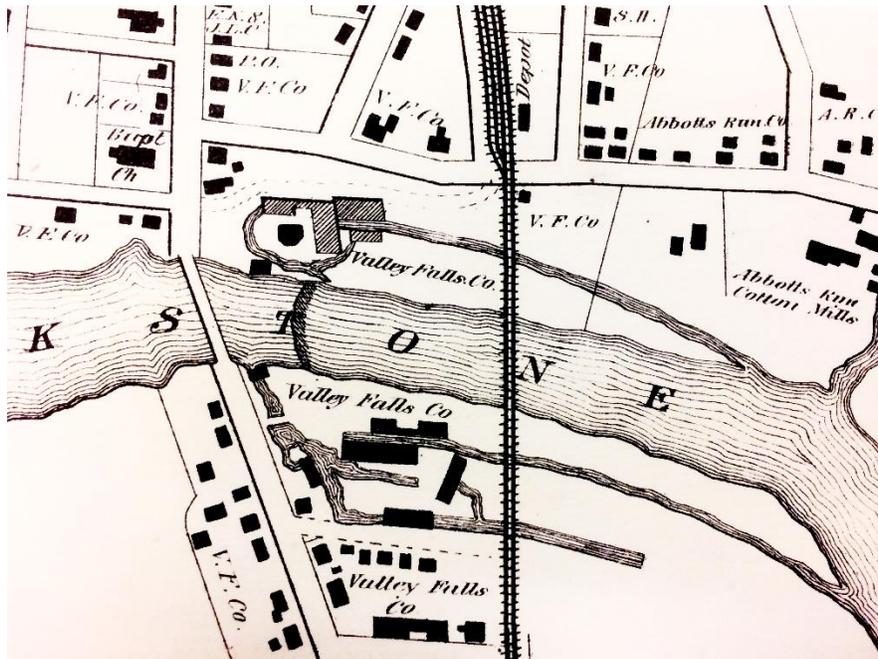


Valley Falls Heritage Park

Conservation and Management Plan

2020-2025



Jeffrey Mutter, Mayor
Planning Department
Department of Public Works
Blackstone River Watershed Council
Cumberland Conservation Commission

February 15, 2020

Executive Summary

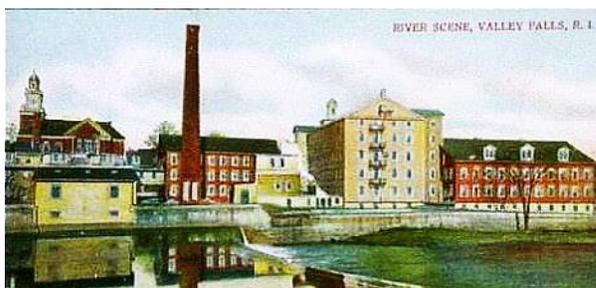
Located on the Blackstone River in the heart of Valley Falls, Heritage Park is a spectacular adaptive reuse of the remnants of the Valley Falls Company, demolished in the early 1930's. Visitors can walk across the foundations of the hydro powered mill, picnic on benches entirely surrounded by the churning Blackstone River. A \$1.7 million reclamation project by RIDEM, RIDOT, FHWA, the Blackstone River Valley Heritage Corridor Commission and the Town of Cumberland in the early 1990's included a installing a collection of interpretive signs to educate visitors about the American Industrial Revolution structures that once stood on the site.

Visual access into the park is impeded by vegetative overgrowth. The inner elements of the area, such as the remaining waterway arches, grassy picnic area and walking paths are surrounded by thickets of ivy and other fast-growing groundcover. Low-hanging tree limbs, and weed patches rooted along several granite foundation blocks need to be pruned or cut, consistent with the Vegetation Plan approved by DEM in 1991. It is therefore recommended an Earth Day cleanup be conducted every March and November.

Physical access to the park is also impeded by a large, circular (cylindrical) granite block located near the Gate House Overlook. It should be relocated elsewhere and replaced with removable bollards to enable large equipment to move into the park to aid with overgrowth maintenance, and ultimately to service special events at the park.

Other park elements are also in need of attention: vandalized interpretive signs are in need of replacement or repair; graffiti needs to be removed; the interpretive sign frames and steel fencing are in need of touch up painting; the benches close to the street and on the entrance walkway should be sanded (or power-washed) and oiled. The historic Shea Bridge (ca. 1886) relocated from Smithfield in 1994 needs to be cleaned and an interpretive sign reinstalled.

With this Plan, the Town enters a partnership with the Friends of the Blackstone, Cumberland Land Trust and others to maintain and improve and Heritage Park. Proactive management of this valuable public space will engender pride and increased use by residents of Valley Falls and all of Cumberland.



