

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

BLACKSTONE

Report Date: 1983

Associated Regional Report: Central Massachusetts

Reconnaissance Survey Town Reports, produced for MHC's Statewide Reconnaissance Survey between 1979 and 1987, introduce the historical development of each of the Commonwealth's municipalities. Each report begins with an historic overview, a description of topography, and political boundaries. For the purposes of the survey, the historic period has been subdivided into seven periods: Contact (1500–1620), Plantation (1620–1675), Colonial (1675–1775), Federal (1775–1830), Early Industrial (1830–1870), Late Industrial (1870–1915), and Early Modern (1915–1940/55). Each report concludes with survey observations that evaluate the town's existing historic properties inventory and highlight significant historic buildings, settlement patterns, and present threats to these resources. A bibliography lists key secondary resources.

Town reports are designed for use together with a series of town maps that demarcate settlement patterns, transportation corridors and industrial sites for each historic period. These maps are in the form of color-coded, polyester overlays to the USGS topographic base map for each town on file and available for consultation at MHC. For further information on the organization and preparation of town reports, readers should contact MHC.

Users should keep in mind that these reports are now two decades or more old. The information they contain, including assessments of existing knowledge, planning recommendations, understanding of local development, and bibliographic references all date to the time they were written. In some cases, information on certain topics was not completed. No attempt has been made to update this information.

Electronic text was not available for digital capture, and as a result most of the reports have been scanned as PDF files. While all have been processed with optical character recognition, there will inevitably be some character recognition errors.

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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: July, 1983

COMMUNITY: Blackstone

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Blackstone is located in the extreme southeast corner of Worcester County. Roughly the shape of a square about 3.5 miles on a side, the town is crossed by two rivers and a large stream: the Blackstone River which flows through the southwest corner of the town, and two of its tributaries, the Mill River and Fox Brook. The former flows north to south through the eastern third of the town and joins the Blackstone in Woonsocket, R.I. Several former mill ponds stretch along the Mill River from the Woonsocket border to East Blackstone.

The town's surface rises to the north and northwest from the Blackstone and Mill River Valleys to more than 400 feet above sea level. The soils are composed largely of the glacially formed and deposited Gloucester series derived from granite and gneiss. They range from stony fine sandy loam in the western half of the town to fine sandy loam in the Mill River Valley and North of Fox Brook. The latter soils, often excessively drained, are well suited to pasture and mowing and supported a number of dairy farms. Grains and vegetables were also grown, but few commercial orchards were developed in this area. Currently, large gravel and sand pits mine the extensive sandy hills. The stony loam of the western half of the town is better agricultural soil and supported extensive dairies and market gardens as well as several commercial orchards.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Part of original Mendon grant, 1667. Established as south parish, 1769. Established as town of Blackstone from part of Mendon, 1845. Part established as Millville, 1916.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Industrial-suburban town at the edge of the Woonsocket, Rhode Island urban area set in the Blackstone and Mill River Valleys as a peripheral area of Mendon ca. 1705. Dispersed 18th century upland agricultural settlement by diverse, nonconformist population. Sufficient numbers to form south parish, 1769. Growth and development of textile industry after 1810 in Blackstone Village area with secondary concentration at East Blackstone. Further growth stimulated by development of Blackstone Valley as regional canal-railroad transportation corridor. Immigrant labor force predominantly Irish. Late 19th century growth of neighboring Woonsocket stimulates fringe cemetery and streetcar suburb development in southeast, later extended as post-1940 automobile suburbs. Only fragmentary survival of industrial complexes but clusters of 19th century worker housing remain both in Blackstone and East Blackstone and the general residential-institutional-commercial structure of Blackstone Village remains intact, though deteriorating.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

Blackstone and Mill River Valley corridors and northwest highlands. Conjectured Mill River trail on Elm Street. Conjectured southwest trail (Lincoln Street) across Hop and Fox Brooks with branch to Blackstone River Falls (Blackstone Street).

