

Walking Tour

CHEPACHET, RI



1822 roadside promoting the performance of Betty The Learned Elephant. Courtesy of the Glocester Heritage Society.

**Tour a small village
with a big story.**

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Chepachet

All across America, while big cities carry the march of progress every forward, small villages like Chepachet keep busy maintaining their time-honored traditions. Romanticizing its passion for the past, in the 1920s author H.P. Lovecraft described this place as “a veritable poem”.

Sa-pat-set means a place to cross the river in the Algonquin language of the Nipmuc tribe. The first English homesteaders kept the native place name, marking the crossing, as well as the river, on the map as Chepachet before 1700. There were no doubt many suitable places to get from one side of the river to the other easily, but like spokes in a wheel connecting at the hub, the byways and highways through three states met at this shallow fording place. The early settlement was remote, but by no means isolated. The first bridge was probably built sometime in the early 1700s, and since then Chepachet village has been a nucleus of commerce and manufacturing. When Gloucester was set off from Providence and incorporated as a separate town in 1731, the village became the civic center. The northern half of Gloucester became the town of Burrillville in 1806, but little changed in Chepachet as a result. By the mid-19th century, the peal of factory bells and whistles from large woolen and cotton mills sounded out the daily routine of village life.

The events in the lives of country people often make history, but here in Chepachet their actions also shaped it in tangible ways. The community earned an important place in the books of American political reform during the summer of 1842 when a village tavern hosted the leaders and “army” of an insurgent state government. Their cause was voter rights. Sixteen years earlier, the senseless killing of a gentle Indian elephant on the main street bridge induced solo traveling shows to band together, making them the forerunners of modern circuses.

To this day, Putnam Pike, Chopmist Hill Road and the roads to Providence and Boston are busy thoroughfares. As in the past, the town affairs of Gloucester are still conducted at the Chepachet junction. Dozens of stores and businesses are the main attraction, as they have been for centuries. Not surprisingly, for as long as travelers and residents have met and crossed the river here, the villagers’ most enduring pastime has been the remembering, retelling and reenacting of the stories of Chepachet’s colorful past.



Mechanization of agriculture in the early 1800s meant some of Gloucester’s farm families could produce a small surplus of fruits, vegetables, milk, meat, poultry, butter and eggs, animal hides and wood which they carted to town to sell (or more commonly, to barter) for “fancy goods” in the village stores. Chepachet’s industries and businesses, promising a steady cash wage and indoor working conditions, slowly drew laborers away from the hardships of working the hardscrabble fields. By mid-century, the village center whirred with trade and manufacture, while acre after acre on colonial era plantations lay fallow and great old barns stood empty.

Walking Tour

Begin your tour at the bridge on Main Street. This loop is about .5 miles.

