John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Assessment
Gabrielle M. Lanier, James Madison University
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In February 2008, the National Park Service (NPS) and the Organization of American Historians (OAH) invited a group of six academics to participate in a site visit to the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor as part of a Special Resource Study. The purpose of the scholars' three-day visit was to assess the Corridor and make recommendations with respect to the Valley's national significance and its future interpretive directions. In particular, NPS and OAH representatives asked the visiting academics, according to the background statement provided by the NPS, for input in helping to "determine whether sites and associated landscape features in the Valley met the criteria for inclusion as a unit or units of the National Park System" as well as to consider "whether the resource study will continue to examine the Blackstone Valley as a whole or focus on one or more individual sites in the study area." Accordingly, the NPS and OAH asked the visiting team to focus their discussions on the following four questions:

1. *How do historians currently understand or define the Industrial Revolution in the United States?*
2a. *What important themes in American history are represented in the Blackstone Valley?*
2b. *During what periods were these themes represented in the Blackstone Valley to a significant degree?*
3. *Given the history and integrity of the BRV, should our resource evaluation focus on individual sites, an accumulation of sites, or the landscape as a whole?*

Following a brief introductory overview and a one-day tour of selected Corridor sites, the team met for the next day and a half with representatives from the NPS, the OAH, the Corridor Commission, the Massachusetts Historical Commission, the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, and Roger Williams University to discuss these questions. Between discussions, the team also made brief visits to a few additional Corridor sites. At the end of their discussions, the visiting team participated in a public forum in Whitinsville, Massachusetts to share their findings. The following report summarizes and amplifies the overall assessment of the visiting team with respect to the questions listed above.[1]

1. How do historians currently understand or define the Industrial Revolution in the United States?

As the assessment team agreed, there have been no fundamental paradigm shifts in our understanding of industrialization since the earlier scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s. Still, it may be more helpful to think of industrialization as a process rather than a particular transformative "moment" as suggested by the more apocalyptic term "industrial revolution," since industrialization both caused and was caused by change. And, as Walter Licht has emphasized, early industrialization was not uniform. The process of industrialization was uneven, complex, and diverse; there were multiple paths to industrialization. These various paths included the mill community or village, the single-industry city such as Lowell, diversified manufacturing centers such as Philadelphia, and industrial slavery in the South. The type of industrialization that emerged in the Blackstone River valley represented one of several different paths.[2]

What has changed is the focus of the industrialization story. The study of industrialization has broadened, and now embraces several new subjects. While earlier labor studies tended to focus on the community as an organizing framework, and to view workers more or less as economic actors, newer studies often focus on workers as people with their own histories. Along similar lines, there is also a growing interest in issues of race and ethnicity. Historians of industrialization, technology, and material culture have also become more attentive to issues of consumption, marketing, and demand. Increasingly, economic historians are raising questions about how financing occurred, where the manufactured goods are going, how and where they are being marketed, and where the demand for such goods is. Commodities such as cotton thread and woven cloth are thus more likely to be scrutinized as parts of broader industrial, economic, and social networks. In recent years, popular studies focusing on a single commodity and its relationship to broader networks have proliferated. Interest in de-industrialization has also increased. Scholars now are more likely to view industrialization as an ongoing process rather than a specific historical moment, and to consider de-industrialization as just one of many facets of the industrialization process. So, although the Blackstone River Valley has long stood as something of a model for the eastern industrialization process, that process is likely to be viewed more broadly today, as part of a series of regional, national, and global networks. This emerging focus on broader networks characterizes much recent scholarship.[3]

The way the story of industrialization is being told is also evolving. Jonathan Prude noted that historians now tend to toggle between two different ways of explaining industrialization. One is to focus on the various networks that knit the localities and regions together, and to view smaller local stories as parts of broader narratives. The other is to foreground the stories of certain individuals as exemplary, and to use those stories as a way of shedding light on broader issues. The focus on community that was once a staple of earlier studies is thus being superseded by this emerging focus on networks and individuals.[4]

