

# Walking Tour

**MILLVILLE, MA**



The Separation Day Parade. Photo courtesy of *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*.

**Discover what makes history in Millville!**

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**WATER POWERED!**  
[BlackstoneHeritageCorridor.org](http://BlackstoneHeritageCorridor.org)

# Millville

On this walking tour of Millville you will learn to recognize the stone ruins of mill foundations, pieces of the old canal and lock structures, and sections of unused railroads and bridges. These are your best clues to discover what an important link Millville was in transportation and commerce in the Blackstone River Valley during America's Industrial Revolution.

Millville, originally part of Mendon, is the second youngest town in Massachusetts. By 1766 the population had grown enough in the villages along the banks of the Blackstone River for them to organize as Mendon's South Parish. In 1845, Blackstone divided from Mendon to become a separate town, and Millville happily joined it. By then, both Blackstone and Millville were hardworking communities with quite prosperous mills and manufacturers.

In 1906, the residents of the five-square miles of Millville also petitioned for independence. Their first attempt to obtain a "divorce" from Blackstone failed, but ten years later, the Separation Committee refiled "The Millville Bill" with the State of Massachusetts. Among other things, they said, Millville was not receiving its fair share of state apportionment. Moreover, they added, the 2,100 citizens were not allotted sufficient funds for such modern municipal

improvements as sidewalks. When the Governor vetoed the bill, the State Senate and House voted to pass the bill over the veto. The busy village incorporated as the Town of Millville on May 1, 1916.

Everyone celebrated the privilege of township with a great parade on May 31st. By some accounts, over 10,000 people witnessed the festivities that lasted from morning until night. Girls and women who worked in the mills proudly waved to the crowds from aboard floats they made. A few schoolchildren and teachers rode on a float, and three hundred more children marched the parade route down Main Street, over the river, and along Central Street. All the industries in Millville were closed for the day, but the mill bells rang and factory whistles blew in celebration, joining chorus with all the church bells and school bells.

Today, the families who live along Millville's quiet side streets and miles of winding country roads enjoy the secure residential lifestyle of their community. No one doubts Millville will always maintain the one feature it has cherished since the day of the great parade in 1916—its own identity.



Clues to Millville's past are all around us – this short "above-ground" archaeological expedition shows you what to look for. Along almost every swift-moving waterway in New England, evidence of early industry has been found—the Blackstone River through Millville is no exception.



Millville's Separation Committee on May 31, 1916. Notice the different suit styles. Only one gentleman chose not to don a hat that day on the parade reviewing stand.

# Walking Tour

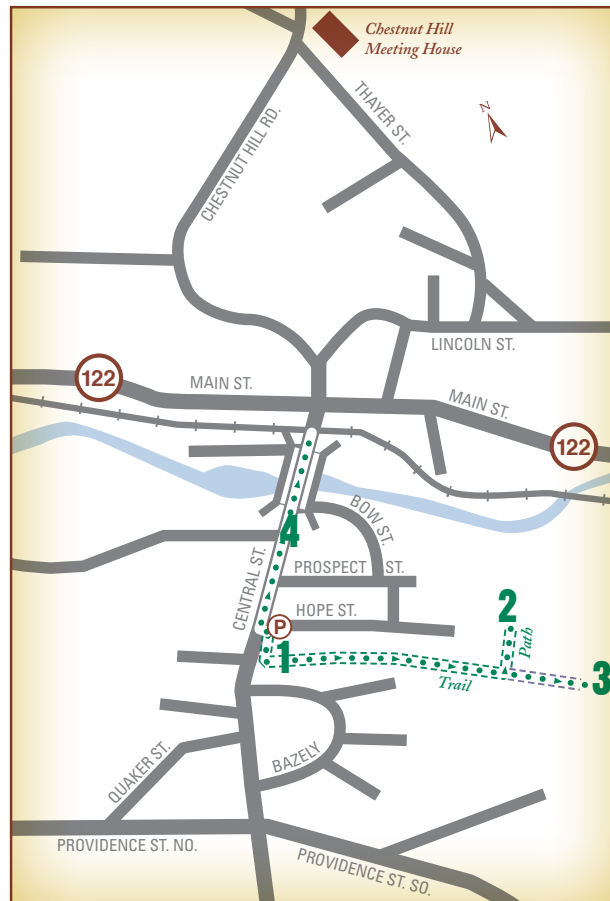
Begin the first loop from the visitor's parking area at the corner of Central Street and Hope Street. The terrain is easy and level. The Millville lock may be difficult to reach when nearby brooks swell during lowland flooding.

## 1 The Southern New England Trunkline Trail

The path leading through the gate at the parking area is the actual Boston & Hartford railroad bed—the tracks were removed in 1955. Just to the right, at a higher level, you can see evidence of the railroad bed of the Grand Trunk line, which was never completed. If it had been, with the still operating Providence & Worcester RR, trains speeding along three sets of tracks would have roared through the center of Millville.

