



## NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

### **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT** **Blackstone River Valley** **Special Resource Study and Environmental Assessment** **in the states of Massachusetts & Rhode Island**

#### **BACKGROUND**

With the passage of Title VII of Public Law 109-338 (October 12, 2006), the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Reauthorization Act of 2006, Congress directed the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a Special Resource Study (SRS) of sites and associated landscape features within the boundaries of the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor ("Corridor") that contribute to the understanding of the Corridor as the birthplace of the industrial revolution in the United States. The primary purpose of the SRS is to determine whether the resources being evaluated meet the criteria for inclusion as a unit or units of the National Park System.

This legislation also extended the Corridor Commission ("Commission") an additional five years until 2011 and authorized development funds through 2016. Subsequent legislation passed in April 2011 extended the Commission's operation to October 2012. By 2012, the Commission will have been in operation for over 25 years.

The study area encompassed the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor including all or part of 24 communities from Worcester, MA to Providence, RI.

The study team acknowledged the desires of the Commission and the public that the long history of federal activity and investment in the Blackstone River Valley region be recognized in the study process. The following elements were identified to ensure that these previous efforts were given adequate consideration:

- Preserve, protect and interpret resources throughout the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor that exemplify the Valley's nationally significant industrial heritage for the benefit and inspiration of future generations.
- Support the preservation, protection, and interpretation of the region's landscape features – both urban and rural, including the Blackstone River and Canal – that provide an overarching context for the Valley's industrial heritage.
- Educate the public about the industrial history of the Valley and its significance to our nation's past and present.
- Protect the substantial federal investment that has been committed to key resources and facilities Valley-wide.
- Support and enhance the network of partners who will continue to engage in the protection, improvement, management, and operation of key resources and facilities throughout the Valley.

During the spring and summer of 2008 the study team engaged in a Valley-wide resource evaluation. Given the large number of resources in the Valley, it was important to identify the best possible examples based on the following factors defined by the study team:



1. Areas that appeared to have the highest level of significance and resource integrity and the greatest opportunity to interpret different facets of the industrial history story or stories.
2. Areas that already had an established visitor services component (e.g., the Blackstone Valley Visitor Center or the Museum of Work & Culture).
3. Areas that offered opportunities to link to the Blackstone River and Canal and existing recreational trails (e.g., state park sites).

The study team visited 26 sites throughout the Blackstone River Valley that represent key resource types including agricultural areas, mill villages, and urban centers. Based on the factors defined above, the study team identified seven historic resources areas and five visitor service areas as focus areas within the larger study area:

Historic Resource Areas:

Old Slater Mill National Historic Landmark District, Pawtucket, RI  
Slatersville Historic District, North Smithfield, RI  
Ashton Historic District, Cumberland, RI  
Whitinsville Historic District, Northbridge, MA  
Hopedale Village Historic District, Hopedale, MA  
Blackstone Canal, MA/RI  
Blackstone River and its tributaries, MA/RI

Visitor Service Areas:

Blackstone Valley Visitor Center, Pawtucket, RI  
Blackstone River State Park/ Kelly House, Lincoln, RI  
Museum of Work & Culture, Woonsocket, RI  
Blackstone River & Canal Heritage State Park/River Bend Farm, Uxbridge, MA  
Worcester Visitor Center (proposed), Worcester, MA

***Study Findings***

The NPS is responsible for conducting professional studies of potential additions to the National Park System when specifically authorized by an act of Congress. Several laws outline criteria for potential units of the National Park System. To be eligible for inclusion in the system, a proposed addition must (1) possess **nationally significant** natural or cultural resources; (2) be a **suitable** addition to the system; (3) be a **feasible** addition to the system; and (4) **require direct NPS management**, instead of alternative protection by other public agencies or the private sector.

Based on extensive analysis and with the concurrence of the National Park Service's History Program Office in Washington, the study team concluded that the Blackstone River Valley's industrial heritage resources including the **Blackstone River, the Blackstone Canal, Old Slater Mill National Historic Landmark District**, and the villages of **Slatersville, Ashton, Whitinsville, and Hopedale** met the criteria for national significance.

The region, with its representative resources, remains the best place to interpret the origin and rise of an important type of American industry. These resources form a cohesive industrial district that evolved and defined the principles of the Rhode Island System of manufacture, which became a paradigm for further American industrial development.

The suitability analysis considered comparable resources representing various models of industrialization throughout the United States. These other places were more likely to



complement, rather than compete with, the Blackstone River Valley in their capacity to convey the complex story of the nation's industrial development. Based on this analysis the study concludes that the resources of the Blackstone River Valley depict a distinctive and important aspect of American history that is not adequately represented elsewhere and is therefore suitable for inclusion in the National Park System.

