



BLACKSTONE

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The Blackstone Canal and the Transportation Age

The Blackstone River winds 46 miles from its headwaters near Worcester, Massachusetts to its mouth in Providence, Rhode Island at Narragansett Bay. The river's steep and constant drop in elevation attracted enterprising men who built dams at nearly every river drop to harness and control its power. The rushing water powered mills and factories, developing industry at a rapid pace along the route of the river.

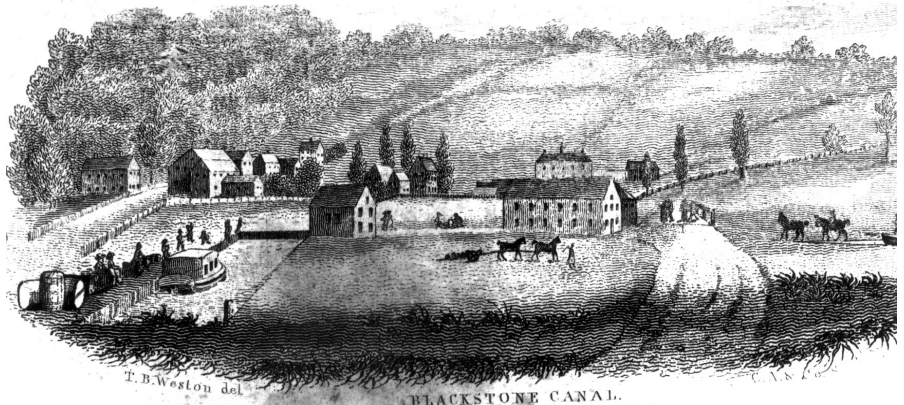
Mill owners had an inexpensive power source in the Blackstone River, but they still needed a more feasible way to send their goods to market. Navigating a boat larger than a canoe along the river was impossible because of its many twists, turns, falls, rapids and dams.

In the eighteenth century, transportation was a huge problem. The only ways to travel or move goods were by small boats, on horseback, or on foot. Slow, costly transport was bad for business and it kept communities in one region

from dealing with those in another. It cost as much to haul a ton of goods 30 miles overland as to ship it all the way to England.

As early as 1796, John Brown, an influential Providence merchant, began promoting his vision of creating a canal using the Blackstone River to link the busy wharves of Providence, Rhode Island to the heartland of Massachusetts at Worcester. He proposed that instead of digging a separate trench for the entire route of the canal, engineers could use the Blackstone River for several sections of the canal, thereby cutting costs and building it quicker.

The idea of the proposed 45-mile waterway was embraced by the people of Worcester County since their economic development was limited by the lack of waterpower and the high cost of transportation. However, they did not have the political clout to drive the Worcester-to-Providence Plan. Also, Boston merchants, anxious about losing



T. B. Weston del.

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trade, blocked early efforts. As a result, the canal plan was postponed for nearly thirty years.

By 1822 interest in the canal was renewed, inspired by the remarkable expansion of textile manufacturing along the Blackstone River. It was the Rhode Island mill owners and shippers who were the guiding forces of the canal project. Several of them owned mills along the Blackstone River and saw the need for a better form of transportation. They also saw the potential to get their manufactured goods into Worcester County.

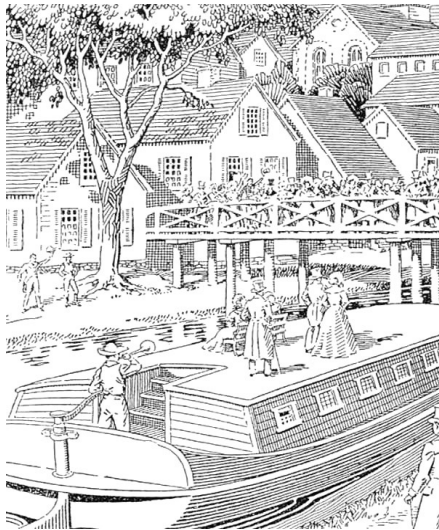
Construction of the canal began in Providence in 1824, and was com-

pleted in 1828, at a cost of \$750,000. On October 7, 1828 the first canal boat, the Lady Carrington, arrived at the Port of Worcester to much fanfare. For the people of Worcester, the Blackstone Canal would become their passageway to the wider world.

Prior to the opening of the Blackstone Canal, Worcester was a small, isolated farming village with a population just under 3,000 that included only a handful of immigrants. The settlement at Worcester was established in 1713 as people began leaving overpopulated coastal towns. It was considered a good locale because it offered a central location which was at the cross-roads of numerous already established Native American trails, the Blackstone River and rich, fertile soil. Initially it was a community of farmers and artisans.