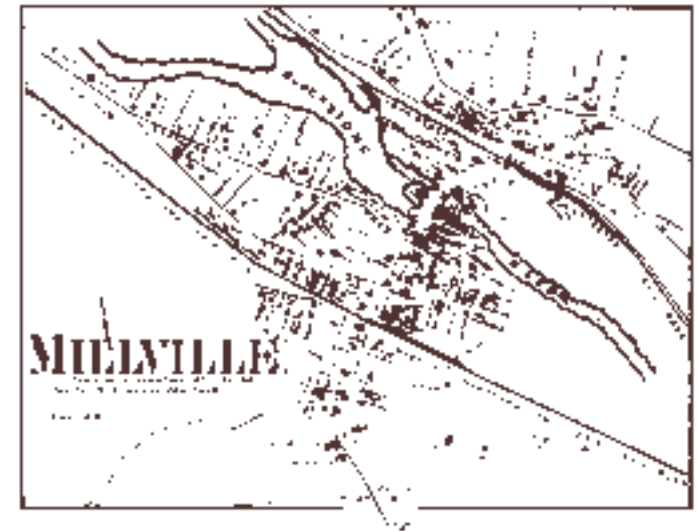
The neighborhood on the left side of the trail (along Hope Street) was called Banigan City, but locals call it New Village. Built in the 1880s for employees of Joseph Banigan's rubber company, the houses were generously sized, two-family units.

Past the row of houses, look for the branch path on the left. Stay on the downhill path for about 200 yards, then step carefully over Angelique Brook. Just ten yards from the riverbank, is a great archaeological find—the best preserved lock along the Blackstone Canal.



The Rhode Island Historical Society

After 1870 Joseph Banigan, an Irish immigrant, developed the Banigan Rubber Company into the prosperous Woonsocket Rubber, and later into a consolidation of fifteen factories renamed the United States Rubber Company. The collapse of the company in 1930 jeopardized Millville's independence.



BOSTON AND PROVIDENCE  
RAILROAD CORPORATION.

Stocks Authorized April 1, 1859

MILLVILLE

WAGON AND HORSE  
— Received from Joseph Banigan Co.  
L. C. Smith  
Baltimore  
C. C. Smith

# Walking Tour continued

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## Lock #21 on the Blackstone Canal at Millville

Construction on the canal trench, the lock, and towpath at Millville took place in the fall of 1827, and again in the spring of 1828. When you compare the quarried blocks in the lock pit with stonework in some of the great mills, you will see that the same experienced workers constructed both. Many were Irish laborers who had previously built the Erie Canal.

At each end of the Millville lock, you can see the iron pins set in grooves on the top of the lock where the huge wooden gates hung. The indentations in the lock wall are so the gates sat flush when fully opened. Inland from the lock, you

can see sections of the towpath beside the canal. Two horses pulled each boat along the canal a distance of fifteen miles a day. The next day, they worked the same section of the canal in the other direction. The animals were small but sturdy, and of no specific breed.

For a brief time, Millville served as a minor collection and distribution center between Uxbridge, upstream, and Blackstone Village, downstream. Much of the old canal and towpath were bought by the railroad less than two decades later to lay down tracks. Overall, the Blackstone Canal project, although considered wonderfully convenient by its users, was considered a major commercial failure by its investors.



It is common in New England to find aromatic Sweetfern (above) growing along old rail beds, and you might also discover the Massachusetts State Flower. The dainty half-inch Mayflower, fragrant and pinkish-white, blooms in springtime. The trail leading to the Millville Lock leads past a wooded knoll named Mayflower Hill. The quietest walkers might come upon deer, fox, rabbit, raccoons, mink, and fisher. Look for ducks and geese along the river, and listen for the notes and calls of many local songbirds. The Blackstone River Valley is part of the flyway for North America's migratory species, and the best bird watching is during the spring and fall fly-overs.

The contracts for the lock pits specified measurements of 10 feet in width and 82 feet between gates to accommodate the 75-foot canal boats. The lock floor is about 13 feet down. The walls of the lock are cut granite, at least five feet thick at the foundations. The towpath alongside the canal was about 10 feet wide.



# Walking Tour continued

## 3 The Triad Bridge

Follow the rail bed to the Triad Bridge. Only the lowest rail line, the Providence & Worcester, is still in use and the highest tier, the Grand Trunk, was never completed. But even as it is, this is evidence of an exciting idea—it works like our modern super-highway interchanges. During the late 1800s, these spans were planned so that while boats were passing below, three railroad lines—the Providence & Worcester, the Boston & Hartford, and the Grand Trunk—would crisscross at this point thus forming a tri-level bridge.

Near both riverbanks below you can see the abutments that were to hold up the highest bridge. Through the dense foliage directly across, you can see two more huge abutments on the far river bank. At this site you have sound archaeological evidence of the sophistication and complexity of the industrial transport system in Millville in the late 1800s—a factor that attracted even more commerce to the Blackstone River Valley.

*Begin the second loop at the visitor's parking area by turning right on Central Street. As you walk down to the riverbanks, you are following in the footsteps of Millville's laborers on their way to work in the mills and factories along the Blackstone River.*



The John Scott Woolen Mill, Millville, demolished.

