Quebecois-French aired by local stations.

# Walking Tour

Old picture post cards are treasured by stamp collectors, post card collectors, signature hounds, genealogists, writers, researchers, and especially by the hometown folks looking for a view of something as “it used to be.”



## 1 Woonsocket Falls

Begin your tour at Market Square. Crossing to the falls at the intersection of South Main Street, you will find wayside information. Mechanical flood control barriers now in place diminish the natural beauty of the cascade, however you can still get a sense of the river’s raw power by standing close enough to feel the mist and spray. Beyond the falls, the turbines in the Thunder Mist Hydro-Electric Plant continue to convert the energy of running water to electric energy, as the 46-mile river pitches downward about 30 feet here.

As you circle around Market Square you will pass the Falls Yarn Mill, now River Falls Restaurant, built sometime before 1846. Originally the Woonsocket Rubber Company, processors of rubber for boots and clothes wringers, it was later the Falls Yarn Mill, producers of wool and merino yarns until 1984.

## 2 River Island Park & Bernon Street Bridge

A few yards along Bernon Street, enter River Island Park. The footpaths cross over the remnants of the “tailrace” from one of the many power trenches still found in downtown Woonsocket.

From the steps at the water’s edge, you should be able to see an island upriver. When the Bernon Dam was in place downriver before 1900, it held back enough water to raise the river level, submerging this island and most of the park. A large area of water is shown here on some 19th-century maps—but no island. Since colonial days the building of dams, mill ponds, trenches, sluiceways and later canals, locks, and towpaths, required a complicated legal process involving buying and selling water rights, land rights, mill rights, and easements.

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“We are on our visit for a few weeks in Woonsocket. Hoping you are all well. Your friends.”  
(Postmarked June 30, 1921.)

# Walking Tour continued

## *River Island Park/Bernon Street Bridge continued*

Along the left-hand side of Bernon Street Bridge, looking downriver, you can see the Veterans Memorial Bridge— which you will cross later. You also have a good view of the Pond/ Narragansett Knitting Mill. This mill's machinery, although fully operated by electricity, also continued to draw on water power from the river until a 1955 flood damaged the Bernon Dam.

Below are the remains of another large power trench along the far riverbank. The gates are still intact at the foot of the pilings, and when opened, rushing water diverted from the river powered the mills on Front Street.

**3**

### **Front Street**

Welcome to old Bernon Village! Once you have reached Front Street, you are no longer in old Woonsocket Falls Village. Turning left, you are on the main street through old Bernon Village. It led to Hamlet, the next village downriver.

At 115 Front Street is Mill #2, built in 1833, and part of the Bernon Mill complex now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. In the center is Mill #1, built in 1827 and later enlarged. Originally a cotton mill, it is the oldest surviving example of slow-burning factory construction. Compared to wood mills, this structure's heavy-timber framing, double-planked floors and rubblestone walls were a vast improvement in fire-protection. Mill #4, closer to the bridge, dates from 1857. Mill #3 was demolished.

**4**

### **Court Street/ Veterans Memorial Bridge**

Turn left onto Court Street. From the bridge, there is a bird's-eye view of the historic Bernon Mills and the river. Allen Street, a narrow, straight lane to the left below, was the Blackstone Canal before it was completely filled in and paved over. Old maps show that Truman Drive, the next street below, was a large body of water called Clinton Pond. Before 1850 the area beneath you would have looked just like a busy seaport, full of boats and commotion all the way back to Market Square.