The feasibility analysis indicated that the size and configuration of the non-contiguous sites and districts that would compose the proposed park would not be a prohibiting factor for management and is mitigated by existing roads and visitor infrastructure (e.g., visitor facilities, directional signage, and interpretive media). The area enjoys good highway access and is served by two international airports as well as intercity train and bus service. Visitor access has been facilitated by existing directional signage systems, published tour guides, and maps. Much of the primary resource base continues to be under private ownership and that is unlikely to change. Strategic NPS acquisition of key properties (in full or partial fee) for preservation or public access purposes would be one facet of the proposed park's resource management strategy. Partnerships with local communities and property owners to encourage resource protection would also be critical.

Finally, the study concludes that given the appropriate authorities, financial and human resources, the resources under consideration would be best managed with the long-term involvement of the National Park Service.

In summary, the study team finds that, based on the factors cited above and the extensive analyses conducted during the course of this special resource study, the resources associated with the Blackstone River Valley are nationally significant and both suitable and feasible for inclusion in the National Park System. It further concludes that there is a demonstrated need for NPS management of these resources in partnership with others described in this report.

### **SELECTED ALTERNATIVE**

Based on the analysis presented in the SRS/EA, the NPS has selected "Management Option 3: Blackstone River Valley Industrial Heritage National Historical Park", as the National Park Service "most effective and efficient" alternative. This implies that Management Option 3 would provide for the best management strategy to ensure the long term protection of industrial heritage resources in the Blackstone River Valley. The National Park Service would note its findings and recommendations in its transmittal of the study report to the Secretary of the Interior who, in turn, will transmit it to the Congress. Implementation of the selected alternative would come only after action by Congress. The Selected Alternative is described on pages 79-82 of the SRS/EA.

### **Summary Description of the Selected Alternative**

This management option envisions that a new unit of the National Park System would be created by an act of Congress. The new unit would include specific nationally significant sites and districts located within the Blackstone River Valley that possess high resource integrity and effectively convey the industrial heritage themes of the valley. The park would engage in visitor programs and resource protection primarily for the sites and districts that would be named in potential legislation establishing the park including:

- Old Slater Mill National Historic Landmark District, Pawtucket, RI
- Slatersville Historic District, North Smithfield, RI
- Ashton Historic District, Cumberland, RI



- Whitinsville Historic District, Northbridge, MA
- Hopedale Village Historic District, Hopedale, MA
- Blackstone River and its tributaries
- Blackstone Canal

The non-contiguous historic districts named above and as depicted on maps found in Chapter Two: Historical Overview and Resource Description would form the boundary of the proposed park unit.

These areas of national significance and NPS interest are where potential acquisition could occur in full or partial-fee. Properties in which NPS acquires a partial interest (e.g., a preservation easement) could also be cooperatively managed if appropriate. The following properties are possible candidates for full or partial-fee acquisition by NPS:

- Old Slater Mill National Historic Landmark District, Pawtucket, RI
- Blackstone River State Park, Kelly House/ Old Ashton segment, Lincoln, RI (adjoins Ashton Village Historic District in Cumberland, RI)
- Centennial Memorial Park, Slatersville, North Smithfield, RI
- The Parklands, Hopedale, MA
- Castle Hill Farm, Whitinsville, Northbridge, MA

The NPS may also seek to acquire and develop other locations in the village historic districts for interpretive purposes (e.g., a residence could be acquired and developed to interpret a mill worker's daily life). The NPS may also acquire properties along the Blackstone River and Canal that are historically significant or that provide for continuous linkage, supporting public access, and resource protection. A General Management Plan would be developed for the park that identifies priorities for acquisition (full fee or partial fee), and protection and public use of the resources. Any NPS acquisition would occur on a willing-seller basis, and properties currently in public ownership could be acquired only by donation.

In addition to land acquisition authority, within the park's authorized boundaries NPS would have the authority to enter into cooperative agreements to provide assistance for resource protection and interpretation. The park would also be authorized to provide interpretive assistance to thematically-related resources located throughout the Corridor.

The National Historical Park would be operated by the National Park Service in cooperation with a regional partner that could be specifically identified in the park's enabling legislation and with other local management partners, as appropriate. The NPS would be authorized to enter into a cooperative agreement with the regional partner to undertake activities that support the purposes of the park. The regional partner would assume a lead role in preserving, protecting, and interpreting related industrial heritage resources throughout the Corridor that fall outside of the park's boundary, as well as the region's larger rural and agricultural landscape. The regional partner is likely to be Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, Inc. ("Blackstone Corridor, Inc."), a newly formed 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that will assume responsibility for the Corridor after the Commission expires in October 2012.