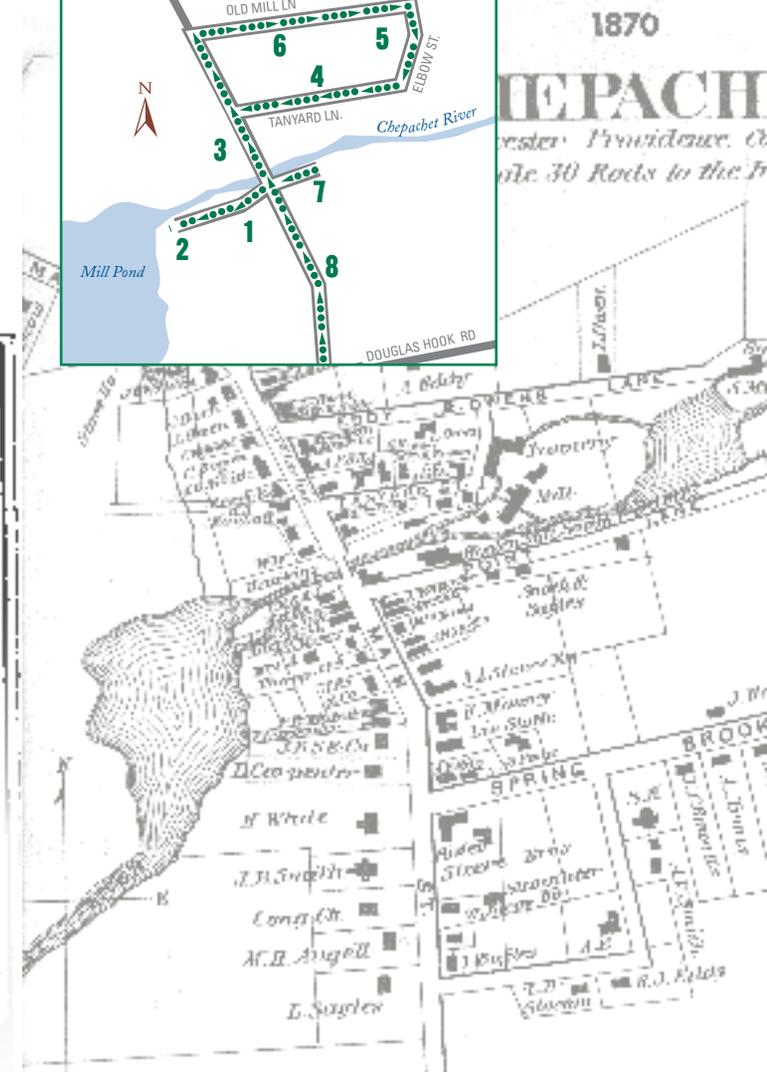
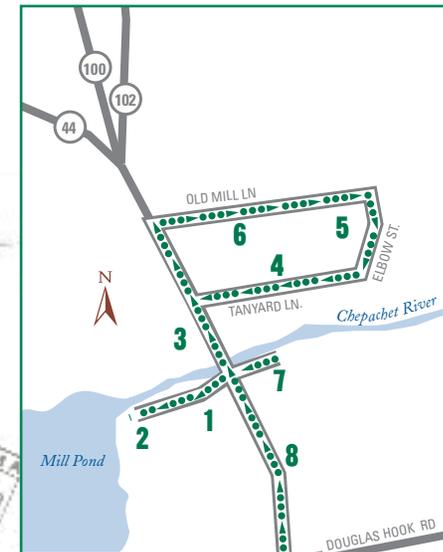
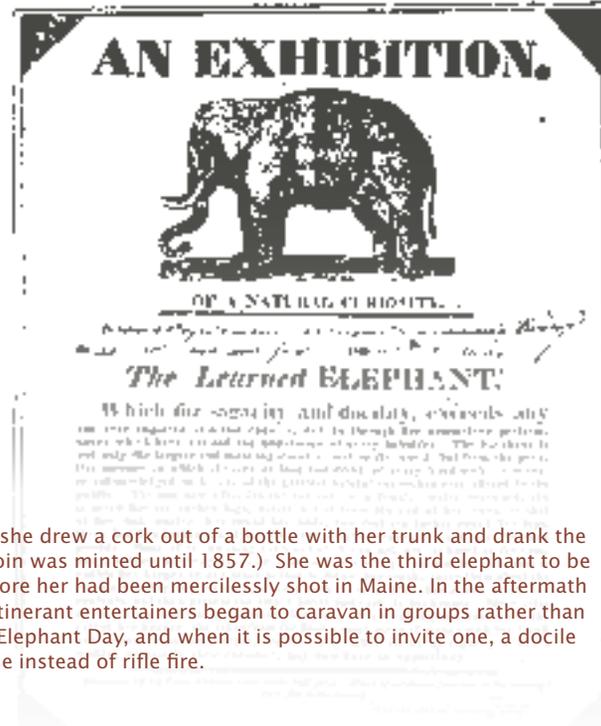
1 Chepachet River Bridge

No one seems to know for sure what sort of grudge young Canton Smith of nearby North Scituate, Rhode Island, had against the traveling show of Betty the Learned Elephant and her handlers. Whatever it was, his hard-heartedness forever linked this river crossing with a memorable incident on the night of May 25, 1826. The enormous tragedy is noted on a tiny plaque which you can see mounted on the west railing.