The arrival of the canal proved to be a powerful catalyst for economic development and brought about growth and prosperity to the town of Worcester. The canal highlighted the importance of trading with other regions. Worcester was no longer landlocked. It now was an inland seaport transporting agricultural and manufactured goods to international markets.

A variety of goods that came overland to the Port of Worcester to be shipped out by the canal included dairy and agricultural products, chairs, coal and building stone. Overland transportation remained expensive, but to transport goods from inner regions to



When Worcester had an Outlet to the Sea

This drawing by J.M. Briery of the Lady Carrington, the first canal boat to arrive in Worcester on October 7, 1828, was the first in a series published by the Worcester Telegram on July 26, 1942.

From the collections of Worcester Historical Museum

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Worcester, then on to distant ports via the canal, greatly reduced transportation costs and increased the margin of profit for both the farmer and the business owner.

The canal was a highway, which charged customers a fee per ton, per mile. It maintained fees and added a toll for use of the waterway. Even during its most busy time, the actual rate charged for most items was only three cents per ton, per mile. The canal moved people as well, although it did not revolutionize passenger travel. Regular stage coach service had been in place between Worcester and Providence since 1821, and it continued to be a preferable mode of personal transportation. (Kelleher, Tom *The Blackstone Canal: Artery to the Heart of the Commonwealth.* Old Sturbridge Village, 1997)

By 1830 Worcester's population had increased by 33 percent to 4,173, but the town was still basically a country village with only 15 streets listed in the 1829 City Directory. Men with mechanical talent and ambition continued to be attracted to the town by the opportunity to prosper. Many prominent people owed their success to the huge surge of economic wealth and established themselves and their families in the expanding town.

The number of industries increased and the value of manufactured goods produced in cotton mills, tanneries, tool manufacturing, paper and wire mills increased from \$30,000 in 1830 to

\$1,739,730 in 1845. (Zeller, Rose 1940 *Changes in Ethnic Composition and Character of Worcester's Population.* Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Clark University, Worcester, MA).

Industrialization had also brought diversity to Worcester's population. Canal building was complex work and demanded great skill and expertise, compelling contractors such as Irish-born Tobias Boland to recruit veteran Irish canal workers from the nearly completed Erie Canal. Boland, realizing the project would require large numbers of unskilled laborers to carry out the back-breaking digging, directed his agents to recruit immigrants arriving in Boston and New York to the project.

Boland, who was to play a major role in the city's future, brought 500

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Courtesy of Worcester Historical Museum

"The first railroad station in Worcester was located on Foster Street in 1835, when the Boston & Worcester Railroad commenced running. This building (several times enlarged) was used until 1877, when it was demolished."
- Dictionary of Worcester (1893)



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Irish Catholics to Worcester in July, 1826 to begin the northern terminus of the canal, marking the first major influx of Irish Catholics to the area. Once the canal was built, some of these laborers stayed began working on the new mode of transportation being built—the railroads.

The canal was plagued by problems from the outset—lawsuits by mill owners over water rights, and seasonal freezing and low water levels. The canal's fate was sealed by the arrival of the railroads in 1835. It was formally closed in 1848, the same year Worcester was incorporated as a city. Ironically, it was thanks in large part to the canal that Worcester was by then a thriving manufacturing center with a diverse population of nearly 17,000—fivefold increase in only twenty years.

The Blackstone Canal is no longer visible in Worcester. During the 1860s a portion was consolidated into the city's sewer system and remaining sections were later covered, leaving no trace of the waterway that ushered in the era of Worcester's industrial transformation.

Time line: 1713-1848

- 1713: Permanent settlement of Worcester
- 1731: Worcester named the Shire Town of Worcester County
- 1765: Population of Worcester: 1,475
- 1790: First American textile mill, using water-powered spinning machines, opens in Pawtucket, RI
- 1792: John Brown has an idea of building a canal, linking Worcester, MA to Providence, RI
- 1800: Thomas Jefferson elected President.
Population of Worcester: 2,411
- 1803: Louisiana Purchase
- 1810: Population of Worcester: 3,650
- 1812-1815: War of 1812
- 1813: New England capitalists found the Boston Manufacturing Company and build the first large-scale American factory
- 1817: Workers begin building the Erie Canal.
- 1825: Erie Canal opens
- 1825: Workers begin building the Blackstone Canal.
- 1828: Blackstone Canal opens
- 1830: Baltimore & Ohio Railroad opens, first in the U.S.
Population of Worcester: 4,172
- 1835: Boston & Worcester Railroad opens
Population of Worcester: 6,624
- 1840: Population of Worcester: 7,497
- 1845: Population of Worcester: 11,556
- 1847: Providence & Worcester Railroad opens
- 1848: Blackstone Canal closes
Worcester incorporated as a city
Population of Worcester: 17,049

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