B. Settlement Patterns

The area now Blackstone served as an area for seasonal hunting and gathering from the larger base camp located to the west, now in Uxbridge. The Mill River in the east, and the Blackstone in the south, provided sites for fishing and agriculture and therefore, were used more intensely than the area to the northwest. It is not clear how proximity to the Narragansett and Wompanoag "borders" may have effected density and use.

C. Subsistence Patterns

Fishing, particularly during anadromous runs in the Blackstone of particular importance. Some agriculture on terraces, hunting in uplands.

D. Observations

The number of sites located during the Rt 146 survey in Uxbridge, etc., to the west, indicates a density of sites far greater than has been predicted in the literature for this inland area.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Contact period trails continue in use.

B. Population

No Information.

C. Settlement Patterns

The area now Blackstone was the southeastern portion of the large Mendon grant. No permanent settlement by colonials during this period. Formation of a Christian community at Waentuck to the west in Uxbridge may have reduced native use in the region.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Early period routes continue in use. Rehoboth Road (Elm Street) improved by 1698. East/west corridor paths develop (Bellingham Road, Summer Street, Milk Street).

B. Population

Few figures available because part of Mendon.

While most colonists of Mendon clustered in the north part of the town, by 1722 enough had gathered in the south so that school teaching was required in what is now Blackstone and its daughter town, Millville to the east. By 1766 these two received semi-independent status as Third or South Parish Mendon. The meetinghouse location, in the west, Millville, and their inability to settle ministers, contributed to a failure of the area to become the town focus.

D. Economic Base

Agriculture provides primary employment with best land in Mill River Valley for grains and pasturage in the north. As part of Mendon, Pruitt characterizes it as an Egalitarian Farm community. Mills on the Mill River by 1700.

E. Architecture

Few structures remain standing from the Colonial period. A small number of two-story, five-bay center chimney plans and a one-story, five-bay center chimney plan were observed. Additional two-story, center chimney houses were noted but were impossible to date accurately and could be either eighteenth or early nineteenth century.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A Transportation Routes

Colonial roads remain in use. North/south connector to Blackstone River power sites established (Blackstone Street, Mendon Street). Main Street laid out. Blackstone Canal opened 1828.

B Population

Still no figures available but population growth of parent town Mendon due primarily to industrial development in this area: in that town total farmers grew by only 35 between 1820 and 1840, while manufacturing employees grew from 199 to 688. The growth here is reflected in Mendon's school districts, seven of eleven located in the south. With population growth in the villages of Blackstone and East Blackstone came church formation: Quakers in 1812 followed by Free Will Baptists in 1822. The Congregational second parish, located in what is now Millville, called no ministers after sharing with Mendon to 1812.

C. Settlement Patterns

Low density, dispensed agricultural settlement until industrial nucleations develop along Blackstone and Mill rivers after ca. 1810. Cross-roads nucleations develops at Five Corners. Friends meetinghouse built in Northeast (1812). East Blackstone and Blackstone textile manufacturing factories built 1809. Second

East Blackstone mill built 1817. Waterford Village (later part of Blackstone Village) mills built 1825, 1828. Residential/institutional cluster on Blackstone Street near Main Street with meeting house (ca. 1830). Worker housing on St. Paul Street.

D. Economic Base

In the late 18th century Blackstone, still a part of Mendon, was predominantly an agricultural community sending its produce of hay, grains, meat, and livestock, farm produce, lumber, and potash to Providence merchants in return for imported and manufactured goods. The large number of potential water privileges along the town's rivers lay largely unimproved except for a saw and grist mill in East Blackstone at the site of an early 18th century iron forge.

The first two decades of the 19th century launched Blackstone into the Industrial Revolution as manufacturing became firmly established. In 1804 the mercantile firm of Brown and Ives and several other prominent Providence merchants purchased 260 acres at a falls on the Blackstone River above Pawtucket. The stone cotton spinning mill measure 211 feet by 40 feet and by 1820 the Blackstone Manufacturing Co. complex included a dye house, grist mill, saw mill, machine shop, bleaching, stone store, boarding house, and housing for employees. By 1825 a second wood mill was added and the Village contained 25 company-built dwellings, a school, two stone structures and barns and sheds.

