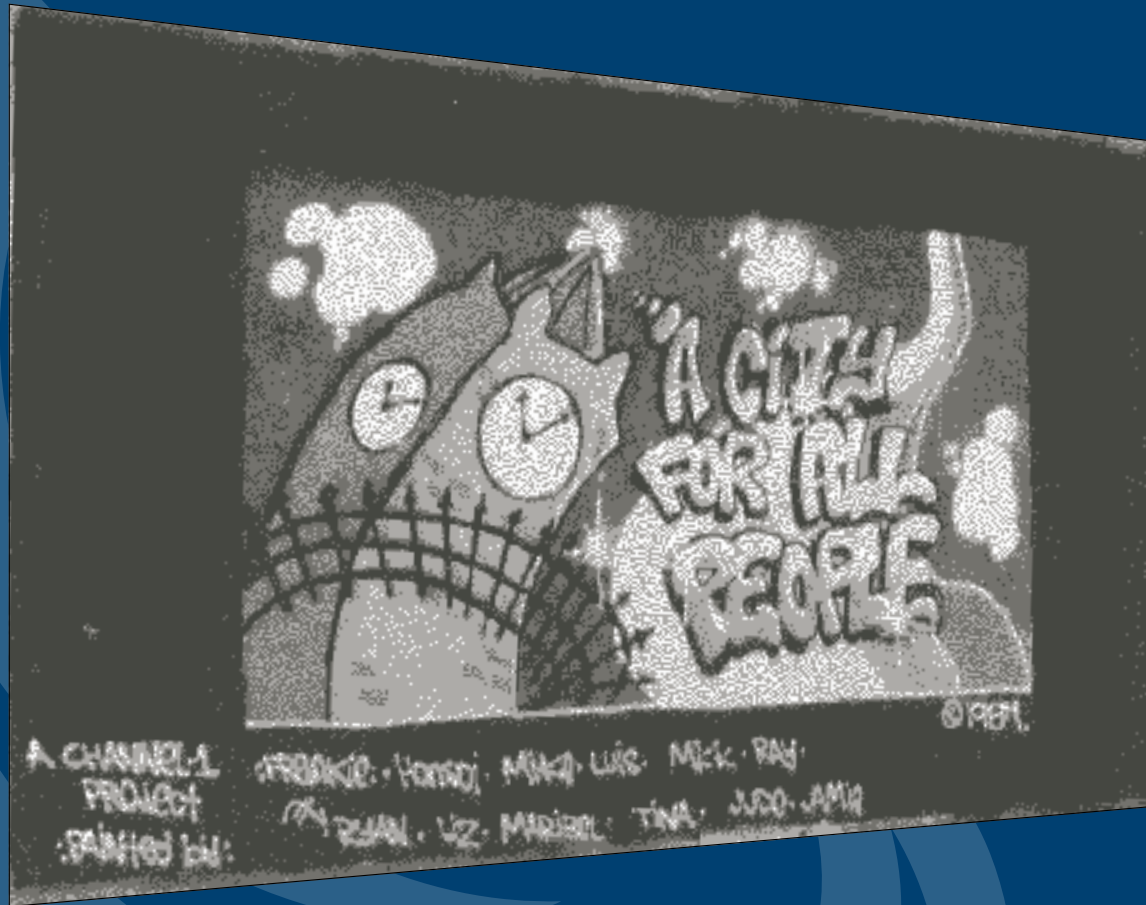


# Walking Tour

## CENTRAL FALLS, RI



"A City for all People" Mural

**"A City for all People"**

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BlackstoneHeritageCorridor.org

# Central Falls

The story of the Blackstone Valley is best told through the mills and the people who came here to work in them. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Central Falls, which is the smallest and most densely populated city in the valley and was originally an industrial district of Smithfield and later a part of Lincoln. For almost two hundred years people have been coming from around the world to live and work in Central Falls. The succeeding waves of immigrants have gradually assimilated into the city, and each nationality has added to the vitality of Central Falls.

There were few immigrants during the early days of the industrial revolution. Most jobs were filled by local farm families who were tempted by the promise of a steady paycheck. The handful of immigrants who did come here in the early 1800's were usually skilled textile workers from England and Scotland, particularly weavers. The first wave of immigration began in the 1820s and 1830s when Irish laborers arrived. At first the Irish were not allowed to work in the mills, but instead were assigned construction jobs, such as digging the Blackstone Canal and building the railroads. By 1840, however, there were many Irish mill workers and the Irish community in Central Falls grew steadily for the rest of the century.

The next wave of immigration was brought about by several factors. Around the 1860s, the Blackstone Valley began to convert to steam power. Steam turbines could run larger mills and allowed for mills to be built away from the river, which was by then overcrowded.

At the same time, railroads provided the transportation needed for expansion. The spark for immigration, though, was the Civil War, which produced both a demand for textile products and a shortage of workers. To fill these vacancies, mill owners began to recruit French Canadian workers from Quebec. Soon,

the French Canadians became the largest ethnic group in the region. This can be seen clearly in Central Falls where the population exploded from under 1500 in 1855 to 9,000 in 1870, and most of the new arrivals were from Quebec.