Like hawkers and peddlers of wares, troupes with a rare sight or unusual act journeyed from town to town – often after dark to keep their spectacle a surprise. The show had performed here once before, four years earlier. However, as Betty's show hit the road this time, two of the six youthful conspirators instigated by Smith, aiming from a window in the second story of a gristmill, fired on the elephant as she walked across the “rustic” span. The shots were fatal, and the six hooligans faced charges for their cruel deed.

In 1822, admission to Betty's show, featuring a trick in which she drew a cork out of a bottle with her trunk and drank the contents, was 12 ½

cents, children half price. She was the third elephant to be seen in North America; ironically, another tamed elephant before her had been mercilessly shot in Maine. In the aftermath of these unfortunate incidents, the “tent circus” was born as itinerant entertainers began to caravan in groups rather than touring singly. The villagers of Chepachet retell this story on Elephant Day, and when it is possible to invite one, a docile pachyderm retraces Betty's steps across the bridge to applause instead of rifle fire.



Walking Tour continued

2 **Chepachet River**

Walk down the lane along the right-hand side of the Chepachet Fire Station between the Chepachet River and the narrow canal. All around you are man-made structures that are clues to the meaning of the term “working water”. Falling out 70 feet in elevation between one side of the village and the other, there was enough energy to run sawmills, gristmills, a fulling mill for processing woolen goods, a cotton carding mill and a nail and tool factory with a water powered trip hammer at the forge – all lining the embankments before 1808.

Above the dam, a channel called a headrace splits off the mill pond drawing water to run the machinery at the mill on the other side of Main Street. At one time, there would have been many spillways, dams, gates and waterwheels, all trying to make the most efficient use of the limited supply of water. Once past the mills, the water went back into the river via trail races, typically carrying environmentally harmful manufacturing wastes with it.

Downstream, the Chepachet weds the Clear River, forming the Branch River. It joins the Blackstone River which eventually empties into the sea.



Crossroads inevitably create commerce, and by 1813, there were 13 dry goods and grocery stores in Chepachet village. The goods for sale today at Brown and Hopkins Country Store (operating under this name since 1929) are stacked on shelves and counters that have endured nearly 200 years of practical use.

Return to the main street and turn left.

3 **Stores**

At the crosswalk on the main street, you are surrounded by a few of Chepachet’s oldest stores. The building close to the riverbank at 1178 Putnam Pike was originally the Hawkins store and a post office after 1868.

Job Armstrong ran a shop in the basement of his home at 1182 Putnam Pike before building a separate store across the street in 1814. He employed four or five full-time clerks. Restored in 1974, Armstrong’s store is now the headquarters of the Gloucester Heritage Society at 1181 Putnam Pike.

Years ago, Yankee magazine’s venerable editors challenged readers to name a rural grocery anywhere in America that had been in continuous operation longer than the Brown and Hopkins Country Store, at 1179 Putnam Pike on the main street. It has undergone at least seven name changes under different owners, since it opened its doors for business in 1809.

At the crosswalk, cross the main street with caution.

4 **Tanyard Lane**

Walk down the narrow street between the Job Armstrong store and the Brown and Hopkins store. The signpost on the corner is an easy clue to the past – from about 1800 on, Tanyard Lane led to a tannery where hides were cured into leather.

The first house on the right-hand side, a type of residence often called a “block”, is a restored multi-family worker’s tenement, dating from the 1870’s.

The house at 15 Tanyard Lane was the office for H.C. White’s woolen and cotton mill. Built in the 1860s, it is a private residence today. Lawton Owen, who lived in the house at 16 Tanyard Lane, established the tannery just around the corner.

This is an 1887 view of the H.C. White mill, Chepachet’s largest industrial complex, with carding, spinning and weaving mills. It had a separate smithy shop, picker houses for raw materials and a boiler and engine house for steam power. White had demolished the old tannery buildings and built worker tenements and storage buildings. At the height of production, 400 workers made cotton goods and fine worsted woolens. The mill, already facing hardships during a nationwide recession, was burned by arsonists in 1897.