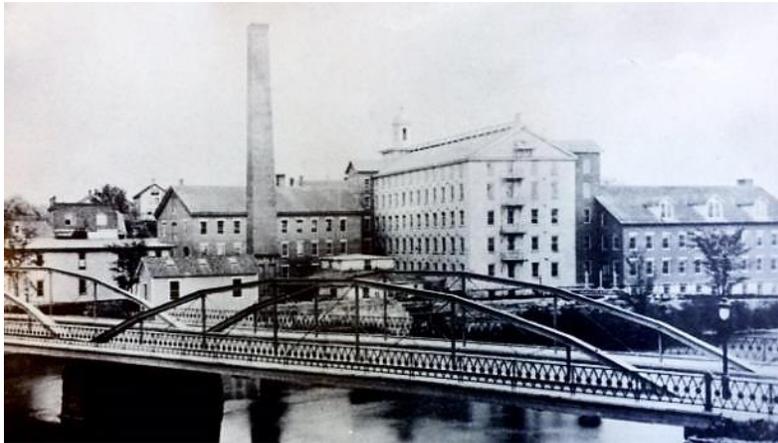
Ca. 1900



Valley Falls Heritage Park vision rendering 1992

A Glimpse Into History: Heritage Park

Valley Falls Heritage Park is built upon the remnants of the Valley Falls Company textile mill. It is likely a cotton mill first occupied the site around 1813. Owned by the Chace Family, the thriving textile complex at one point manufactured cotton cloth filled with gunpowder for ammunition in World War I. The company ceased production at the beginning of the Great Depression and the buildings structures were disassembled in the 1930's to avoid property taxes.



Valley Falls Company mill ca. 1890

Ironically, the Valley Falls Company ended up being a forerunner to Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway:

"Buffett began to buy into Berkshire Hathaway in the 1960s, but the company traces its roots to the late stages of the Industrial Revolution in New England, and a textile business called the Valley Falls Company. It was originally founded in 1839 in Cumberland, Rhode Island, by a former carpenter turned industrialist named Oliver Chace, and his sons Harvey and Samuel B. Chace. The two brothers were ardent abolitionists; Samuel's wife, Elizabeth, even ran a stop on the Underground Railroad for escaped slaves..."

Chace had learned about the textile industry by working under an early immigrant American entrepreneur from England, named Samuel Slater. Slater, in turn, established his first mill in the United States after memorizing plans for mills and machinery in England--and thus smuggling them into the United States. While this was a great boon for America, it was against British law and didn't exactly make him a hero in Great Britain, where Slater was reportedly known afterward as "Slater the Traitor..."

Chace died in 1852, and his sons and others continued running Valley Falls Company and other interests for decades afterward. In 1929, Valley Falls Company merged with a Massachusetts textile company and took a new name: Berkshire Fine Spinning Associates. The company took on its modern name in 1955, after another merger--this time with the Hathaway Manufacturing Company." (Inc. Magazine "Ten Surprising Facts about Warren Buffet's Company")

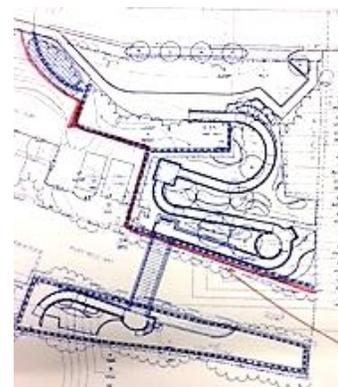
The property lay fallow behind chain link fencing until the Cumberland Historic District Commission and the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission (BVNHCC) championed a vision for the adaptive reuse of the historic mill remnants on the site as a park. RIDEM transferred the land to the Town in 1988 and provided initial funding for its restoration. In the early 1990's Cumberland partnered with the BVNHCC, RIDOT, RIDEM and the Federal Highway Administration to transform the site into a fine public park which celebrates the American Industrial Revolution. This \$1.7 million adaptive reuse project (1991-1995) included the installation of a collection of interpretive signs to inform visitors about the history, people, structures and mechanical features of the Valley Falls Company mill.



The park was designed by Don Leighton and constructed by DARE, Inc. The construction plans for Valley Falls Heritage Park included the installation of two historic bridges to span the gaps between foundation sections.

The \$300,000 first phase, completed in the fall of 1992, included clearing and landscaping much of the site, building stone dust walkways and installing railings, architectural lighting, benches and tables. The second phase included installing interpretive signs designed by Leighton and installed using a \$90,000 grant from the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission (Providence Journal, 1993).