This vast influx of French-Canadians permanently changed the city and the entire region. Unlike earlier immigrants, the new arrivals did not speak English, and during the 1880s and 1890s French-speaking churches, newspapers, shops and schools were founded throughout the Blackstone Valley. The traditional French neighborhoods are in the northern part of Central Falls, around St. Matthew's and Notre Dame Catholic churches. The original Notre Dame church, built in 1875, was the first to be built by a French-Canadian parish in Rhode Island. In the 1920s, the pastor of Notre Dame, Reverend Joseph Beland, was a leader of the Sentinellist movement, which opposed the Irish Bishop of Providence whom they accused of trying to Anglicize French-Canadian youth by eliminating speaking French in parochial schools.

The boom years for the Central Falls textile mills lasted through the 1920s, and the population continued to grow reaching a stunning peak of 25,898 in 1930. New waves of immigrants kept coming to the city, and like the French and Irish before them, each settled their own neighborhood, establishing new churches and businesses. Polish immigrants began to arrive here around 1895 and "Polish Village" developed in the southeastern corner of the city. A major focal point of this neighborhood is St. Joseph's Church, built in 1919. Church festivals and other events, such as the celebration of General Pulaski's birthday, continue to keep the Polish community together, though many have now moved to neighboring towns.

In the early years of the 1900s, Syrian and Lebanese immigrants came to Central Falls. Many settled in the center of the city, particularly along Washington Street where St.

Ephraim's Church is located. The last immigrants to arrive during the boom years were the Portuguese, who came to the region beginning in 1917. The Portuguese neighborhood is centered in Valley Falls on both the Central Falls and Cumberland sides of the river. It continues to be a thriving community with several active clubs and popular festivals.

The depression and the decline of the textile industry slowed the immigration rates here to a trickle for many years. Gradually, though, the work force in the city grew older and by the 1970s the remaining mills faced a shortage of skilled textile weavers. Thus began the current wave of immigrants to Central Falls: the Hispanics. While many Spanish speaking nations are represented here, the majority come from four countries: Colombia, Puerto Rico, Guatemala and The Dominican Republic.

Like those that preceded them, the Hispanic immigrants have come to Central Falls to find work and are leaving their mark upon the city. Today, about 40% of the population of Central Falls is Hispanic, and the strength of their community can be seen on the signs all over the city from churches to stores and restaurants all advertising in Spanish. Like their predecessors, the Hispanic community faces some challenges in their new home. Just as the French Canadians fought for speaking French in parochial schools, the debate today is over bilingual education in public schools. In the past twenty-five years, however, Hispanics have made many in-roads into the city and have become active members of Central Falls' melting pot community.

Though the population of Central Falls is declining, immigrants continue to make up a significant percentage of the city's residents, a trend that should continue as long as the mills here offer employment opportunities. We can only speculate from where the next wave of immigrants to Central Falls will come.

# Walking Tour

*From Slater Mill: Turn right onto Roosevelt Avenue. Proceed about 1/3 of a mile. Mill district begins at Central Falls Line.*

## **1** Central Falls Mill District: Roosevelt Avenue

The six original mill privileges in the city were located along Roosevelt Avenue, just north of the Pawtucket line. Today, these mills remain active, a testament to the work ethic of the city. From south to north along Roosevelt Avenue are the Royal Weaving Mill (1897), the Pawtucket Hair Cloth Mill (1864), the Central Falls Woolen Mill (1870), the Pawtucket Thread Company (1825) and the Kennedy-Stafford Mill Complex (1825-1860's). Of particular interest here is the Hair Cloth Mill, located at the intersection with Cross Street, which is one of the finest examples of mill architecture in the region. Hair cloth was used to cover furniture as well as to make crinolines. Another highlight is the Pawtucket Thread Mill, a small rubble stone mill which is partially hidden in between the much larger brick Woolen Mill and Stafford Complex. The Cross Street Bridge offers a good view of the Central Falls Dam just to the north.

*From Roosevelt Avenue turn left at light onto Charles Street. Proceed west four blocks, following one way signs, to the intersection with Broad Street. Turn left, Jenks Park and City Hall are one block down on the right.*



Pawtucket Thread Company (1825) Four story stone mill now hidden by the massive brick mills that surround it.



CENTRAL FALLS

Left: John Somyk: Van Craft Knitting Central Falls, RI

Though greatly reduced from its heyday in the early 20th century, the textile industry remains active in Central Falls. Today, a number of small "specialty shops" dot the city—many occupying space in the former massive mills.

# Walking Tour continued

2

## Central Falls City Hall (1888)/ Jenks Park; Broad Street

This lovely Queen Anne style structure was built as the Lincoln High School in 1888. It became the Central Falls High School in 1895 and City Hall in 1927. It served as the corner stone of Central Falls' municipal center on Broad Street, along with the Fire Station (1889), the old Town Hall (1873), and the Police Station and Courthouse (1914).