The assessment team also addressed the question of how scholars understand the Blackstone Valley within the broader framework of industrialization. Within the context of that larger story, what makes the Blackstone Valley particularly distinctive as a region is that a specific pattern of industrialization emerged here. The kind of industrialization that happened in the Blackstone Valley was all about small-scale enterprise, whereas what emerged at Lowell was a large-scale, big-capital enterprise. Lowell was atypical; the pattern in the Blackstone Valley was much more typical of the technological diffusion and exchanges of labor that characterized the industrialization process. Consequently, any story of American industrialization that focuses primarily on Lowell will be problematic because it misses this larger story. The corridors of interrelated enterprise that emerged in the Blackstone Valley exemplified the mushrooming and interconnectedness that characterized most American industrialization. As one member of the assessment team noted, the Blackstone Valley was, in many ways, the first Silicon Valley. The presence of so many long-lasting mill villages is a very distinctive feature of industrialization in the Blackstone Valley.

2a. What important themes in American history are represented in the Blackstone Valley?

In the course of its discussions, the assessment team and the other invited participants identified several key themes that the Blackstone Valley conveys. Some of these are themes that have been identified repeatedly in earlier Corridor assessments, while some are amplifications of or new formulations of those earlier themes. The assessment team generally agreed with Michael Steinitz's summary assessment of the group's discussions:

- The Blackstone Valley tells the story of American industrialization. The story that the Valley conveys focuses not just on great innovators, but on what was more typical of the American industrialization process. The Valley constituted an American enterprise zone where multiple synergies existed. This enterprise zone emerged as an extraordinary incubator of technological innovation and convergence, and experienced a long period of florescence. Certain parts of the Blackstone Valley Corridor tell different parts of that story particularly well.

The specific themes that the assessment team identified include the following, in no particular order:

- *The process of industrialization.* Industrialization was an uneven, complex, and ongoing process. Although the Blackstone Valley saw the beginnings of industrialization as well as the early mechanization of the textile process, there was no one apocalyptic moment or "industrial revolution." Instead, there were multiple paths to industrialization and changing strategies for development. The Blackstone Valley also served as an incubator for other prominent early industries and manufacturers beyond textiles.

- *The importance of the connection between the rural hinterland and industrial development.* Agriculture and manufacturing existed in tandem with one another in the Blackstone Valley. Industrial development did not neatly supersede the rural hinterland; the two supported one another. The Blackstone Valley tells the story of the market revolution and the gradual movement from subsistence to market farming, but it also conveys the importance of the symbiosis between industry and hinterland. This symbiosis was central to the region's identity and constituted a powerful engine for the Valley's industrial development. Although town centers evolved in relation to the developing industrial centers, a level of anxiety about urbanization also prevailed.

- *The density and longevity of mill community development.* What sets the Blackstone Valley apart is the long-lasting nature of the mill villages here. Unlike the Lowell system, which was a large-scale, heavily capitalized effort that was far less typical of what happened elsewhere, the system that developed in the Blackstone Valley was important because it set the pattern for industrialization in much of the rest of America. The kind of industrialization that emerged in the Blackstone Valley was similar to what developed in Philadelphia, but was distinctive from Philadelphia and other industrializing areas because of the longevity of its mill communities.

- *The Blackstone Valley as a networked incubator of technological innovation and convergence that experiences a long period of florescence.* An unusual level of technological innovation, diffusion, and borrowing that lasted at least a century occurred in this region. This was largely driven by the presence of a networked critical mass of expertise. Innovative management techniques that emerged in the Blackstone Valley were eventually picked up elsewhere. The machinists and merchant-investors who had the skills and resources necessary to propel industrialization here were also part of broader interconnected networks. As a result of these networks, belts of interrelated enterprises with multiple synergies developed in this region.

