

Walking Tour

RUMFORD
EAST PROVIDENCE, RI



Original Rumford Baking Powder can in the collection of The Rhode Island Historical Society. Photo of John Hunt House courtesy of East Providence Historical Society. All other photos courtesy of The Rhode Island Historical Society. Stone rubbings courtesy of Anita Rafael

Find out what a Rhode Island village, a Count born in Massachusetts, and a can of baking powder have in common.*

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Rumford

The city of East Providence hugs the riverbank where the 46-mile Blackstone River becomes the Seekonk River, and finally spills into Narragansett Bay. This walking tour in the Rumford section is along a small corner of what was once an enormous two hundred acre village green, laid out according to a careful plan over 350 years ago.

The residents of East Providence, Rhode Island, playfully declare that they have lived in two states, and three towns, without ever having moved once. Originally a collection of early Massachusetts settlements which began 25 years after Plymouth, the villages united, shifted again into separate towns, and were later repartitioned upon the resolution of 226 years of boundary disputes between the two states on either side of the river.

If Roger Williams had his way, the land on this side of the river would have belonged to the Rhode Island colony all along. Banished from the Massachusetts colony for his literal interpretation of “soul liberty” and what were considered to be his “newe and dangerous opinions,” the Cambridge educated, ordained minister and his followers encamped here in 1636. Within months, they were informed that this land was still within the Plymouth colony’s patent. Williams gave up his claim on the east riverbank and moved to the west side, naming this new settlement Providence.



In Rumford you can also visit the John Hunt House. Some rooms are furnished and decorated to show the lifestyle of an 18th-century family, while other rooms are used for changing exhibitions and gift shop.

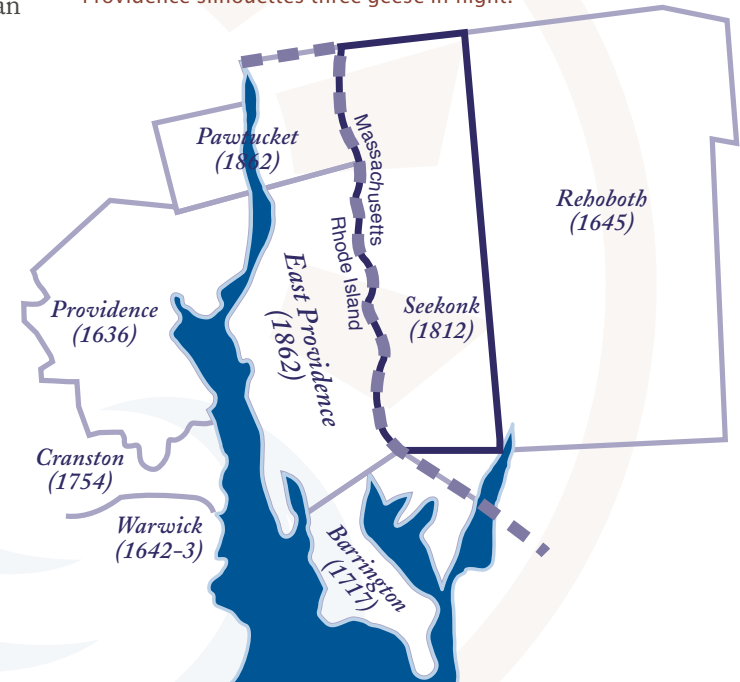
Eight years later, the Reverend Samuel Newman and his followers established a community here, remaining under the authority of Plymouth and the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Their stake of land, eight square miles or about 41,000 acres, was called Rehoboth. In the Bible, all the places named Rehoboth are by a river, or water.

By the late 1800s, the chemical works and the village surrounding it, part of the old town green, became known by the same name—Rumford.

Finally, in 1862, four neighboring communities—Rumford, Riverside, Watchemoket, and Phillipsdale, plus a former colonial farmstead now called Kent Heights—incorporated as East Providence, in the State of Rhode Island.

Because the hands of time have moved slowly across the face of this landscape, you can still see several different eras of Rumford center’s history, all within an arm’s reach as you walk a short section of the “Ring of The Green.”

Present day Rumford, Rhode Island, is part of an area first known as “Seakunke,” in Massachusetts, possibly meaning “at the river” in the Native American language. There are 29 different spellings of Seekonk in early records. Another, more popular translation was “black goose.” The seal of East Providence silhouettes three geese in flight.