## **JUSTIFICATION FOR SELECTING MANAGEMENT OPTION**

Management Option 3: Blackstone River Valley Industrial Heritage National Historical Park, was considered to be the "Most Efficient and Effective Alternative." The partnership approach described under this management option would increase the potential for preservation, restoration, and rehabilitation of industrial heritage resources throughout the Blackstone River



Valley. In addition to enhancing the climate for resource protection, this management option also would maximize opportunities for a more complete understanding of the significance of the Samuel Slater and the Rhode Island System of manufacture and its role in the industrial development of the United States.

The partnership nature of this management option would foster greater opportunities to work with state and local governments, non-profits, and academic institutions to engage in collaborative research. It would also provide for further leveraging of federal financial contributions for resource protection and interpretation with matching state, local, and private financing.

Under this management option, visitors would continue to be provided an integrated resource-based experience in which individual sites would provide coordinated and integrated interpretive programming. This integrated approach is the best way to convey the story of the emergence of the

American textile industry as it evolved in the Blackstone River Valley and influenced the course of American industrial history.

## **OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED**

The other alternatives that were evaluated in the EA included: Management Option 1 – John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Continues to Operate under Current Authorities (status quo), and Management Option 2 –Old Slater Mill National Historic Site. Under Management Option 1 heritage corridor funding authorization is scheduled to end in 2012 and the NPS presence in the corridor is concluded (See pages 73-76 of the SRS/EA).

In Management Option 2: Old Slater Mill National Historic Site, the Old Slater Mill National Historic Landmark District would be designated as a unit of the National Park System. NPS would seek a protective easement on the property and would work in collaboration with the Old Slater Mill Association and others to interpret the national historic site and other facets of the Valley's industrial history.( See pages 77 – 78 of the SRS/EA).

## **ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE**

The NPS is required to identify the environmentally preferred alternative in its NEPA documents for public review and comment. The Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) NEPA's Forty Most Asked Questions, defines the environmentally preferred alternative (or alternatives) as the alternative that best promotes the national environmental policy expressed in NEPA (Section 101(b) (516 DM 4.10). In their Forty Most Asked Questions, CEQ further clarifies the identification of the environmentally preferred alternative, stating "Ordinarily, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources" (Q6a).

Management Option 3: Blackstone River Valley Industrial Heritage National Historical Park is considered to be the Environmentally Preferred Alternative for the following reasons:

- This management option best supports the project objectives articulated in Chapter One of the study. These goals call for a regional approach to protecting and interpreting industrial heritage resources, thus addressing the protection of the natural, cultural,



recreational, and scenic values that provide its context and the connections among non-contiguous resources.

- Through the proposed relationship with a regional partner that would be tasked with working beyond the park boundary, this management option offers the greatest opportunity for NPS to support **both** interpretive and protection efforts throughout the Blackstone Valley; and could bring about a greater level of resource protection; and could foster a greater level of public understanding and appreciation of these resources than either Management Options 1 or 2.

## **WHY THE SELECTED ALTERNATIVE WILL NOT HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT**

As defined in 40 CFR § 1508.27, a significant impact is determined by examining the following criteria:

*1) Impacts that may have both beneficial and adverse aspects and which on balance may be beneficial, but that may still have significant adverse impacts that require analysis in an EIS.*

There are no major adverse or beneficial impacts identified with the Selected Alternative that would require analysis in an environmental impact statement. The Selected Alternative would have moderate long-term beneficial impacts on cultural and natural resources. Visitor experiences would have moderate long-term beneficial impacts under the Selected Alternative.

*2) The degree to which public health and safety are affected.*

Public health and safety would not be affected by the Selected Alternative.

*3) Any unique characteristics of the area (proximity to historic or cultural resources, wild and scenic rivers, ecologically critical areas, wetlands or floodplains, and so forth).*

No unique characteristics of the study area would be adversely impacted by the Selected Alternative. Topics dismissed from detailed analysis in the SRS/EA included: air quality, Indian trust resources, sacred sites, environmental justice, public health and safety.

*4) The degree to which impacts are likely to be highly controversial.*

There were no highly controversial effects on the quality of the human environment identified during either scoping, preparation of the SRS/EA or the public review period.

*5) The degree to which the potential impacts are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

There were no highly uncertain, unique or unknown risks identified that would affect the quality of the human environment during the preparation of the SRS/EA or the public review period.

