

# Walking Tour

**MENDON, MA**



Known by many as the "Mother Town," Mendon gave birth to communities destined to become giants in the Industrial Revolution: Uxbridge, Northbridge, Milford, Blackstone, Hopedale, Millville, and parts of Upton and Bellingham. Photo courtesy Christopher Noonan.

**Explore an historic crossroads village.**

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# Mendon

It is hard to tell whether Mendon is better known as the mother town of all the towns that abut it, or as the town that did *not* let George Washington sleep there.

While both stories are rooted in fact (an innkeeper's wife turned the President away in 1789), there is another truth about Mendon that is more immediately apparent to the passing visitor: to visit Mendon is to glimpse a 19th-century farming community unaltered by industrialization.

Unlike many towns within the Blackstone Valley, Mendon never became the site of major industrial villages. Instead, it became an important source of farm products to an increasingly industrialized population. Perched on a hilltop at a crossroads to four major manufacturing centers, Mendon's farm production increased in the late 19th century to meet the growing demands of nearby manufacturing centers. Even today, Mendon's agrarian roots can be seen in its winding roads, tranquil pastures, and sturdy stone walls.

The second-oldest town in Worcester County, Lancaster being the oldest, Mendon began as an eight mile square tract purchased for twenty-four pounds from several Native American tribes in 1662. John Eliot, historically famous "Apostle to the Indians," was one of the witnesses of the deed.

In 1663, fifteen families, mostly from Braintree and Weymouth, undertook the arduous task of creating a new settlement in what was then considered the western frontier. Squinshapauke Plantation, as the isolated settlement was originally known, was incorporated as the town of Mendon in 1667.

Eight years later, Mendon was the first town in the Massachusetts Bay Colony to be attacked in the Native American uprising known as King Philip's War. Five residents were killed, the entire town was burned to the ground, and the community was not resettled until 1679.

Over the next 200 years, "Mother Mendon" lost the furthestmost portions of her territory when inhabitants of those distant parishes successfully petitioned the courts to incorporate as separate towns. Lacking the abundant water that powered the early mills of the Industrial Revolution, Mendon residents continued to pursue farming and cottage industries. Even the railroads passed the town by.



Christopher Noonan

Today, quiet Mendon is becoming a bedroom community as many of its pastures are filled with new housing. Cars whiz along the intersecting thoroughfares. Yet the past is everywhere evident, in the tiny triangular village, the weathered farm buildings, the sleepy cemeteries, the timeless vistas in "Mother Mendon," one can still find living vestiges of old New England.

# Walking Tour

## 1 Founders' Park

Begin your tour at Founders' Park, site of Mendon's first three meeting houses, where residents held town meetings and worship services. The first meeting house, a 22-foot square structure built in 1668, was burned to the ground along with the rest of the town during King Philip's War. Metacomet, known by white settlers as King Philip, was the son of the great

Wampanoag Chief Massasoit. King Philip led his people into a desperate battle with white settlers in an attempt to prevent further encroachment onto ancestral lands.

By 1680, the war was over and Mendon had begun to rebuild. A plaque on the property tells the story of the two subsequent meeting houses built here. Also of interest on the property is a Franklin mile marker in the Northwest corner.

## 2 Ammidon Tavern:

Looking across Main Street you will see Ammidon Tavern. Built in 1745, this building is a relatively rare Worcester County example of a Georgian public house. Famous guests included Nathan Hale but not George Washington.

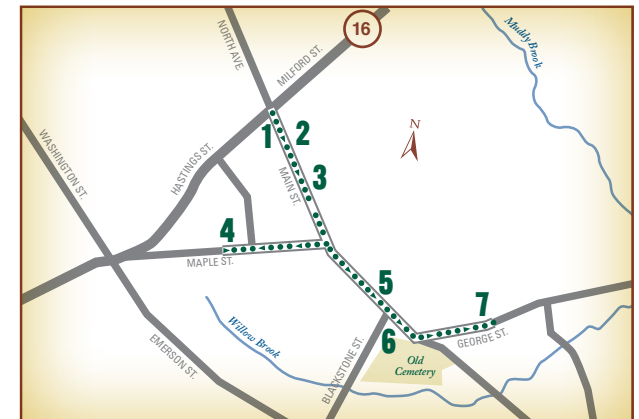
Legend has it that President Washington, during his triumphal inaugural journey in 1789, had planned to stay at the tavern upon his return trip to New York. But the innkeeper's wife did not recognize the presidential party and advised them to continue down the road to the Taft Tavern in Uxbridge. There is no known account of how the president reacted to this unexpected refusal, but an existing letter from Washington reveals that he was greatly pleased by the hospitality he received from the Tafts, ancestors of future president William H. Taft.