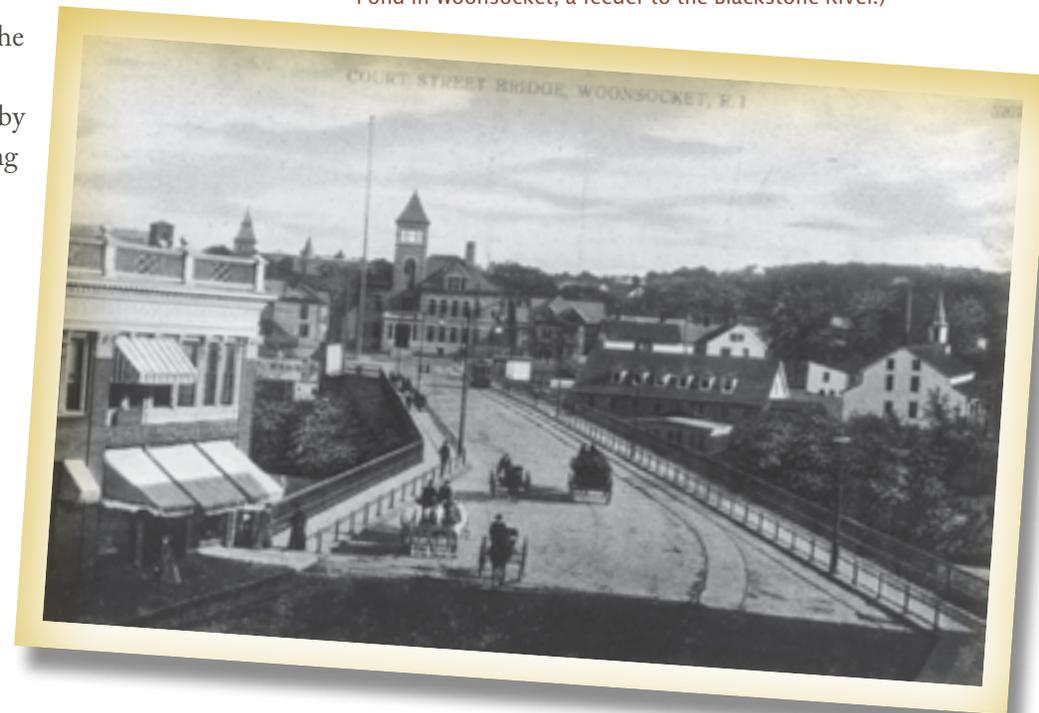
Looking downriver, the Providence & Worcester railroad bridge is held up by massive stone pillars dating from 1847. That bridge is a clue to why the canal business collapsed within

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"Just a Souvenir of our trip. 2-6-1911." (No postmark, no stamp, addressed and signed; possibly mailed in an envelope instead, hand-delivered or never mailed.)



"How would you like to dive from this little island. Have a swim for me tomorrow. Have you finished reading your book yet. Love."  
(Postmarked July 16, 1912. Note: This idyllic scene is Harris Pond in Woonsocket, a feeder to the Blackstone River.)



# Walking Tour continued

## *Court Street/Veterans Memorial Bridge contineued*

twenty years. Everyone who once eyed the waters of the river and canal to bring travelers, commerce, and correspondence switched to watching the front door of the train station for new business, new customers, and any sign of progress in busy Woonsocket. The depot at the intersection ahead became the new hub of traffic and transport. At its peak, the P&W ran 26 trains a day. Freights still run along the 400-mile rail system twice nightly, and occasionally daytime excursion trains travel the scenic river valley.

Once across the Veterans Memorial Bridge, you are back in the original village of Woonsocket Falls.

The train station in Depot Square replaced the wooden station which burned. Built in 1882, this more fireproof depot was proudly regarded as the most impressive on the line. No longer serving passengers or parcels, it is now the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission office. Inside you can get more information about sites and events in the Blackstone River Valley.

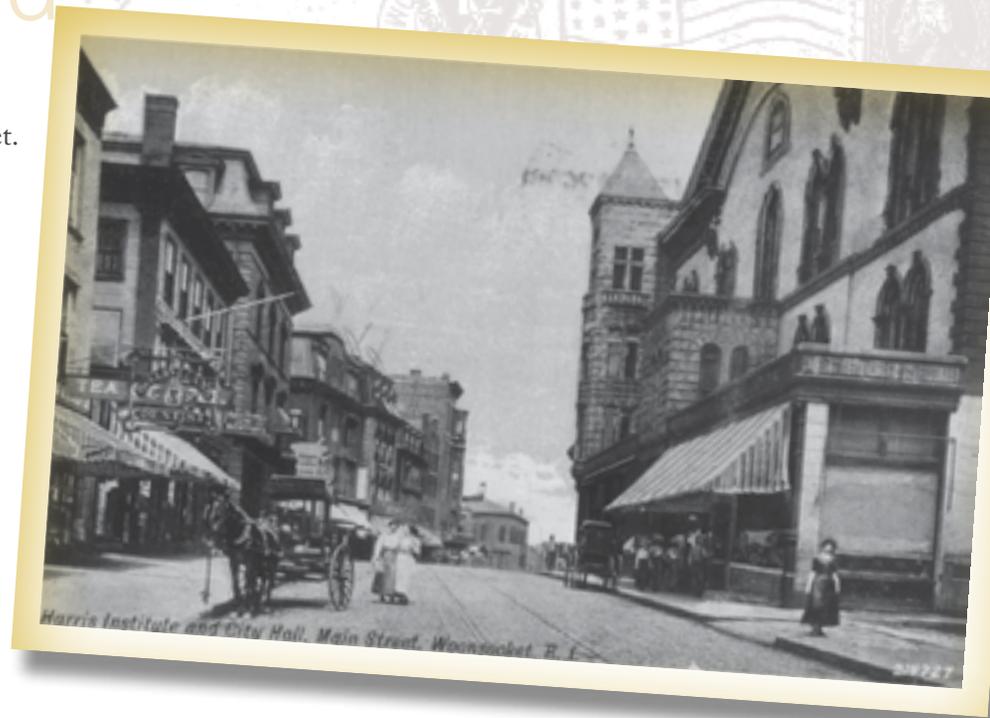
Slightly behind the former terminal is the 1855 Harris Warehouse, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The rubblestone building is gracefully curved, and was designed with train tracks running inside so freight cars full of raw wool could be unloaded, and finished woolen goods reloaded, regardless of the weather.

