

# Walking Tour

**DOUGLAS, MA**



Bird's eye views of Douglas.

**Where fields met  
factories and  
country met commerce.**

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# Douglas

Come, take a walk through East Douglas, where an agricultural community evolved into a mill town, and a stage stop became a dynamic commercial center. In East Douglas, you can still catch a glimpse of what it was like when fields met factories and country met commerce in the valley where American industrialization was born.

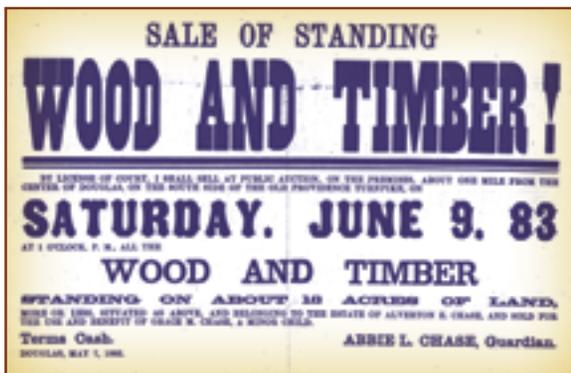
Centuries before the arrival of the first Europeans, Douglas was inhabited by Nipmucs, an Algonquin people, who lived here in a settled agricultural and hunting society. In the 1720s, the first English-speaking settlers here established the town as New Sherborn, later renamed Douglas In 1746. Over the next century, Douglas enhanced its agricultural economy with increasing commerce,

becoming a crossroads for stagecoach turnpikes from Worcester to Providence and Boston to Hartford. Its growing number of taverns and wayside inns soon transformed Douglas into a hub for people and goods traveling through the Blackstone Valley. In addition, local grist mills turned grain into flour and saw mills processed lumber from Douglas' forests.

Douglas' East Village, now East Douglas, developed in the early 1800s when entrepreneurs established mills on the Mumford River. By harnessing the river's waterpower, they significantly increased the production of goods that for centuries had been made slowly and individually by hand. By mid-century, industrial activity centered upon the miles of buildings along the Mumford which produced edged tools – the "Axe Shops" of the world-famous Douglas Axe Manufacturing Company. The axe business had declined by 1912, undercut by Pennsylvania's steel industry, and was replaced by the Hayward and Schuster woolen mills. By the 1950s, these mills employed 856 town residents, representing 92 percent of the local workforce.

While most of the textile mills have gone the way of the axe shops, Douglas remains a thriving community, grounded in a more diversified economy and committed to the re-use of local assets. 20th-century storefronts rest comfortably in 19th-century structures, while older buildings stand renovated nearby. Modern apartments grace old mills, while another produces contemporary fabrics. A former livery stable holds commercial businesses, what was once a factory office is now a restaurant, and the E.N. Jenckes General Store has become a historical museum. In Douglas, rather than bulldozing the past, the residents have reclaimed it.

The forests of Douglas were known throughout the region for their superior timber. They supplied cedar for shingles, white pine for ships masts, and black walnut and maple for furniture and unstocks. Forest products were used to tan leather in Grafton, to change pig iron into gun metal in Millbury, and to become railroad ties and potash for making soap and candles in Sutton.



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## 1 Elmwood Club Restaurant (#338 Main Street)

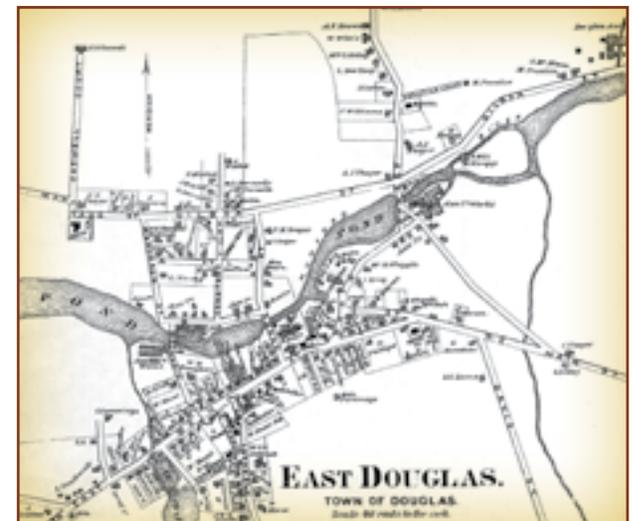
The Elmwood Club Restaurant at the corner of Cook and Main streets was built c.1865 as the main office for the Douglas Axe Co. After it passed to one of the woolen mills in 1912, it became an employee recreation center. Another recreation outlet supported by mill owners throughout the valley was baseball. Mill owner Walter Schuster sponsored many winning professional baseball teams and helped local boys become major league players. In 1932, in the last week of his life, ailing Walter Shuster had himself driven to Douglas' Soldiers Field to watch the high school team pull ahead of Northbridge in late innings. From the back seat of his roadster, Schuster helped manage one last game. He ordered the Douglas third baseman, who was supposed to pitch exclusively for the mill team, to pitch the final three innings and save the game.



