

# Walking Tour

**MILLBURY, MA**



**The Story of Roads,  
Rivers and Rails.**

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# Millbury

Tucked off to the side of several major thoroughfares – the Massachusetts Turnpike, Rte. 146, the railroads, and the river – Millbury seems but a modest suburb of nearby Worcester. Yet, it is Millbury’s geographic position so close to the confluence of roads, rivers and rail that has allowed the town a vital role in the industrial upheaval born in the Blackstone Valley.

Millbury began as Sutton’s Second or North Parish in the 1700s, the industrial district of a farming community. Throughout America, 90 percent of all Americans tilled the soil and most manufactured goods were imported from Europe or hand-made by artisans. Recognizing the industrial potential of Sutton’s northern districts, investors established water-powered mills on the Blackstone and Singletary Rivers, mass producing flour, lumber, paper, textiles, guns, and other metal products. Villages formed around these mills and, after several attempts, the district was incorporated as the new town of Millbury in 1813. Over time the mills stimulated commerce and inventions, subsequently attracting immigrants from Ireland, Great Britain, and French-speaking Canada.

In many ways, Millbury’s development was shaped by its proximity to several New England crossroads. It was near Millbury that Native Americans called the Blackstone River the “Halfway River,” marking it on their travel from the Connecticut River to the sea. In the colonial era, the English established an east-west route “the Bay Road,” while a north-south route connected that byway to Millbury. By 1828, the Blackstone Canal also traveled north-south from Worcester to Providence. A decade later the first rail connection to Boston was made, followed ten years later by the Providence and Worcester Railroad. As a result, intersecting waves of people and ideas repeatedly transformed Millbury’s historic landscape.



While both genders worked in the textile mills, only men and boys were employed in Millbury’s iron-working shops, like the edge-tool business advertised here in 1881.

While change is never easy, Millbury has always found ways to innovate, renovate, and renew. It was here that Thomas Blanchard invented the eccentric lathe to turn irregular objects. Millbury was also among the first towns to print postage stamps, first to create a lyceum that presented public lectures and the first to use water power to manufacture guns. It was local mill workers who published *The Plebian and Workingmen’s Advocate* in 1831, one of America’s first labor newspapers. Local mill owners repeatedly adapted their facilities to new uses and technologies

over the years. Today, Millbury continues to embrace innovation and new residents while saving what is special about its heritage.

# Walking Tour

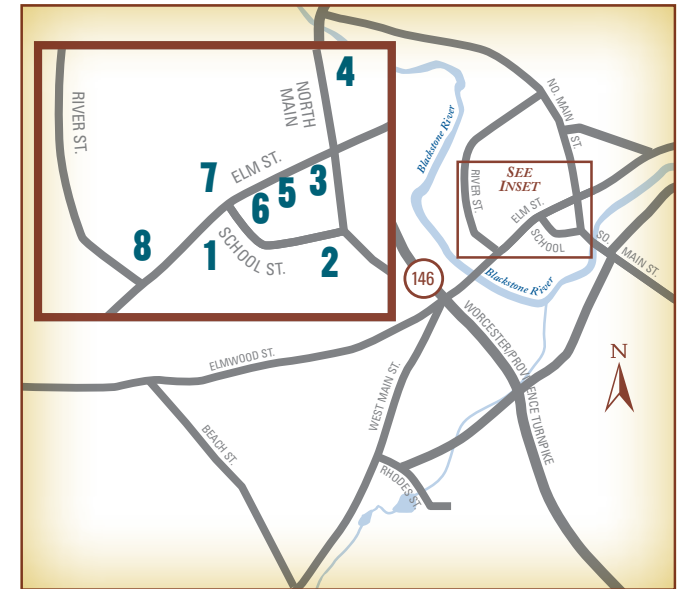
Park on Elm Street and start tour at 123 Elm Street, Millbury, MA

## 1 Asa Waters Mansion

Not all mill money went into banks and businesses, as seen in this estate built in 1826-29. As some of the country's largest landowners and employers, members of the Waters family reinforced community standards of authority and respectability with visible displays of wealth. While church leaders supported republican government, many also believed in a "natural aristocracy" in which white, male landowners should lead. The Waters family embodied these philosophies, the one exception being slavery. They may have supported the rights of African-American people on moral grounds or just believed in the argument that "free soil, free labor, free men" were necessary for industrial capitalism. Regardless, residents proudly keep alive the local folklore that the Waters Mansion was a station on the Underground Railroad, helping runaway slaves escape to freedom. While the truth remains buried in the past, there is no question that Asa H. Waters, III—gun manufacturer, lawyer, banker and legislator—was anti-slavery and active in the Free Soil Party.



Asa Waters II spent two years gathering materials for his "honeymoon cottage," shown here in the 1880s. It was one of the last buildings in town to use the Georgian Colonial design. Materials in the house include Southern hard pine and brick, Central American mahogany and Italian marble. The woodwork was handcrafted and the house designer, Asher Benjamin, was brought in from Boston.



MILLBURY, MA



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## Blackstone River/Armory Site

Over the fence, one can view the turbulent rapids of the Blackstone River. The Asa Waters family saw the potential for water powered industry along the river here as early as the 1770s. Descended from a line of gun makers, Asa Waters was the first to use water power for what had been a labor intensive handcraft. He built gun works and a powder mill on Singletary

Brook, making weapons for the Revolutionary Army. He also acquired 800 acres of land and passed his wealth and gun making skills on to his sons. In 1808, Asa Waters, II built an armory on this site. With his son, Asa Waters, III, he made guns for the United States military and also operated flannel, cotton, sash-and-bind and nail factories. Once industrial, the site is now a VFW hall.