Walking Tour continued

5 Elbow Street

Continue around the bend to the left. This quiet wooded glen with its picturesque rolling river was at one time the noisiest, smelliest, most industrious neighborhoods of Chepachet village. Shortly after dawn and again after dark, for over half a century, six days a week, hundreds of men, women and children walked along this lane to and from their jobs at huge factories on both sides of the now reforested riverbanks. Beside the street, you can see some of the old foundations and stone ruins.

Eddy & Owen's tannery, which stood close to the road along the right-hand side, was the setting of the final chapter of the story of Betty the Learned Elephant. Her carcass was skinned and rendered here. The tanned hide and the cleaned skeleton were sold to separate museums.

6 Oil Mill Lane

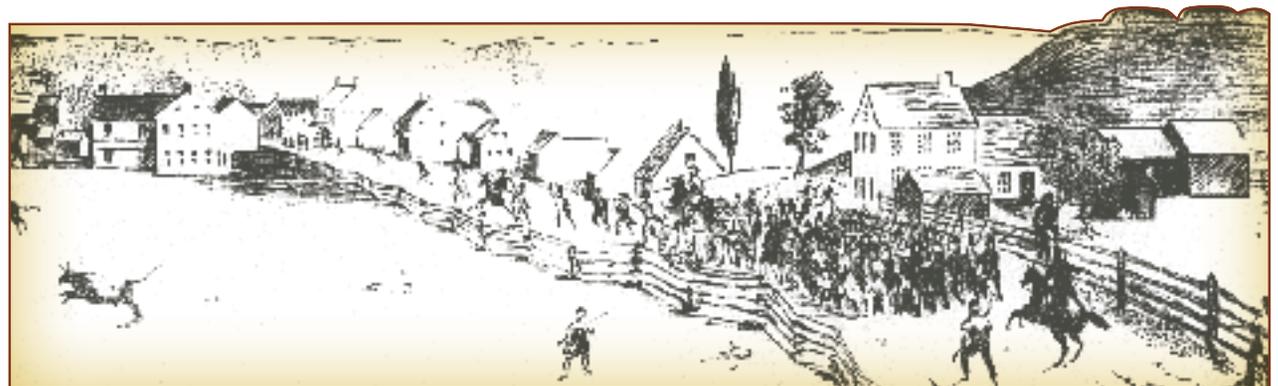
Follow the street as it bends to the left again. Another hint to what people did for a living in the village long ago is the name of this lane. It led to a processing plant that extracted oil from cotton seed and linseed. There are three interesting residences here, all close together, yet far apart in age and style. 11 Oil Mill Lane is a classical Greek revival style house from 1840, but the ell was probably built earlier. Lawton Owen, of the tannery business, lived here. Adfer Eddy lived at #12-14 in an ornate Victorian style house built about 1850. The plain house at #5-7 is the village's oldest mill worker's tenement, dating from about 1800.

7 Stone Mill (c. 1814)

At the end of Oil Mill Lane, turn left onto the main street. As you cross the bridge, look closely at the two different kinds of stonework on the corner of the stone mill. You will notice a massive repair. In February of 1867, the Chepachet River swelled from torrential rains and meltwater. When dams upriver began to break, a flash flood washed away many structures entirely, including the gristmill where Betty's snipers hid. It nearly destroyed the mill. The oldest part of this stone building was the Chepachet Manufacturing Company, a cotton and later woolen mill. Before the flood, it had three floors, but it was rebuilt with one less story. One of the village's first textile mills, it is now the last left standing. Later, wooden additions were demolished, but not cleared off the site.



The freshet of February 1867 washed away the entire bridge and deeply gouged the riverbed and the embankments below where these people are standing. Climbing down and up the muddy slopes, everyone crossed the river by boat until a makeshift bridge was built over the falls.