Adjacent to City Hall is Jenks Park, which was established in 1890 on four acres of land donated by Alvin Jenks. Besides serving as the "lungs" of the city, the park features several highlights, including the "iron umbrella" pavilions



built by Fales and Jenks, a Central Falls Machine manufacturer. The centerpiece of the park though is the Cogswell Tower, which stands seventy feet high and has a clock face on each side. The tower is built upon Dexter's Ledge, the highest point in the city. You can see the entire city from the tower, as well as much of the valley from Providence to Woonsocket.

*From City Hall continue south on Broad Street for 3 blocks. Turn right onto Cross Street into the South Central Falls Historic District. Turn right onto Evaleen Street and right again onto Central Street.*

3

## South Central Falls Historic District

Some of the finest and most interesting houses in the city are located in the South Central Falls Historic District, which was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991. Everything from Queen Anne mansions to triple-deckers can be seen here in the neighborhood that was home to both mill owners and mill workers. A detailed tour of the district, created by Historic Central Falls, is available at City Hall.

*Turn right onto Dexter Street. Turn right onto Hunt Street then right onto High Street. Continue on High Street to Pierce Park which is on the left side.*



"Because of its ethnic diversity, Central Falls is an exciting place to be."



These tidy Greek-Revival houses from the 1840s are just one example of the mill worker housing that still exists in the South Central Falls Historic District.

**"Using the best of all ethnic groups — that's what Central Falls is all about."**

# Walking Tour continued

## **4** Pierce's Fight Site & Riverwalk Park: High Street

A dramatic incident of the King Philip's War took place here on March 26, 1676. A force of about seventy English soldiers and twenty allied Indians under Captain Michael Pierce of Rehoboth were ambushed along the banks of the river by warriors of the Narragansett tribe. According to legend, nine of the white soldiers were captured and taken to what is now the Monastery in Cumberland, where they were tortured and killed. The site became known as the Nine Men's Misery. The trail along the river here is short, about 1/10 of a mile, and it connects a baseball field and a playground. There are some benches here, and the park provides a nice picnic spot along the river.



Above: El Palacio De La Musica Mural: Dexter Street.

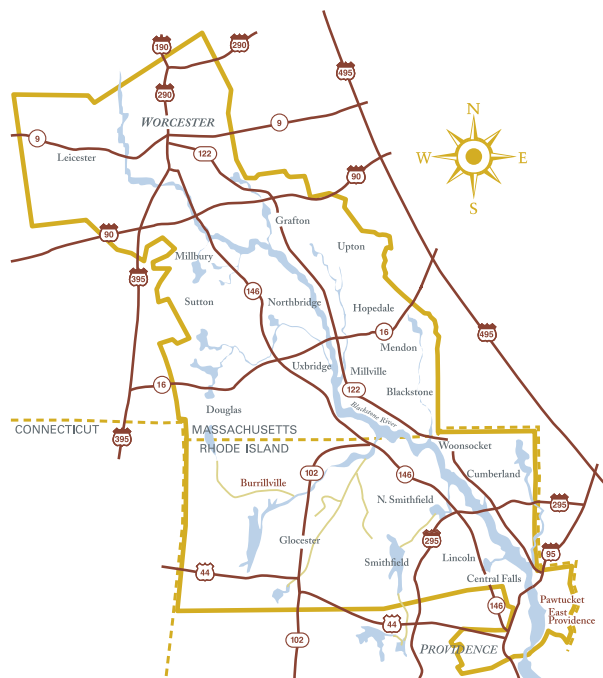
Below: These decorative pavilions serve as a reminder of Central Falls' heritage in the iron and machine making industries.

**"I see the young people . . . take their music, and their sports, and their culture from Columbia and from America. They will be able to take from both cultures, and they know they have to work hard and their futures will be great."**



# Directions

To begin at the Mill District and from Route 95: Take the East Street/ Central Falls Exit (#30) and follow signs to Central Falls. You will enter the city on Roosevelt Avenue, at the northern end of the mill district.



## Along the Way

- Free Parking is available on most streets.
- Sample the many ethnic restaurants and shops throughout the city, particularly along both Broad and Dexter Streets.
- Take note while driving through the city that many streets, especially those in the South Central Falls Historic District, are one-way.
- Facilities are available at City Hall.
- The Slater Mill Historic Site, the first successful water powered textile mill in America, is only minutes away. It is located on Roosevelt Avenue in Pawtucket, 1/3 of a mile south of the Central Falls Mill District. For hours of operation and admission prices, please visit [www.slatermill.org](http://www.slatermill.org) or call 401-725-8636.
- To see another side of the city, take a ride on board the Blackstone Valley Explorer. Tours of the Blackstone River in the Central Falls area are usually available in the spring. For more information contact the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council at 401-724-2200.
- To discover more about the French-Canadian influence in the Valley, visit the Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket, 42 South Main Street. Open daily. For more information call 401-769-WORK or visit [www.rihs.org](http://www.rihs.org).

- Blackstone Valley Visitor's Center — 175 Main Street Pawtucket. Free maps and information, videos, exhibits and more. Restrooms. Free parking. Open seven days. 401-724-2200 or 800-454-2882. Located at the corner of Main Street and Roosevelt Avenue in Pawtucket, 1/3 of a mile south of the Central Falls Mill District.

**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.**

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