The Lovett Mill, as it appeared in 1885 when it was being used as a machine shop for the Douglas Axe Company. The building pictured in the far right of the photograph is the Axe Company office, now the Elmwood Club Restaurant.

## 2 Lovett Mill (#3 Cook Street):

Behind the Elmwood Club, down Cook Street, is another example of renovation and preservation. One of Douglas' first textile mills, the Lovett Mill was built in 1827 on the Mumford River. The Douglas Axe Company owned the building in 1877, when the company's owners purchased the newly invented telephone. Stringing wires between their office at the Elmwood Club and their factory buildings, the Axe Company had cornet solos played at their lower factory, which were enjoyed via phone line at the office. The building was briefly a piano factory in 1911 and the Hayward-Schuster Woolen Mills' offices in the 1940s. Today the building contains apartments.



DOUGLAS

# Walking Tour continued



In 1798, brothers Joseph and Oliver Hunt built a blacksmith shop in East Douglas. Because it was a rural community on the main route between Boston and New York, they found a ready business shoeing horses and making tools. Their superior axes built their reputation, and they soon developed the Douglas Axe Manufacturing Co., shipping edged tools throughout the country and abroad. Axe company workers are shown here in front of the Lovett Shop on Cook Street in 1885.

## 3 Baker Store Building (#318/320 Main Street)

The re-use of buildings was a practice embraced early in the Blackstone Valley by settlers who understood the value of “recycling” architectural materials, designs, and labor. This structure was originally at barn, built on Warren Hunt’s Mechanic Street farm about 1850. By 1869, Ezekiel Thayer was using it to stable horses, a profitable business on any stage line. In 1874, Thayer moved it to the rear of the lot next door. Although the railroad was eroding horse-drawn traffic when Richard Lafleur bought it in 1898, he ran a livery there until 1917, carrying passengers

to and from the train, and transporting children to school. Herman Baker moved the building to its present site in the 1930s and, after remodeling it, ran his dry goods business here until 1954. Since that time, it has housed a paint store, a Laundromat, and a liquor store, among many other businesses.

## 4 East Douglas Hotel (#306-300 Main Street)

Salesmen and traveling shows are said to have once made up much of the clientele at Asa Thayer’s inn and tavern, built in 1833. In the decades to follow, however, the establishment was plagued by temperance reformers, leading some patrons to enter and leave by the back door to avoid being seen. When, in 1919, Prohibition banned alcohol sales altogether, the owners left the bar business, selling to the Whitin Machine Works of Whitinsville. The building was then used as a boarding house. In 1934, mill owners Hayward and Schuster bought its western section (#300), turning



Rogerson Building left, Douglas Hotel right

it into tenements, which they owned until 1940. The eastern ell (#306) was detached c. 1922 and made into a gas station. Recently the station was converted into a restaurant and shops.

## 5 Rogerson Building (#296 Main Street)

When Asa Thayer’s partner, Robert Rogerson, went independent about 1850, he erected this building (#296). Always a saloon or store, it attracted its own share of temperance reformers. According to one account from the early 1880s, a group called The Praying Band burst in on the proprietor of Simpson’s Saloon, which then occupied the building. After being lectured on the evils of alcohol, and warned of his fate in the afterlife, Simpson is said to have become agitated, had a stroke, and soon died. Despite a history of temperance agitation and legal prohibition, however, Douglas residents seem to have upheld their right to decide with regard to alcohol consumption. While the building across the street (#295, built in 1847) has at times been a pharmacy, post office, restaurant, convenience store, and clothing shop, today it is a liquor store.

From the 1700s to World War I, Douglas was renowned for its inns and taverns, catering to weary travelers. Above is an advertisement for the notorious Simpson’s Saloon.

# Walking Tour continued

## **6** **The Hunt Houses** **(#274 & #271 Main Street)**

Axe manufacturer Oliver Hunt's son, Warren, was instrumental in building his father's business, and also became a leading citizen. His success is evident in his mansion, #274, built c. 1825. Federal in style, the Italianate details were added in the 1870s. Warren's brother, Otis, owned a similarly impressive Greek revival mansion, #271 – complete with stately columns – across the street. Both homes set the tone for this section of Main Street, helping to establish the authority and privileges of Douglas industrialists.