- *The transformation and control of the cultural landscape through the persistent power of certain individuals and families.* Such transformations are readily seen throughout the Corridor, but are typified by places such as the major company town of Whitinsville. The Whitin family, which maintained and controlled Whitinsville for over 100 years, left a lasting imprint on the landscape here beginning in 1815 with the establishment of the Whitin and Fletchers Cotton Mill and later, the Whitin Machine Works. The Whitin family not only brought in Irish, Dutch, French Canadian, and Armenian workers to supply labor, but they also erected nearly a thousand worker dwellings and built or subsidized other major town institutions such as the library, town hall, schools, churches, and recreational facilities. The built environment here, as in other Blackstone Valley mill communities such as Lonsdale and Hopedale, retains the lasting imprint of nineteenth-century ideas about industrialization and social stratification.

- *The transformation of work.* The transition from farm to factory is a major theme in U.S. history that is conveyed very powerfully in the Blackstone Valley. Industrialization fundamentally transformed the nature and place of work, but also brought with it changes in economic and community relationships, lifestyles, attitudes, social and cultural values, and regional economies.

- *Working people.* The individuals who fueled industrial development in the Blackstone Valley remain central to the story. The Rhode Island system established here was one that put entire families to work. The industrialization process also witnessed changes in the labor force over time with the immigration of specific ethnic groups to the region. The kind of trans-nationalism that exists in places like Woonsocket, with its large French Canadian population, was an important outcome of such changes. In the end, the process of industrialization produced winners as well as losers.

- *The decline of industry or de-industrialization.* A resonant theme in today's era of outsourcing and globalization, de-industrialization constitutes an important facet of the industrialization process. This theme is conveyed especially strongly in the Blackstone Valley, as it was one of the first places in America to experience industrial decline. The process that began in the late nineteenth century as some firms began moving their operations south and continued through the early twentieth century with more mill closings is a part of a much larger national and global story of industrialization. The Valley thus conveys part of this national and global story in local terms.

- *The engineered river, the engineered landscape.* The Blackstone River is the present-day physical and conceptual spine of the National Heritage Corridor, but it was also the primary reason that industrialization emerged with such strength here. Water power was critical to the development of early industry. With a significant drop in elevation over the entire course of the river, the Blackstone and its larger tributaries were well situated for industrial development. The power inherent in the river permitted widespread regional development of manufacturing villages and stimulated transportation improvements. Whether by means of dams or canals, the river was manipulated in multiple ways to serve the industrializing Valley. This environmental manipulation had an enormous impact on the surrounding landscape. Because of the primacy of water power, the geography of the river also dictated where early factories could be built, which left a lasting imprint on the subsequent development of the countryside.

2b. During what periods were these themes represented in the Blackstone Valley to a significant degree?

The assessment team agreed that the Blackstone Valley's period of significance begins at the end of the eighteenth century with Slater Mill and the development of the Rhode Island system and persists into the twentieth century, probably up until the end of World War II. Cotton started to decline in the region in the 1920s and 1930s. One way to assess this period of significance is to consider the longevity of company housing. The era of the company-owned mill village persisted through the first decades of the twentieth century. The last company housing in the area was built in the 1940s, and housing remained in corporate control until just after World War II. Widespread de-industrialization began to occur after that. By 1956, Slatersville had sold off its housing. Since one of the features that underscores the Blackstone Valley Corridor's significance is this concentrated cluster of planned mill communities, the period of gradual decline of these communities helps to define the end of the Corridor's period of significance.

3. Given the history and integrity of the BRV, should our resource evaluation focus on individual sites, an accumulation of sites, or the landscape as a whole?

The Special Resource Study team agreed that ideally, the resource evaluation should focus on the landscape as a whole. Team members generally agreed that, to convey the story of industrialization in the Blackstone Valley, the resource evaluation should continue to address the landscape of the entire Corridor, while also highlighting some of the most significant individual sites within the current Corridor boundaries.

Implementing such an approach depends heavily upon emphasizing and coordinating the linkages between sites. The Blackstone River itself is the spine of the Corridor, providing a key conceptual as well as physical linkage. Other linkages such as the bike path and the canal enable visitors to move through portions of the landscape recreationally and enjoy specific sites, but also to appreciate the region's history, distinctive identity, and interconnectedness. Existing driving and walking tour brochures such as those for Slatersville, Whitinsville, Sutton, Hopedale, and the Great Road historic district work very well in this regard. So, too, do existing recreational tour packages advertised at the Slater Mill Visitor Center such as CycleBlackstone.com or PaddleBlackstone.com.