Less than one mile downstream, Welcome and Darius D. Farnum built a satinet mill at what was to become the village of Waterford. A former overseer at Slater's Pawtucket mill, Welcome Farnum had earlier operated mills in Wrentham and South Uxbridge while Darius operated a successful mill in Woonsocket. A second mill to supply cotton warp was completed in 1828.

To the north along the Mill River, a third manufacturing district grew at East Blackstone. At the site of an 18th century forge and grist mill, a cotton mill was erected in 1809 by Seth Kelley and James Paine. Less than half mile downstream the Paine and Ray machine shop which produced textile machinery, was established in 1823 and in 1828 two more cotton mills, one frame, one brick, were erected. At Walsh Pond a cotton mill was built prior to 1830.

The construction of the Blackstone Canal through Waterford and Blackstone where there were located locks, greatly enhanced the situations of these villages and their industries. Its construction and easement through the Farnum's in Waterford prompted them to build their 1828 cotton mill, grist mill, and a new raceway utilizing water from the canal to power the mill.

A fourth area of industrial activity arose at the village of Millville, several miles upstream on the Blackstone River. There textile manufacturing commenced in 1814 (see Millville town report for further information). By 1830 the area which later became

Blackstone contained 8 cotton mills, 2 woolen mills, 3 sawmills and grist mill.

E. Architecture

Residential: Small numbers of one-and two-story center chimney plans survive. One double chimney, five-bay house was observed. A two-story, seven-bay asymmetrical brick house is located on Main Street at the junction with Blackstone Street. The brick house is located on Main Street at the junction with Blackstone Street. The central entrance has a fanlight and the chimneys are situated in the front walls.

Institutional: Quaker meetinghouse built in 1812 is located in northern section of town on Elm Street. By 1790, a schoolhouse has been built at Five Corners (junction of Blackstone, Providence, Farm, Milk, and Handy Road (nonexistent)).

Industrial: A cotton mill is constructed in 1809. Early mill buildings are frame, but shift to stone structures likely by end of period. The three-story granite building on Main Street at Church Street, part of the Blackstone Manufacturing Company, was probably erected late in the Federal period or in the first years of the Early Industrial period.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

Railroad connections established through Blackstone Valley corridor with Providence and Worcester Railroad (later Boston, Hartford and Eire) opened to Blackstone from the east 1849, with connections to New York, 1854. N/S Airline through East Blackstone completed in 1868.

B. Population

With its incorporation in 1845, (including Millville) Blackstone took a majority of its parent town, Mendon's, population. Growth during the period was irregular: the first available figure, for 1850 is 4391, growth took place during the next decade, to 5453 in 1860, dipping to 4857 in 1865, climbing again to 5421 in 1870.

Immigrants made up a sizeable portion of the town's population as high as 45.3% in 1855. Throughout the period the Irish dominated among immigrant groups. Masses were available by 1835, and St. Paul's Church was formed in 1850.

Among Yankee Protestants, reform movements flourished partially in response to rapid growth and immigration. Concern over the expansion of the manufacturing sector was high, 1/3 of the population was described as transient, grog shops on the rise and a lock-up discussed between 1853 and its establishment in 1870. The Blackstone Co. formed and financed a Congregational church in 1841 and a Methodist Society formed in 1847 absorbed a short-lived Presbyterian group. At the same time voluntary associations

multiplied, Odd Fellows in 1840, Masons in 1856, Good Templars in 1869.

Life in mills fraught with difficulties, however, including two outbreaks of smallpox, 1850 and 1869. A strike and mill closings in 1858 reflected multiple votes and reversals on abolition of school districts between 1849 and 1970; this debate, which culminates in the loss of local control of the schools has been viewed as an example of conflict between working and middle class interests.