Walking Tour continued

8 Stagecoach Tavern (c. 1800)

Walk along the main street to 1157 Putnam Pike. For Thomas Wilson Dorr, a voter's rights activist, the road to rebellion ended at this tavern run by Jedediah Sprague.

Although the People's Party consisted mainly of citizens who did not have the right to vote because they were not landowners, in April 1842 they cast their ballots for Dorr, electing him governor. However, Dorr's attempt to take office led to a charge of high treason from incumbent Governor Samuel Ward King, recently re-elected by the officially registered voters. After a confrontation in Providence, Dorr regrouped on June 25 in Chepachet, where he had many key supporters among workers. They wanted to convene a People's Party legislative session of the General Assembly. This tavern was Dorr's

headquarters. King ordered 2500 militiamen to march on the town three days later to capture the insurrectionists, but Dorr had already disbanded his several hundred followers for their own protection. He fled to Connecticut, the New Hampshire.

This was originally Cyrus Cooke's tavern, built about 1800, now with many alterations and additions. As its name implies, it was a stagecoach stop. The only damage done to the property during the Dorr resistance was to a keyhole – a soldier fired a bullet through the locked door, wounding a man inside.

During living history presentations of the 1842 Dorr Rebellion, re-enactors and spectators alike are able to see and hear firsthand the powerlessness that the non-voting working class felt vis-à-vis a government that did not view their contribution as vital to democracy. The occasional reconstruction of the final days and hours of the episode provides great entertainment nowadays, but history records that the soldiers were accused of excessive use of force against innocent citizens, ransacking their homes and stores. At the time of the actual foray into Chepachet, 130 people were taken prisoner.

Providence attorney Thomas W. Dorr (1805-1854), the descendant of a fellow who was a companion of Paul Revere, led the movement in Rhode Island to expand



voting rights. The course of events took shape as an armed rebellion, but his goal was simply "liberty and justice for all" – a sentiment straight from the souls of the nation's forefathers. Through constitutional reform, Dorr wanted to let thousands of Rhode Island men go to the polls, people like the factory workers of Chepachet and the adult sons of farmers who lived on property they did not own and therefore were not eligible to vote.

Dorr was arrested and in 1845 was sentenced to hard-labor and solitary confinement for life. Released under general amnesty after serving less than two years, he emerged from the jail yard to a throng of still loyal non-voters shouting, "Three cheers for Governor Dorr!" The reforms Dorr advocated eventually became state law. In 1888, the property requirement for naturalized citizens was removed, however women did not win the right to vote until 1919.



Directions

From Interstate 295, exit at Rt. 44 west. Chepachet village is at the junction of Rt. 102, 100 and 44 in the town of Glocester, RI. There is free parking at the Town Hall at 1145 Putnam Pike, Rt. 44/102.



Along the Way

- Restrooms are available during business hours at the Glocester Town Hall, 1145 Putnam Pike. 401-568-6206
- Learn more about Chepachet village by visiting Glocester Heritage Society at the former Job Armstrong Store at 1181 Putnam Pike. 401-568-1866 or 401-568-8967.
- Visit Chepachet's historic churches. Chepachet Union church, built in 1846, and the Freewill Baptist meeting House, built in 1821, with its old carriage shed still at the rear. Both on Putnam Pike/Rt. 44.
- Enjoy the great outdoors at Scotstun Town Forest. Walking trail and scenic vistas of the reservoir through 45 acres preserved by the Glocester Land Trust, Chopmist Hill Road, Rt. 102. Map and brochure at Glocester Town Hall, 1145 Putnam Pike. 401-568-6206
- For information on events, restaurants and lodging in Glocester, call or visit the Visitors Center at the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council. A National Heritage Corridor Visitor Center with additional information, free maps and tour brochures. Free film shown all day. 175 Main Street, Pawtucket, RI, near Slater Mill Historic Site. 401-724-2200.

- Exhibit and artifacts tell the story of the transition 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 a week, year round. Hiking trails, picnic area, canoe launch, free parking 508-278-7604.

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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