Walking Tour



1 Newman Congregational Church and the “Ring of the Green”

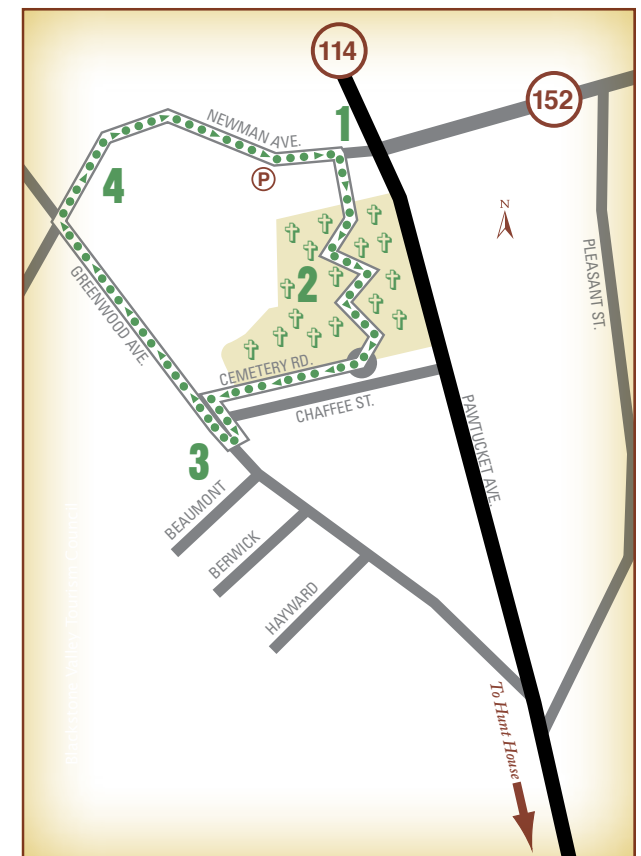
Begin your walking tour at Newman Congregational Church, at the intersection of Route 114/1A, Pawtucket Avenue and Route 152, Newman Avenue. Here, in 1643, the Reverend Samuel Newman’s congregation of about two-hundred souls established their church and organized the first division of lands which became known as the “Ring of The Green.” Surveyors laid out the house lots in a lopsided 200-acre rectangle, giving most land owners access to the river and setting aside land to build the first meeting house.

Each landholder was responsible for the construction of fencing along the border of this large central meadow where livestock grazed. Several gates were built at convenient locations, paths criss-crossed the common, and “highways” wide enough for carts encircled it.



The Rhode Island Historical Society

At the church, you are standing about in the middle of what was the ring of the green. The present church, from 1810 with later additions, is the fourth built in this same area. Nothing remains of the first three meeting houses, built in 1646, 1680, and 1716, each one successively larger and used for town meetings as well as worship.



EAST PROVIDENCE

Walking Tour continued

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Newman and Hunt Cemeteries

Cross over to the cemetery in front of the church.

The area bordered by the original house lots was so huge, that a small patch used for burials out of the whole was of no consequence. Over the years, the village green shrank as residences and businesses encroached upon it. An important part of the character of the landscape of the earliest settlement is perfectly preserved because the burial ground is mostly intact after nearly three and one-half centuries.

Family burials here tended to be laid out in rows, rather than squared-off plots, and most of the rows line up in mismatched directions. For this reason, there is no methodical way to find specific graves, so you have to practice the art of meandering a bit. To simplify maintenance, city workers moved most of the footstones in the oldest graves up alongside

the corresponding headstones, and that is the reason for the confusing big-stone, little-stone arrangement.

You will want to spend some time in this part of the cemetery, reading the epitaphs, and studying the kinships, the carving styles, and the lettering. Look for the colonial long-s, which looks like f. See if you can find the stone of Mrs. Anner Carpenter—a large square slate on the left-hand side of the dirt road, not far from the entrance. The carver, clearly an expert draftsman, misspelled her last name, leaving out the “n.” He went back and edited his error. This marker is also unusual for the twin-cherubs angled in the upper corners.

These old gravestones, as much as any written text, tell the story of the lives of Rehoboth’s colonial families. To the right, facing the road not far from the two stone-built tombs which form an aboveground L, is the oldest stone in this graveyard,



that of William Carpenter. A simple, rough-cut fieldstone about twenty inches high, it reads in rough-cut letters, “W.C., 1658.” A few rows back on the right-hand side, look for the urn-topped, 9-foot Minister’s Monument.

In this cemetery, the sequence of the three main phases of mortuary art prior to 1850 easily can be seen. First, look for slates carved with grimacing skulls and wings. These generally date from before 1790. These images suggest death and decay, life’s brevity, and the circumstances of orthodox Puritanism - hard work, hard life, and quite possibly, a hard death.

Second, look for grave markers carved with pleasant, sweet cherub faces and angel wings. These date from about 1760 to 1810. These images suggest a softening of religious views, prosperity, and optimism about life. There is a promise of a happy afterlife, redemption, and salvation. Look for double-stones, which often mark the graves of children who died within a short time of each other.

Stones with other mourning symbols— these could be simple urns or vases, weeping willow trees, or both, geometric designs, fanciful framed borders, or an ornate family coat-of-arms or heraldic crest—can date from the late 1700s in some places, but mainly occur from 1800 to 1830.

Follow the dirt road as it winds around all the way back to the farthest side of the cemetery, and exit exactly opposite where you first came in. Once you reach the paved cemetery road, turn right. Exit onto Greenwood Avenue, and turn left. Watch for traffic.