This plaque on Providence Street at the intersection of East Hartford Avenue, marks the beginning of King Philip's War in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.



MENDON, MA



# Walking Tour continued

## 3 Main Street

A walk down Main Street enables you to imagine the town as it was in the 19th century. The Mendon Historical Society building, adjacent to Founders' Park, was built as the Mendon Bank in 1825. It subsequently served as a law office, a private school, a dwelling, and the public library. What is now the Baptist Church was built in 1830 by Congregationalists who separated from the Unitarian Church during the religious upheaval that swept New England in the 1830s.

The Adin Ballou house at 9 Main Street is named for the preacher who founded the Utopian

society at Hopedale in 1842. Ballou was a minister in Mendon's Unitarian Church for a decade before he and 44 followers withdrew from town to begin their great experiment in Practical Christian communal living. From this house he published his weekly newsletter, the *Independent Messenger*, from 1831 to 1842.

The tiny brick building at 13 Main Street was built in the 1820s as a law office. It subsequently housed town offices, a tailor's shop, and a general store. It is commonly referred to as the "record room" because it was used to store town records. As you approach Memorial Square, note the long two-story structure to your right. This 1830s commercial building has housed

a number of general stores where residents have met for generations to discuss news of the day.

## 4 Unitarian Church

Turn right on Maple Street and walk one block to the Unitarian Church, the oldest church building in town. Designed by master builder Elias Carter in 1820, it is a classic example of early 19th-century church architecture. The spire, rising 130 feet, was damaged by fire caused by lightning in 1936 and was duly replaced.

Turn back along Maple Street and return to Main Street, noting the modest 19th century houses that form the nucleus of the town. Holding pride of place in the town center is Memorial Square — dedicated to Mendon's sons and daughters who served their country in times of war.



Lake Nipmuc Park was a popular resort for many years. Its theater drew top-notch vaudeville acts and its ballroom attracted the best in the musical world. Transportation to the park was originally by trolley from Milford and from Uxbridge. On weekends, the cars ran about every 15 minutes.



Nipmuc Park employees around the turn of the century.

# Walking Tour continued

## 5 George House

Looking south down Main Street, you will see a grand Federal style house on the left side of the street. It was built in 1810 by the George family, a notable family of lawyers, town officers, farmers, boot and shoe manufacturers, and, in the late 19th century, bottlers of Misco Spring Water. This is the most architecturally sophisticated Federal house in town. The property presents a memorable vignette of a prosperous early 19th-century farm, with its old stone walls, period slat-work fencing, farm buildings of various vintages, old trees, and open fields.

Return to your car and drive to the Old Cemetery. At Memorial Square, continue down Main Street past the George House. The Old Cemetery will be on your right.

## 6 Old Cemetery

Established in 1669, the Old Cemetery contains the graves of 40 Revolutionary War soldiers. Many of the older headstones, carved with such traditional mourning symbols as the cherub or urn and willow, have been worn down by years of weathering. The oldest graves were marked with simple fieldstone.

*Turn down George Street, directly across from the cemetery, to visit two other old cemeteries.*

## 7 George Street

A short drive down George Street brings you to two old burial grounds. On the right is the site of Mendon's first Friends Meeting House and Quaker Cemetery. Note the many weathered fieldstone markers. Worship services were held here regularly from 1729 to 1841, when they were discontinued by the Smithfield Monthly Meeting. The building was sold in 1850 to Colonel Israel Plummer of Northbridge, who dismantled it and used its timbers to construct a train depot near his granite quarry and store in Whitinsville. Across the street is the George Cemetery, an excellent example of a family burial ground. Its orderly plantings and marker arrangement are typical of the classical orientation of formal landscaping in the early 1800s. Burials took place there from the 1820s to the 1980s. The cemetery was formerly the site of Mendon's first school house, built in 1709.