The third phase was installing the historic Shea Bridge (1886), located in the adjacent to the Providence and Worcester railroad bridge. While several thousand wrought iron, lenticular-truss design bridges were manufactured in the U.S. between 1870 and 1900, the Shea bridge is one of only two remaining in Rhode Island. The fifty-foot span was disassembled from its previous location on Stillwater Road in Smithfield and relocated, piece by piece, to the new park. The relocation took three years. State and federal agencies contributed \$72,000 for J.H. Lynch Construction Company to relocate the bridge and with a \$237,500 RIDEM grant, the Town paid to reassemble the structure (Woonsocket Call, 10/29/1994).



A final phase-the installation of another historic bridge to span the Blackstone for pedestrians-was never built. Original construction 1992 photos (below) documented the project's progress.



The canals and sluices which previously fed water turbines now lie exposed for visitors to see. Within the park, a visitor is surrounded by rushing water. Much of the early nineteenth century granite foundation architecture remains intact.

Park is a dream come true



PARTNERS

Town of Cumberland

Planning Department. Drafts plans, prepares grant applications, is Town's point of contact with federal and state agencies, NGO's and other municipalities. In late 2017 applied for a Certified Local Government grant to prepare a National Register of Historic Places nomination for Town Hall (1894), Valley Falls Post Office (1890) and Heritage Park.

Public Works. The Highway Division services the Town's streets, highways, sidewalks, bridges, watercourses, and storm drains. The Division is capable of performing capital projects in Heritage Park, and will haul brush that has been cleared from the site and placed on the street for pick up.

Conservation Commission. The Conservation Commission makes recommendations to the Town Council for the protection of the Town's natural resources.

Blackstone River Watershed Council/Friends of the Blackstone

The Council's mission is "To restore, enhance and preserve the physical, historical and cultural integrity of the Blackstone River, its watershed and its eco-system, through public advocacy, education, recreation, stewardship...Our programs are dedicated to protecting, preserving and enhancing the natural habitat of local river wildlife and creating recreational programs for the local residents to enjoy... [and] provide opportunities to volunteer, including cleanups, education and work with local municipalities to bring this great river and its surrounding watersheds back to its natural and majestic state." (website <http://blackstoneriver.org>)

Blackstone River Heritage Corridor, Inc.

Network organization supporting local sites with branding and grant opportunities (website: <https://blackstoneheritagecorridor.org/>)

Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park -National Park Service

Established in 2014, the Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park helps preserve, protect, and interpret the nationally significant resources that exemplify the industrial heritage of the Blackstone River Valley. The park supports the preservation, protection, and interpretation of the urban, rural, and agricultural landscape features of the region that provide an overarching context for the industrial heritage of the Blackstone River Valley. (<https://www.nps.gov/blrv/index.htm>)

Cumberland Land Trust

The Cumberland Land Trust is a private, non-profit, charitable, conservation organization run by a dedicated group of volunteers. Since 1982 they have protected 459 acres of land acquired through purchase, donation and conservation easements. The Land Trust's mission is to preserve the natural resources of Cumberland for present and future generations by preserving land for open space.

Rhode Island Department of Transportation

Technical support for graffiti control program.

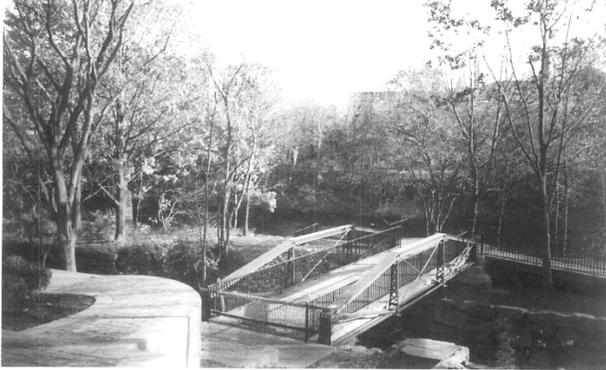
Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management

Potential recreational development grant source.

ISSUES/RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Manage Vegetation

Old foundations and views of the Blackstone River, once clearly visually accessible, are now choked by heavy vegetative overgrowth, including ivy, weeds, and small trees. This overgrowth obscures views into the park and of the Blackstone River.



1995: mature trees and minimal underforest growth



2017: same view, greatly obscured by dense vegetation



Visual access into and within the park should be a top priority. Sweeping viewsheds into the park are critical in engendering stewardship and quality of experience.

Overgrowth damages the value of the park. People will avoid using the park if they feel their safety is at risk. Instead, vandalism and misuse of the park is evident.



Overgrowth obscures views, destabilizes structures

RIDEM permits 91-0047D; 91-0253D; 92-0307D issued to the Town in 1991 for the reclamation project approved a landscape plan submitted by consultant Gates Leighton and Associates. A number of large trees of significant indigenous species were specified for preservation. Most other trees were slated for removal. Grass and groundcover are to cover open areas.