Still, such efforts might be more effective if they were more coordinated, and if there were more of them. Similarly, the existing signage identifying Corridor sites is attractive but subtle. If the resource evaluation does ultimately focus on the landscape as a whole, amplifying the signage and introducing other possible wayfinding mechanisms could help to emphasize the interconnectedness of Corridor sites to visitors.

The canal is another important physical and conceptual landscape linkage for the Blackstone Valley Corridor as well as an important part of the region's story. Although one of the original canal locks does survive in Millville, Massachusetts, the team suggested, if feasible, restoring a canal lock in a place where visitors would be likely to see it. One possible location for emphasizing the canal's importance would be near one of the existing Visitor Centers at River Bend Farm in Uxbridge, Massachusetts. A well-preserved section of canal and towpath survive there, and three sets of canal gates near the visitor center were recently restored through a partnership between the NPS and the Massachusetts State Parks Department. Since the Stanley Woolen Mill and related mill housing still stand nearby, this would be a good location to consider restoring a lock of the canal.

Another important landscape theme conveyed by the Corridor and embodied in the landscape is the importance of the connection between the rural hinterland and the mill villages. The distinctive landscape of individual farms and hilltop farming villages formed the connective tissue between the Valley's planned mill communities and mill complexes. The team suggested that visitors could also be directed to any sites within the Corridor where this distinctive landscape is particularly apparent.

Throughout the discussions, the team also agreed that one theme that is not brought out as fully as it could be in the existing Corridor was the theme of environment. Some place where the story of the manipulation of the river and its effect on the environment could be highlighted would add considerably to the visitor experience.

The assessment team was asked to consider the possibility of varying levels of NPS presence within the Corridor boundaries, and to discuss which parts of the landscape they viewed as the most important. Most members of the assessment team were reluctant to define landscape boundaries or to cite specific resources within the Corridor that they considered to be especially representative of the themes outlined above. The team agreed that the Corridor is a large entity, and a one-day tour of a few selected sites during a three-day site visit can hardly include or do justice to the many significant sites that are presently encompassed by the Corridor boundaries that the team did not see. Like the existing system of thematically-oriented visitor centers, each of which focuses on a different theme such as transportation or immigration, different historic resources within the Corridor boundaries also communicate different themes or different parts of the story to varying degrees.

With these caveats in mind, members of the team named those sites that they considered to be especially representative of the Corridor's themes. All agreed that Slater Mill was obviously critical as the place where industrial development first took root. The discussions during the site visit had continually underscored the significance of the Valley's mill communities as expressions of the Rhode Island system of manufacturing. Accordingly, one of the most significant mill communities that comes to mind is Slatersville, one of the first planned factory villages in America and one that remained a company town until well into the twentieth century. Other important mill communities and company towns include the model mill villages of Lonsdale and Hopedale, and the

large mill village of Whitinsville. Some members of the assessment team felt that the importance of the two outside anchors of the Corridor—Providence and Worcester—should be stressed. Several agreed that Woonsocket, where one of the existing visitor centers is located, was also important.

One of the distinctive features of the Corridor is its depth of visible landscape history. Unlike other large National Heritage Areas that focus on a particular period in time, such as the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields National Historic District, which focuses on Civil War battlefields and thus concentrates on a very tightly defined time period, the Blackstone Valley Corridor frames a much longer period of significance—a period of over 100 years. The scale, density and longevity of the Valley's mill communities make this region a unique and significant environment for telling the story of American industrial development. Yet, this is a complex, layered, working landscape that evolved over time, with physical evidence of multiple historical periods surviving in many places. It is also a living landscape. Visitors regularly encounter earlier landscape remnants either embedded within more modern surroundings or repurposed for twenty-first century uses. Although the Blackstone Valley's story or "interpretive line" might be complicated by this deep landscape stratigraphy, it is also considerably enriched. The depth of this landscape history encourages visitors to appreciate the layers of change and, more importantly, to value the presence of the past in the contemporary environment.