C. Settlement Patterns

Continued industrial development in Blackstone with secondary growth at East Blackstone. Company town (Blackstone Manufacturing Company) develops at Blackstone with worker housing neighborhoods, churches, commercial buildings, and a segregated, high income cluster. Textile factory enlargements 1841, 1845, 1847, 1854. Waterford Village mills expansion 1835 (with 1843, 1864 construction over Rhode Island line). Worker housing clusters (duplex cottage) on Blackstone Street, Saint Paul/Farnum Street, Main Street (south side), and area south of rail corridor. Dispersed institutional development with Congregational Church (1836). Baptist Church (1841) north of river, Catholic Church (1850) south. Town house (1849) far north of manufacturing area on Mendon Street. Commercial focus on Bridge Street south of Main (across river from railroad junction) with Blackstone Block (1849). Union Hotel (1853). Institutional cluster on Mendon Street with high school (1863) library (ca. 1870) near Congregational Church. High income cluster nearby.

D. Economic Base

The prosperity of the 1820s continued through the 1830's and 1840's stimulated first by the Blackstone Canal, opened in 1828, and later by the Providence and Worcester Railroad which replaced the canal in the late 1840s. The Norfolk and Worcester Railroad opened railroad communication to Boston in 1849, brought to Blackstone largely through the efforts of Welcome Farnum. Many of the town's civic and commercial buildings were erected during this period: the Congregational Church (1836) erected by the Blackstone Manufacturing Co., a Free Will Baptist Church (1841) the Arcade (1843), Town House (1845), Lincoln House (1847), Blackstone Block (1849), and Union Hotel (1853). The Blackstone Chronicle was established in 1848, and in 1849 the Blackstone Savings Bank and Worcester Co. Bank were incorporated. By 1850 the two villages of Waterford and Blackstone had grown together and joined into one entity.

The expansion of the manufacturing establishments allowed this growth and prosperity. Additions to the Blackstone Manufacturing Company-owned plant and new mill construction occurred in 1841-45, 47, and -54; Company-owned housing numbered 70 buildings by 1839.

The firm was incorporated in 1841 with a capital stock of \$500,00. At Waterford, the Farnums continued to expand their

facilities also. In 1837, a four story brick mill, 400 feet by 51 feet was completed on the Rhode Island side of the border. The longest mill of its kind in the country, it contains 22 sets of machinery in the production of very fine broadcloths. At least one of the other mills, ran by Evans and Seagrave in the 1850s, produced cheap, coarse, mixed woolen and cotton cloth for sale to the Southern states as clothing for slaves. In East Blackstone, the three cotton mills and machine shop continued to operate through the end of the period. Expansion there halted after the initial spurt of growth in the 1820s and 1830s.

A depression in 1857, the failure of Welcome Farnum, and a strike in 1858 at the Waterford Woolen Mills temporarily halted Blackstone's prosperity. However, improved economic conditions brought renewed growth. In 1859, Harris Dam and Pond #1 Waterford Mill was burned in 1865 but immediately rebuilt. In 1867, the first iron bridge in the town was erected and in 1868 the Boston and New York Railroad bed was laid. A number of smaller industries were introduced during this period and included saddle, harness, and trunk manufactories, a cordage manufactory, glue and soapworks, two bakeries, a box mill, wagon manufactory, and tin ware shop.

The growth of manufacturing villages in Blackstone, Woonsocket, and Uxbridge provided an expanding market to the farmers of Blackstone. Apple orchards, market gardens, and crops of cabbage, squash, carrots, grains, and potatoes were grown on Blackstone's 133 farms. Dairying was gaining in importance as 26,000 gallons of milk were sold in 1865 and butter production decreased by one half from 1855. More hay, which supported the raising of beef cattle, swine, and the dairy herd. In 1865, 350,000 lbs. of beef, 37,000 lbs. of pork, and nearly 14,000 lbs of veal were slaughtered.