## **7** **E.N. Jenckes Store Museum** **(#283 Main Street)**

This classic general store was built by Ebenezer Balcomb c.1833. In 1884, Edward N. Jenckes bought it, making several additions. Over the next decades, he sold groceries on the west side, dry goods on the east, furniture upstairs, and grain from the attached barn. Deliveries were by horse and wagon. After Jenckes died, his daughters, E. Mialma and Helen, ran the store until 1972, and then deeded it to the Douglas Historical Society that operates it as a museum. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1988.



## **8** **Wixtead Building** **(#297-303 Main Street)**

The only brick commercial building in East Douglas, this structure was built by James Wixtead in 1910 to replace the old Thayer Block that burned in 1909, destroying Wixtead's grocery and dry-goods store. (Note that the high curb and stone steps at the street, designed for the Thayer Block, do not line up with the Wixtead entrance). When it opened, Wixtead's new store shared space with the Post Office. After his death in 1923, several owners ran the store until it was converted into a pharmacy in 1940. In 1993 it became a restaurant.

## **9** **Batcheller House** **(#317-325 Main Street)**

Consistent with the pattern of building adaptation, this series of structures (marked at one site as #319) was altered from a single to two-family dwelling, and then to commercial and private use. The central part, a brick Cape, was built c.1800. The right-hand wooden frame with Greek revival influences was added when Jeremiah and Joseph Batcheller bought it from Jesse Balcome in 1828. Joseph occupied the newer extension. The left-hand, two-story commercial ell, added in 1917, was a fruit store and, from 1927 to 1943, a grocery store. It has since been occupied by a grocery, barber, Laundromat, and dry cleaning business.

## **10** **Balcome Block** **(#335-342 Main Street)**

Second Empire in design, this large commercial block was built by Julius Whipple in 1882 and purchased by Isaac Balcome soon thereafter. Among the town's more impressive structures, its 19th-century feel and 20th-century applications reinforce a sense of ongoing connection between the modern commercial era and that of an earlier time. Built in the early years of prosperity generated by the local axe and textile industries, the block was at one time owned by the Hayward Woolen Company. Its shop fronts have since held a bakery, as well as grocery, drug, hardware, notions, package, and clothing stores.

## **11** **Hayward Landing** **(#26 North Street)**

The power generated by the Mumford River has made this a superb mill site since the 1700s. First used for grist mills, the site also accommodated a cotton mill that was built in 1863 and burned down in 1880. William E. Hayward then built this brick structure, from which he operated Douglas' first successful woolen mill. He was joined by partner Winfield S. Schuster, and was succeeded by his son, William L. Hayward. As partners, the Schuster and Hayward families acquired numerous mills in Douglas, Manchaug, and Millbury. They also were Douglas' largest employer until the industry began to decline in the 1960s.

The mill closed in 1965 and, in 1992, was converted into apartments. Although this ended 200 years of industrial activity, the mill's present embodiment provides another fine example of renovation, preservation, and renewal. Large photos and examples of textile machinery in the lobby reinforce a sense of the mill's historical role in Douglas.

The Jenckes sisters standing at the counter of the Jenckes store, with the patent model of Douglas Washer nearby, c1975

# Directions

Exit Rt. 146 at Lucky Dam Road toward East Douglas. Turn left on Gilboa Street. Turn Left on North Street. Continue onto Main Street (Rt. 16). Park nearby at the corner of Cook and Main Streets.



## Along the Way

- E.N. Jenckes Store Museum, a turn of the century general store complete with period stock on display, is operated by the Douglas Historical Society. Open Seasonally. Call 508-476-3856.
- The village of East Douglas has many interesting shops and restaurants along Main Street.
- To learn more about the mill workers of the Blackstone Valley, visit the Museum of Work and Culture in Woonsocket, RI. For hours and fees, call 401-769-9675 or visit [www.rihs.org](http://www.rihs.org).
- Old Douglas Center, an original 18th-century hilltop village, is at the intersection of Rt.16 (Main Street) and Rt.96. Seven roads intersect at the point where land and buildings surround the Douglas Common. One of Douglas' old inns, the Dudley Tavern (built c.1775) is still standing there. At one time a tavern here supplied horses for the Marquis de Lafayette, who stopped there during the American Revolution.
- The Douglas State Forest contains 4,620 acres of recreational opportunities and scenic lands including Wallum Lake. From Douglas, follow Rt. 16(Main Street) west through Douglas Center.

- For information on other tours, riverboat excursions, special events, and more in the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, contact the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce at 508-234-9090 or visit [www.blackstonerivervalley.com](http://www.blackstonerivervalley.com).
- Visit the River Bend Farm Visitor Center on Oak Street in Uxbridge, MA. Free maps, trail guides, brochures, and interpretive exhibits with videos, and more. Free parking. Free admission. Open seven days. 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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