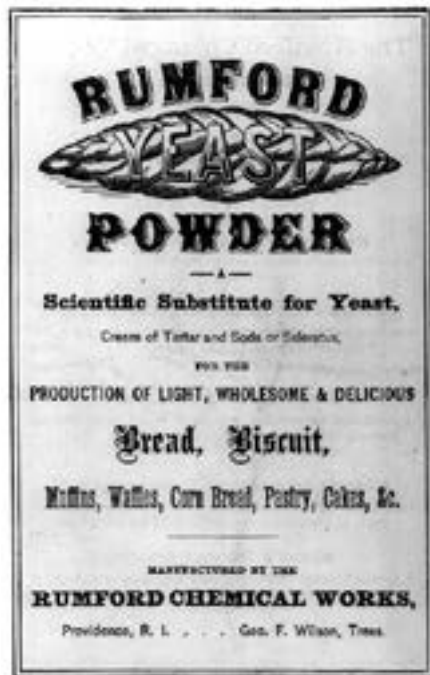
Walking Tour continued

3 The Phanuel Bishop House (c. 1770's)

The first house on the right is the Phanuel Bishop House, 150 Greenwood Avenue.

This brick-ended Georgian-style house was originally built as a two-family home. To some extent, you can “read” the formality of the floor plan from the exterior—the twin end chimneys, the central entrance, and the symmetrical design tell you that there are identical rooms off to each side of a generously sized hall with a staircase in the middle.

Some reconstructed maps suggest that at the time of the first settlement, this was the site of Newman's garrison. Because the village was so spread out, it could neither be defended as a whole, nor stockade, leaving it highly vulnerable. The people, however, could dash for cover inside the “Indian Arrow Shelter.” About sixty homesteads and forty barns and buildings on the ring of the green, including the meeting house, were torched and burned to ashes on March 28, 1676, in a swift and terrifying attack during King Philip's War.



Rumford products were so successfully marketed that at one time, the plant employed nearly 400 workers, men and women. Rumford Chemical Works published and distributed to women all over America hundreds of thousands of almanac-type pamphlets and cookbooks with recipes all made with Rumford Baking Powder—everything from soup to candy.

Walking Tour continued

4 Formerly, The Rumford Chemical Works

The industrial complex you come to on the right-hand side as you turn back along Greenwood Avenue is the former Rumford Chemical Works, makers of Rumford Baking Powder, other food products, and chemical compounds used for manufacturing.

Eben N. Horsford, a scientist, and George F. Wilson, a businessman, located their chemical plant here in 1856 on land which was once a corner of the ring of the green. They named their company Rumford because Horsford held a lecturer's position at Harvard University, endowed by Count Rumford for the "Application of Science to Useful Arts." Advertised as a highly-advanced scientific

breakthrough in cooking, the company's calcium and phosphate-based powder was a self-rising additive which simplified baking.

The two-square miles near the factory also came to be known as Rumford and was dubbed the "kitchen capitol of the world." Still standing are some 19th century frame buildings, plus a three-story brick mill from about 1895, and a five-story brick mill built in 1928. In operation here until 1966, Rumford Baking Powder is now made in Terra Haute, Indiana.

Turn right on Newman Avenue to return to the parking area.



*The answer to the riddle on the front cover is Rumford—their name is what a Rhode Island village, a Count born in Massachusetts, and a can of baking powder have in common. The Rhode Island village was named for the chemical factory, and the chemical factory, makers of Rumford Baking Powder, was named for the Count born in Massachusetts.

Who was Count Rumford? He was born Benjamin Thompson in Woburn, Massachusetts in 1753. After 1783, living as an American expatriate in Europe, he became world-renowned as a philanthropist, engineer, inventor, and scientist, particularly in the study of heat, and especially, cooking.

Directions

Traveling north or south: From Interstate 95, take Rt 195E to exit 4 for East Providence, Route 44E, Taunton Avenue. Follow 44 (it makes a one-block jag in the downtown area) until junction of Route 114/ 1A, at the Wampanoag Mall. Turn left onto Pawtucket Avenue. Follow to junction of Route 152, Newman Avenue. Turn left, free parking on left, across from Newman Congregational Church.



Along the Way

- Free parking in Rumford—intersection of Route 152, Newman Avenue and 114/1A Pawtucket Avenue, directly across from Newman Congregational Church. Public restrooms during business hours—Rumford Branch, East Providence Public Library, 1392 Pawtucket Avenue.
- Many interesting places in East Providence are near or are private property— please be respectful and do not trespass, litter, or cut plants and flowers.
- Visit a historic house museum—the East Providence Historical Society, the John Hunt House, Hunts Mills Road. East Providence. For more information on the Hunt House call 401-438-1750 or visit www.ephist.org/hunt.htm.
- Blackstone Valley Visitor's Center—175 Main Street Pawtucket. Free maps and information, videos, exhibits and more. Restrooms. Free parking. Open seven days. 401-724-2200 or 800-454-2882. Directions: Follow Route 114 North for 2 miles into Pawtucket. Visitor's Center on right across from Slater Mill.

- Closest place to see a historic working mill museum—2 miles north of East Providence on Route 114, into Pawtucket. Slater Mill Historic Site, Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Free Parking. Bus Parking. Restrooms. For hours of operation and admission prices, please visit 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. 401-724-2200 or 1-800-454-2882.

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 the Newman Congregational Church, The East Providence Public Library, The East Providence Historical Society at the Hunt House and The East Providence Chamber of Commerce.