Waterpower provides a primary reason for Millbury's industrial history. Both Singletary Brook and the Blackstone River have a steep drop as they pass through Millbury, providing a number of suitable dam-building sites. Particularly stunning is the sharp drop over the Class 3 rapids on the Blackstone River visible from the Main Street Bridge.



As industry grew, a transportation system linked Millbury to the rest of the region. When the Blackstone Canal opened in 1828, two horses slowly towed barges through Millbury's landscape. The nine locks in the canal here made the trip through town slow indeed. Next steam powered railroads rushed raw materials and finished goods between Millbury and major seaports. Then by 1901, two electric powered trolleys ran through town. Here one of those trolleys is seen passing the Old Town Hall, which was later destroyed in a fire.



Commercially-oriented Cunningham block, built c. 1895. Elm and South Main Streets.

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## Millbury Center

Many New England towns were created when earlier and larger colonial-era settlements split into separate entities in response to rising populations, changing resources and new opportunities. A perfect example of this is Millbury, where the migration of Sutton residents northward towards the power of the Blackstone River led to the creation of a new town in 1813. Armory Village was established in 1808, built around the activities at the Waters Armory. Like its sister textile-based mill villages throughout the Blackstone Valley, Armory Village grew to become a population and commercial center and, later, the seat of the town offices. Today, the small common provides a respite from the bustling traffic and business district that surrounds it.

# Walking Tour continued

## 4 Millbury Federated Church (20 Main Street)

A classic example of the New England “white church on the common,” the Millbury Federated Church opened in 1828 as the First Presbyterian Church of Millbury. Asa Waters, II

was one of the church’s founders. In 1834, it became the Second Congregational Church of Millbury. The Second Congregational Church and The Methodist Church, founded in 1822, united with the new Federated congregation in 1919.



## 5 Millbury Savings Bank (109 Elm Street)

Growing businesses required banking services in close proximity. Mills required banks to handle their payroll and purchasing accounts.



When the Millbury Bank (later Millbury National Bank) was created in 1825, mill owners were its main stockholders and Asa Waters, II was its president. The Millbury Savings Bank, established in 1854, was also run by mill owners, included Asa Waters, III. Both banks moved to this site in 1881 and shared it for many years.

## 6 U.S. Post Office (119 Elm Street)

While human interactions often generate valuable exchanges, diverse and changing cultures also bring conflict. When this building was erected in 1941, it held one of America’s steel reinforced bomb shelters. In time, local children would practice air-raid drills in its basement.

A mural in the lobby, painted by artist Joseph Lasker, shows a different conflict. Lasker was among the unemployed aided by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Depression. Invited to paint a WPA mural using local history, Lasker depicted the battle that ensued when colonists met Native Americans in the vicinity of nearby Ramshorn Pond in 1675 during King Phillip’s War.

## 7 Torrey House

Town leaders also extended their influence beyond Millbury. The Torrey House, beyond the fire station, was built in 1824 for Susan H. Waters (daughter of Asa Waters, II and Susan Holman), when she married Samuel D. Torrey. Their grandson,



Over time, men like Bell, Taft and Waters continued to “network” at the Torrey home (shown here in an old postcard) and the Waters mansion.

William Howard Taft of Ohio became U.S. President in 1908. Asa H. Waters, III and Mary Hovey also were grandparents of Gilbert Grosvenor, editor of National Geographic. Grosvenor married Elsie May Bell, daughter of inventor and National Geographic Society president Alexander Graham Bell.

## 8 Millbury Public Library (128 Elm Street)

Across Elm Street from the family home, Delia Torrey, Asa Waters, II’s granddaughter, donated her cow pasture in 1903 to be used as the site for a town library. The library opened in 1915, built with \$12,500 donated by steel magnate Andrew Carnegie who had spearheaded a drive to build new libraries across America.

Long before then, town leaders were shaping local culture. The lyceum movement – organizations presenting public lectures – began here c. 1820 by Josiah Holbrook. In 1832, Asa Waters donated land for the Millbury Academy. Abby Kelley Foster, advocate for Women’s rights, ran the Millbury Women’s Abolition Society.

# Directions

Exit from Route 146, following the signs to Millbury Center onto Main Street. Stay on Main Street to intersection at Elm Street. Turn right onto Elm. Then left onto School Street. The Waters Mansion parking lot is the first driveway on your right.



## Along the Way

- The Waters Mansion, now owned by the Town of Millbury, is also home to the Millbury Historical Society. To contact the Society for information on Millbury history, tours, historic replicas, and events, please call 508-865-0885.
- Millbury's Central Cemetery, on Waters Street in Armory Village, contains the graves of many prominent old Millbury families, including that of Asa Waters, III.
- Millbury's Old Common, at Elmwood Street and Carleton Road, is the town's original center. It has many old homes, built as early as 1747, including a former general store, a tavern, and a one-room school house.
- S&D Spinning Mill on West Main Street (formerly the Wheeler Cotton Mill, depicted on the Millbury town seal) was built in 1846. It sits upon one of the oldest mill sites in continuous operation in the U.S. Since John Singletary built a grist mill there c.1720, it has been used for lumber, cotton, linen, and wool production.
- To see a historic working mill museum, visit Slater Mill Historic Site in Pawtucket, RI. For hours and fees, call 401-725-8636 or visit [www.slatermill.org](http://www.slatermill.org).
- 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).

- For information on other tours, special events and more in the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, visit River Bend Farm Visitor Center 287 Oak Street, Uxbridge, MA. Free maps, trail guides, brochures, and interpretive exhibits with videos, and more. Free parking and admission. Open 7 days. 508-278-7604.
- Visitor information on lodging, restaurants, events, as well as free maps and brochures are available by contacting the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce at 508-234-9090 or visit [www.blackstonevalley.org](http://www.blackstonevalley.org).

**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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