**5 Main Street**  
Turn left on Main Street. Many properties along this stretch of Main Street are significant for their architecture and historic value in illustrating the themes and patterns of Woonsocket's history. Together, the buildings are silent, solid proof of Woonsocket's 19th-century success as an important urban center, busy with retailing, banking, publishing, government and professional services, and even saloons and hotels. Enough

remains of the character of downtown Woonsocket as it looked in the early 1900s to imagine its potential for revitalization. In fact, you will notice that some excellent adaptive reuse has already been done here. Behind the add-on 20th century storefronts is an authentic American Main Street—well-designed and built to last.

The National Register properties on this half-mile section are:

- 169 Main Street—City Hall/Harris Block, 1856 and 1891 (Lincoln trivia buffs—look for the special plaque about Lincoln's speech here);
- 112-114 Main Street - an unnamed commercial block, 1902;
- 106-108 Main Street—Honan's Block, 1879; and
- 1 Main Street—Hanora-Lippitt Building.



"You see where I put the crosses on the other side. Well, that is where I am working. They tore the old building down and built a new one." (Postmarked May , 1914.)

After 55 Main Street look for the Lyman-Arnold Trench, dating back to the 1820s and named for Samuel Arnold and David Lyman who purchased 25 acres here in 1814. Peer through the railing— to the left you can see where the water flowed underneath the foundations, supplying mills as well as hydro-powered elevators in some buildings on Main Street. To the right you can see where the trench made a sharp turn coming in from Market Square above the falls. The waterscape of central Woonsocket involving the river, huge mill dams, mill ponds, Clinton Pond, the canal, three 85-foot long locks, and many trenches and sluiceways like this one, indicate how important waterpower was for this city. Main Street leads to Market Square.

# Directions

From Route 146 North or South: Take exit for Route 104 in Woonsocket. Turn left on Route 104 North and follow to light. Continue straight through on Providence Road to end. Turn right on South Main Street, continue to Market Square.



## Along the Way

- Free parking in Woonsocket—follow the signs for Market Square and Visitor’s Center. Additional free parking at the Main Street Municipal Lot and the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, Depot Square. Restrooms during business hours.
- Come to the Museum of Work and Culture. Learn about the lives of the French Canadians who left the farms of Quebec for the factories of New England. 42 South Main Street, Woonsocket. For hours and fees, please call 401-769-9675 or visit [www.rihs.org/mowc.htm](http://www.rihs.org/mowc.htm).
- Closest place to see a historic working mill museum—18 miles south of Woonsocket at Exit 27 on Interstate Route 95—Slater Mill Historic Site Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Free Parking. Bus Parking. Restrooms. For hours of operation and admission prices, please visit [www.slatermill.org](http://www.slatermill.org) or call 401-725-8636.
- Closest place to see an intact lock, sections of canal trench, and towpath of the Blackstone Canal—2 miles north of Woonsocket on Rte. 122N in Millville, Massachusetts. Walking tour guide brochure available from the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor. 401-762-0250.

- To take a riverboat excursion past many more mills and old mill sites—spring, summer or fall—call for the Explorer schedule, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council. 401-724-2200 or 800-454-2882.
- Stadium Theatre, built in 1926, is the one remaining theater of six in Woonsocket. Located along Main Street, the theater is open for special shows and programs. It is currently under restoration by the Stadium Theatre Foundation. 401-762-4545.

**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 Park Ranger Bob Bellerose and Volunteer Denice Mitchell of the U.S. National Park Service.