E. Architecture

Residential: Five-bay center chimney, one-story dwellings continue to be popular, but only one two-story example was observed. Double chimney houses and side-passage plans appear more frequently; two end chimney houses were also noted. In Blackstone Village, the Blackstone Manufacturing Company worker housing consists of Greek and Italianate period dwellings. Two-story, double chimney units vary from five to eight bays in width, with some five-bay examples clustered on the south side of Main Street at Church, having the gable end to the street. Six-bay, center chimney structures also noted as were five-bay gable end and side passage duplexes. On Mendon Street hill above Main Street are a two-story side-passage Second Empire house and a similar Italianate-detailed residence which were the homes of mill superintendents. Both retain carriage houses.

Institutional: The Congregational meetinghouse (now Blackstone Federated Church) was built by the Blackstone Manufacturing Company in 1836 and is a gable end Greek Revival Structure with paneled pilasters and corner blocks at the windows and is surmounted by square tower. The Free Will Baptist Church was

erected in 1841. In 1850, a granite Gothic Revival Roman Catholic Church was erected. A one-story brick school pre-1857 survives in East Blackstone. In the center, the 1865 school between Church and Mendon Streets is a two-story, four-bay gable end Italianate structure. The two entrances have surrounds supporting a full entablature; brackets, hood moulds, and paneled pilasters adorn the building and a cupola sits atop the gable roof. The Masonic Temple (60'x32') was built in 1870, and its gable end fronts on Main Street displaying brackets, hood moulds, and paneled pilasters. The 1845 Town Hall which measured 70'x 50' is no longer standing.

Commercial: The brick Blackstone Block was erected in 1849. The Lincoln House was built the same year and in 1853 the three-story, five-bay gable end granite Union Hotel was constructed.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

By early 1900s street railway service is established through town from Woonsocket to Uxbridge and points north (Blackstone Street, Main Street). In addition, a Woonsocket line to Bellingham passes through the Southeast corner of town.

B. Population

Growth continues to be fluctuating in the town: lowest point is reached at 4640 in 1875, highest point 6138 in 1890, and 5689 at the end of the period. Although the foreign-born becomes a smaller portion of the population, down to 29.5% in 1915, Canadians overtake the Irish at the close of the period. Other groups include the English, Swedes, and later Poles and Italians. The number of manufacturing employment increases from 861 to 1240 among males while agricultural employment is more stable 213 to 174. Blackstone Village was the location of the town's population while East Blackstone languished, numbering only 304 in 1895 when the total population, without Millville, amounted to 3523.

C. Settlement Patterns

Continued residential expansion and infilling, though mill fires in the 1870s diminish industrial activity for a time. Development along the north side of Main Street, led by Masonic Building (1870). Residential construction on east side of Blackstone Street south of Main Street. Extension north of high income corridor on Mendon Street. Saint Paul Church enlarged with tower and bell (1872). Southeast area develops as a fringe cemetery belt for Woonsocket. In addition, by the 1890s part of the area (east of Harris Pond) is surveyed for speculative housing development as a street car suburb along the Rathburn Street axis.

D. Economic Base

The 1870s and 80s saw the further development and maturation of the community, but little expansion in its economic base. Several

new iron and stone arch bridges over the Blackstone River were built at Waterford. In 1882, a new iron bridge replaced the one built in 1867, and the New York and New England Railroad replaced all its wood bridges with iron ones. A new stone bridge over the Blackstone was built near the Union House in 1884.

A number of mills were lost to fires during the 1870s. among them the East Blackstone Sattinet Mill of John C. Scott, located on Walsh Pond (1874) and the Waterford #3 Mill (Built 1825, burned 1877). By 1898 two cotton mills at East Blackstone had ceased operation and were removed

Recognizing the maturity of their industrial base and the loss of several firms, a commission to encourage the establishment of new manufacturing firms in the town was created in 1880, offering five year tax abatements for investments over \$50,000. One of their successes was the attraction of the Woonsocket Rubber Company to the village of Millville.

Textiles and related industries dominated manufacturing in Blackstone throughout the period. In 1875 they accounted for over 80% of the \$2,209,000 value of manufactured goods. By 1895 the value of these goods increased to more than \$3 million and 90% of the total. Of the 28 manufacturing firms listed in 1895, 12 were involved in textiles, clothing, and related industries.