It is vital to actively manage the park's vegetation. The Friends of the Blackstone initiated a tree trimming exercise in 2014, and by the time the next was conducted in November, 2017, much of the vegetation had regrown. They are willing to work on a semi-annual, Town-sponsored brush and limbing clearing event.

Recommendation. To increase visual access into the park and enhance vistas of the Blackstone River, the following steps are recommended:

Tree identification. A landscape architect should review the RIDEM-approved landscape plan and identify which trees are to be preserved and which should be removed, consistent with the original DEM-approved clearing plan.

Annual Tree removal and vegetation control exercise. The Town, Friends of the Blackstone and other partners should remove/prune trees and branches at least once a year, consistent with RIDEM permit. Also weeds and poison ivy should be eradicated, especially in and around granite foundation structures.



Friends of the Blackstone three-hour clean up, November 18, 2017

New plantings. Plant wildflower seed mix along river banks akin to slopes and walking paths. This mix was recently planted at the new Veterans Park at BF Norton School. A landscape architect should determine seedling types and suitability for grasses and shrubs.

2. Manage Graffiti

Graffiti presents a significant blight on the park. While most of the historic architecture is graffiti-free, easily-accessible elements are prime targets for taggers. Entranceways, walkway ramps, utility boxes, and benches have been marked. The Shea Bridge (right) has also been blighted.



Recommendation. The Town, Friends of the Blackstone and other partners should:

Initiate a graffiti control program. On an annual basis, paint over graffiti on walkways, utility boxes, and foundations.

Emulate RIDOT graffiti control program. For frequently tagged areas, RIDOT applies a dark uniform gray base paint over an entire abutment surface or large area bounded by edges or architectural features. In the event that area is tagged again, the graffiti can be surgically covered over with the base paint. The Town should contact RIDOT to get the paint specifications and order enough paint to cover all the surfaces in the park that should be painted.

3. Signs, railings and Furniture- Repair, Paint and Maintain

The interpretive signs in the park tell the story of the history of water power, the construction of the mills, and their impact on the Town. They include photographs and artistic renderings of the original mill layout. The signs are mounted on black metal frames in key locations throughout the park.

Several of the signs have been tagged with some type of graffiti, be it Sharpie or spraypaint. One sign has even been taken off its frame, which is also tagged. The frames exhibit typical wear from over 20 years of weather exposure, and are in need of repainting.



In addition to picnic benches, traditional-style benches are located at the Broad Street entrance of the park and on the walkways. Like the weather-worn sign frames, some benches are tagged with graffiti. Others are grayed and have small lichen moss growing on them, and all would benefit from simple sanding/pressure washing and oiling to rejuvenate their appearance.

Complementing the visual access component of this plan, the signage and furniture of the park must be maintained in order for the park to be most enjoyable for visitors.

Recommendation. The Town, Friends of the Blackstone and other partners should:

Clean or replace vandalized signage panels.

Repaint panel frames.

Sand, oil and coat the park-style benches on Broad Street and in the park. Some benches have circular Cumberland insignias in the middle; these should also be cleaned or replaced.

Strip and repaint worn spots in protective metal railings.

4. Relocate granite block, replace with movable bollard

While Heritage Park is walkable by pedestrians as well as accessible to the physically-challenged, a cylindrical piece of granite, about 3.5 ft in diameter and cut to form, is located at the down ramp at the Gate House Overlook. It prevents vehicles and large equipment (mowers, chippers, small backhoes, maintenance trailers) from entering the park. It also presents an impasse for getting small equipment for activities and maintenance into the park.

Recommendation. The Town Highway Division should relocate the granite block and replace with a removable bollard.



5. Reduce Profile of Mill Foundation Remnant



There is a two-story concrete foundation remnant built into the slope just below the parking area on the north east corner of the park. It impedes views into the park and is attracting an inordinate amount of litter and graffiti. The Cumberland Historic District Commission has approved a Certificate of Appropriateness to reduce the profile of the structure by 80 percent, so as to memorialize its existence while making it less of a nuisance.



Recommendation. Assuming the Town can secure permission from the RI Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission and necessary funding, this structure should be altered, consistent with the Historic District Commission's authorization.

6. Reduce or Eliminate Animated Billboard Illumination

There is an electronic billboard on the Central Falls side facing the Blackstone which is animated and inordinately bright. Its glow and movement compromises the natural and historical integrity of Valley Falls Heritage Park.



Recommendation. The Town should submit a request to the City of Central Falls and the property owner to either permanently dim the side of the sign facing Heritage Park, or even extinguish it all together.