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[1] Because bad weather delayed my arrival in Rhode Island in time for the grand tour of selected Corridor sites on Thursday, I was unable to see some of the sites that the NPS selected. However, many of the same sites had been part of the Vernacular Architecture Forum's 2001 annual conference tour of the Blackstone Valley, which I did attend. Excellent overviews of several of these sites are included in the VAF tour guide for that year. See Claire W. Dempsey, Richard E. Greenwood, and Wm. McKenzie Woodward , with contributions by Robert P. Emlen, Carl R. Lounsbury and Myron O. Stachiw, *The Early Architecture and Landscapes of the Narragansett Basin, Volume II: Blackstone River Valley and Providence* (Newport, Rhode Island: Prepared for the Annual Meeting and Conference of the Vernacular Architecture Forum, April 25-29, 2001).

[2] Walter Licht discusses these various paths to industrialization in greater detail in Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 21-45.

One way to assess the way relatively recent scholarship has viewed industrialization is to examine the textbooks used in college-level surveys of U.S. history. These textbooks are often broadly indicative of the way the "master narrative" of U.S. history shifts over time, and in recent years, new scholarship has been incorporated in them with increasing rapidity. Although the scholarship reflected in current U.S. history textbooks is rarely right on the cutting edge, in the highly competitive college textbook publishing market, it is usually not too many steps behind. Authors typically begin working on revised and updated editions of popular textbooks just as a new edition is published, with publishers often releasing revised editions every few years. A brief and admittedly unsystematic survey of several recently published college-level U.S. history survey textbooks, even those with a particular focus on American invention and innovation such as *Inventing America* by Pauline Maier *et al,* underscores the team's assessment that there have been no fundamental paradigm shifts in our understanding of industrialization in recent years. Pauline Maier, Merritt Roe Smith, Alexander Keyssar and Daniel J. Kevles, *Inventing America: A History of the United States* by (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003).

[3] One of many possible examples of this increased focus on industrial workers is Stephen A. Mrosowski, Grace H. Ziesing, and Mary C. Beaudry, *Living on the Boott: Historical Archaeology at the Boott Mills Boardinghouses, Lowell, Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996). This book provides a brief but very accessible introduction to historical archaeology through an examination of the excavations undertaken at the Boot boardinghouses. The archaeological findings also illuminate aspects of workers' lives that were previously poorly understood, such as personal hygiene, diet, levels of economic freedom, and standards of living. Another example that focuses on the built environment and spatial relationships experienced by workers is Kingston Wm. Heath, *The Patina of Place: The Cultural Weathering of a New England Industrial Landscape* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001). Heath studies

workers' housing, and particularly the New England three-decker, as an index to change and cultural and regional identity in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Both studies exemplify the sharpened focus on workers as individuals with their own histories.

Consumerism and consumption patterns have also drawn increasing attention from material culture scholars in the last twenty years. For a good general overview of material culture historiography dealing with consumerism, see Ann Smart Martin, "Makers, Buyers, and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework" *Winterthur Portfolio* 28 nos. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 1993), 141-57. For a recent study by the same author that exemplifies the ways in which local consumption patterns were part of broader, interrelated national and global networks in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, also see Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). Examples of more recent popular books that place a specific commodity within broader regional and global networks are Pietra Rivoli, *The Travels of a T-shirt in the Global Economy: An Economist Examines the Markets, Power, and Politics of World Trade* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), Mark Kurlansky, *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* (New York: Walker and Co., 1997), Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York: Penguin, 2003, 2002), and Barbara Freese, *Coal: A Human History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Publishers, 2003).

[4] The burgeoning of the literature in recent years on the presentation of history in public places and the creation of public memory may also eventually affect the way the industrialization story is commonly told. Two recent studies of Lowell National Historical Park illustrate the ways in which some scholars have attempted to reexamine how the industrialization narrative plays out in the public realm. See for example Cathy Stanton, *The Lowell Experiment: Public History in a Postindustrial City* (Amherst and Boston: The University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), and Martha Norkunas, *Monuments and Memory: History and Representation in Lowell, Massachusetts* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002).