Despite the increase in production values, the textile industry was troubled with many strikes and long stretches when mills sat empty during the 1890s. Ownership of the Waterford mills changed many times after Evans and Seagrave closed operations in 1893. The #2 Mill burned in 1897 and the #1 Mill was closed for 5 years before reopening in 1899 as the newly organized Saranac Worsted Mill.

In 1904 Blackstone suffered another serious loss to its industrial and tax base, as the Blackstone Manufacturing Company moved its facilities just over the border into North Smithfield, R.I. The move was caused by the raising of taxes by the town of Blackstone and the Company's refusal to comply with payment. As a result, all the old mills on the Massachusetts side, including the original 1809 stone mill, were torn down, and just over the line in R.I. a new three story mill was erected. Although the town lost the taxes that would have been paid by the company, the town's residents continued to supply the work force for the mill. The loss also accounts for Blackstone's virtual disappearance from industrial statistics as a major manufacturing town.

Blackstone's agricultural products continued to steadily increase in value into the early 20th century as the population of the surrounding mill villages and of Woonsocket increased. The greatest increase occurred in dairy products. In 1975 91,000 gallons worth \$18,000 were produced up from 26,000 gallons in 1865. By 1895 nearly 200,00 gallons of milk were sold, valued at over \$33,000. The value of dairy products increased from \$21,000 and 23% of the total value of agricultural products in 1875 to \$59,000 in 1905 while still only 25% of the total, an indication

of the overall strength of agriculture in Uxbridge. Poultry and eggs and market gardening also increased, each comprising 10% of total agricultural goods in 1905. The 140 firms listed in 1903 showed at least a 50% increase in property values over those of 1895, while average value of products per acre increased between 25% to 60%. Meat production declined drastically from the more than 400,000 pounds of beef, pork, and veal dressed in 1865. By 1885 the amount of dressed meat prepared in the town totaled under 73,000 lbs. The quantity continued to decrease into the 20th century as more farmers focused on more profitable cash crops. Directly related was a decrease in the relative importance of hay and fodder as more farmers focused on more profitable cash crops. Directly related was a decrease in the relative importance of hay and fodder as a crop, dropping to less than 17% of the total value of agricultural goods by 1905.

E. Architecture

Little significant development during the late Industrial period. Traditional two-story gable ruffed house types and side-passage plans continue throughout the period with modest Queen Anne and Colonial Revival details. A very small number of bungalow types and Four Square plans were noted. Three deckers observed infrequently.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Route-

Street car lines are abandoned by the 1920s and local roads are improved as auto highways. Main Street becomes part of an important regional highway from Worcester/Northbridge to Providence (Route 122). Alternate routes north to Mendon (Blackstone Street, Mendon Street) are improved by the mid-1930s.

B. Population

Millville , consisting of the town's western third, became independent in 1916, and took approximately of the Population. Blackstone itself continued to fluctuate in size, low in 1920 at 4299, highest in 1925 at 4802, and 4566 in 1940.

C. Settlement Patterns

Continued single and multifamily residential development in southeast corner as fringe suburbs of Woonsocket, with further infilling and expansion along Rathburn Street axis. Further suburb development west of Farm Street and south of railroad. Town Hall relocates to Saint Paul Street, south of river.

D. Economic Base

Post World War I recovery briefly reinvigorated Blackstone's sagging economy and the Blackstone Manufacturing Company and Saranac Mills, part of American Woolen Company, prospered and increased their capitalization to almost \$1 million each. In

1928, a new mill was erected in East Blackstone, the East Blackstone Knitting Company, but it burned the next year. The town lost more than 1000 residents during this period as every textile mill in the town either burned or went out of business, leaving no manufacturing within Blackstone's borders by 1940. Most of its inhabitants were forced to seek work in the still thriving Rhode Island textile mills and towns.

Few statistics regarding Blackstone's agricultural production during this period are available.

E. Architecture

Little evidence of significant growth in this period.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Very Poor. Only building, the Union Hotel, has been inventoried.