Many people enjoy an afternoon in the Old Cemetery because of its interesting art and epitaphs such as this one:  
*My children dear, this place draw near, a mother's grave to see.  
Not long ago I was with you, and soon you'll be with me.*



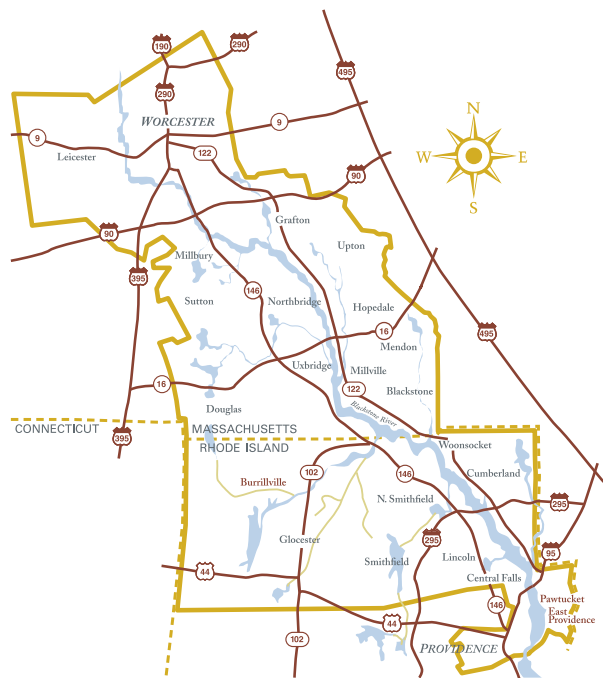
This 1830s commercial block once housed the town's post office.



The mile stone on Founders' Park marks 37 miles from Boston. It was erected in 1772, during Benjamin Franklin's administration as Postmaster General for the Colonies. Franklin had the markers erected at varying intervals on all post roads from Boston to Philadelphia. Route 16 was at that time known as the Middle Post Road, and was the major route from Boston to Hartford and New Haven.

# Directions

Mendon is located just off Route 16. To get there from Route 146, follow Route 16 East through Uxbridge to Mendon, approximately six miles. Turn right at the traffic lights onto Main Street and park at Founders' Park. From Route 495, take Exit 20 for Milford/Rt.85. Follow Rt. 85 South to Rt. 16. Follow Route 16 West past Hopedale to Mendon and turn left at the traffic lights and proceed to 1 Main Street, Mendon.



## Along the Way

- Free parking is on Main Street along Founders' Park.
- Refreshments are available in the town center.
- Good resting areas are Founders' Park and the cemeteries on the tour.
- For information about events, restaurants, and lodging in the Valley, call the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce at 508-234-9090 or visit [www.blackstonerivervalley.com](http://www.blackstonerivervalley.com).
- Be sure to visit the Blackstone River & Canal Heritage State Park and River Bend Farm Visitor Center—just five miles away at 287 Oak Street in historic Uxbridge, MA. Canal tow path walk, canoe launch sites, hiking trails, free maps, brochures, interpretive tours, and exhibits with videos, and more. Free parking and free admission. Open seven days. 508-278-7604.
- Visit a historic working mill museum, just 25 miles south of Hopedale at Exit 28 on Interstate Route 95—Slater Mill Historic Site, Pawtucket, RI. Free parking. Restrooms. For hours of operation and admission prices, please visit [www.slatermill.org](http://www.slatermill.org) or call 401-725-8636.
- To take a riverboat excursion—spring, summer, or fall—call for the schedule for The Explorer, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council. 401-724-1500.

- For further information consult *Mendon, Massachusetts, 1667-1967 - Mother of Municipalities*, written by Peter Hackett for the Mendon Tercentenary Celebration, or call the town hall at 508-473-1085.

**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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