## 4 Central Street

Not only were massive blocks quarried for industrial use in the bridges, the canal, and mills, but for the streets and homes as well. It's easy to spot granite curbstones, stone fences or posts, block retaining walls, and stone foundations all along Central Street. St. John's Episcopal Church, 1849, at the corner of Hope Street showcases the talent of the stonemasons. Architect Richard Upjohn's design for the unusual twin bell-tower adds great character to the petite gothic facade.

Between 74 and 52 Central Street you will see a mix of architectural styles in the wooden houses, spanning nearly a century of construction before 1900. The central chimney and symmetry of the Capron House, 40 Central Street, is a clue that it is a much earlier Georgian style house from around 1750. The buildings between 38 Central Street and the river were shops and storefronts until the early 1900s.

*Central Street continued on next page.*

# Walking Tour continued

## *Central Street continued.*

As you continue you will cross:

- The ruins of the Blackstone Canal.
- The west branch of the Blackstone River. Upstream, you can see exactly how the Blackstone canal and the river divide. When in use, the two remarried downriver, just past Lock # 21. In the wall to the farthest right, about thirty yards downstream, you can see a stone archway. This important detail helps you identify these ruins as the site of the former John Scott Woolen Mill, among the other foundations visible on the island and along the riverbanks.

- A tiny island in mid-stream with mill ruins—the little 2 - 1/2 acre island and this spot on the river were written up in the original colonial deeds as “the mill plac.” As early as 1727, Samuel Thompson’s gristmill ground corn from the nearby farms. The water rushing by here soon powered and provided water for processing in many more mills: saw mills, “clothier’s mills,” an axe and scythe forge, small carding shops, and a fulling mill. The area was called The Mills, and then Millville Village. Esek Pitts built and ran an early woolen mill at Millville by 1814. Later, as a result of better transportation, Millville’s industry grew to include: The John Scott Mill, Lawrence Felting, Joseph “The Rubber King” Banigan’s rubber company, and machine shops.

- The east branch of the river.
- The remains of a former mill sluiceway; and a few yards ahead...
- Central Street, the impressive Greek Revival-style home of woolen manufacturer E.S. Hall, from 1838.
- The railroad tracks—along the sides of the railroad underpass, you will see more labor-intensive stonework. The P & W, completed in 1847, is now a 400-mile system. Two freight trains run nightly, and occasionally, passenger cars travel the line for sightseeing excursions.
- On the other side of Central Street is the 1850 Longfellow School, now town offices. One of Samuel Thompson’s old millstones is a commemorative plaque at the foot of the flagpole. The odd stone tower is an “udor,” Greek for water. Believed to be built around 1890, it is a good example of state-of-the-art plumbing at the time: rainwater falling on a conical roof (now gone) filled a cedar-lined tank, gravity-feeding water through copper pipes into the house (also gone).



Margaret Carroll

# Directions

**Traveling north:** Take Interstate 295 to 146N. Take exit for Route 5 and 102. Turn right off ramp, then left onto 146A. At the light at Slatersville Plaza, turn right, bear right into Millville onto Central Street. One mile to parking. **Traveling south:** Take 146S. Take exit for Uxbridge, Route 16. At junction with Route 122, turn right. Continue, turn right onto Central Street in Millville. One-quarter mile to parking.



## Along the Way

- Free parking in Millville—corner of Central Street and Hope Street. Public restrooms at the police station—Longfellow Municipal Center, 8 Central Street.
- Another interesting site in Millville—the beautifully restored Chestnut Hill Meeting House dates back to 1769. From Central Street, cross 122 onto Lincoln Street, then immediately left onto Chestnut Hill Road, for 11 1/2 miles. On the first Sunday after Labor Day, an ecumenical service is held at the meeting house. Open for tours by appointment. No restrooms. 508-883-8466.
- Many interesting places in Millville are near or are private property. Please be respectful and do not trespass, litter, or cut plants and flowers. During hunting season in late fall and early winter, wear bright colors and do not leave the trails. There is no hunting in Massachusetts on Sundays.
- To research Millville’s interesting and historic sites— The Millville Historical Commission. The Longfellow Municipal Center. 8 Central Street, Millville, MA 01529.
- Blackstone River Valley visitor information center is located 7 miles away on Route 122 N, at the River Bend Farm in the Blackstone River and Canal Heritage State Park on Oak Street in Uxbridge, MA. Free maps, trail guides, brochures, interpretive exhibits with videos, and more. Free

parking. Bus parking. Restrooms. Free admission. Open seven days. 508-278-7604.

- Closest place to see a historic working mill museum—20 miles south of Millville at Exit 27 on Interstate Route 95—Slater Mill Historic Site, Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Free Parking. Bus 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. 800-454-2882 or 401-724-2200.

**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.**

Special thanks to Margaret Carroll, Val Stegemoen, The Millville Historical Society, The Millville Public Library, and Bob Bellrose of the U.S. National Park Service.