*6) Whether the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

The actions associated with the Selected Alternative would not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects nor represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

*7) Whether the action is related to other actions that may have individual insignificant impacts but cumulatively significant effects. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or breaking it down into small component parts.* As described in the SRS/EA, there could be beneficial impacts from implementation of the Selected Alternative related to visitor use and



experience, historic preservation, site operations, and the socioeconomic environment. These could result in net minor to major beneficial cumulative impacts.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect historic properties in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or other significant scientific, archeological, or cultural resources.*

The Selected Alternative includes sites that have been previously designated as National Historic Landmarks or are contributing features within designated National Register District. Potentially proposed restoration work to the properties within the boundary would have beneficial impacts. In addition, beneficial impacts would be realized from the technical assistance proposed in this alternative, and given to owners of sites associated with the themes in the alternative. The SRS/EA was developed in consultation with staff from and was reviewed by the State Historic Preservation Offices in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Both the Massachusetts and Rhode Island State Historic Preservation Offices submitted comments in support of Management Option 3.

9) *The degree to which an action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat.*

No adverse impacts on endangered or threatened species or their critical habitats were identified during the preparation of the SRS/EA, nor were any commented upon during the public review period. Letters received from the Natural Heritage programs in both Massachusetts and Rhode Island indicated that there were no federally listed endangered or threatened species known to exist within the project area.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

The Selected Alternative is not expected to violate federal, state, or local environmental protection laws.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

A public information brochure outlining the study process was posted to the project website, the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor (Corridor)'s website, and was made available in brochure racks at the Corridor's visitor centers in 2007. The general public was first made aware of the study process at the Scholars Panel Discussion in February 2008, when a brief introduction to the study process was presented during the opening remarks. The public information brochure was reissued with an updated schedule in 2009. Also in 2009 a Project Update highlighting the significance findings was created and distributed in a similar manner.

In spring 2008, Ranger Chuck Arning of the Commission produced a 16-minute video presentation entitled "*What's Special about the Valley?*" that described the valley's resources, the scholars' site visit, and the special resource study process. The video was aired at the Commission's Annual Meeting and Awards Ceremony in May 2008 and at numerous other meetings since that time. A 30-minute version of the video was produced and aired on local cable stations in Rhode Island and central Massachusetts in spring 2010.

A newsletter describing the full range of management options was distributed in June 2010. Fourteen hundred copies were distributed via the project mailing list, and a pdf version was made available for download on the project website.



Following the release of the newsletter, a series of four public meetings was held on July 7 and 8, 2010. The meetings were publicized in local media as well as through the Corridor's electronic newsletter. Nearly 100 people participated in the meetings which were also videotaped and edited for broadcast on local cable access stations throughout the Blackstone River Valley. In addition to comments offered by meeting participants, the study team received nearly 40 sets of written comments. Based on feedback received at the public meetings, and via comment cards, electronic mail, and formal correspondence, a number of key points emerged. They are summarized below:

- There was overwhelming support for the designation of a national park unit in the Blackstone Valley. Roughly two-thirds of respondents indicated their support for a new park unit, a majority of whom expressed particular support for Management Option 3.
- About two-thirds of respondents supported a broader regional/ geographic and thematic scope that considers the many layers of historical and ecological values and embraces the whole Corridor.
- Many respondents expressed their desire to see the river and the canal included within the boundary of the proposed park. The bikeway and the recreational values of the river and canal were also elements for which respondents wanted to see NPS support.
- Several respondents expressed concern that the northern portion of the Valley was not adequately represented in any park proposal.
- There was also substantial and continuing support for a regional, community-based management structure that worked collaboratively in partnership with NPS.
- A number of respondents expressed their support for the Commission and "keeping things the way they are" and felt that keeping the Commission should be among the alternatives considered.

The Blackstone River Valley Special Resource Study (SRS) Report was made available for public review in July 2011. A mailing of 1,000 postcards went out to a large segment of the project contact list making recipients aware of the availability of the study report for review and comment and of scheduled public meetings to be held in August 2011. An additional 500 postcards were distributed by Commission staff at various venues throughout the Valley. Just under 500 copies of the study were mailed to key project stakeholders as well as local libraries. The document was also available in digital form on the National Park Service's Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) web site via a link from the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor webpage ([www.nps.gov/blac](http://www.nps.gov/blac)).

Information about the availability of the SRS Report and upcoming public meetings was also made available via the National Heritage Corridor's e-newsletter, Twitter feed, and Facebook page. A number of Corridor partners also made the information available through their own websites and e-newsletters. Numerous local media outlets throughout the Blackstone River Valley posted stories or general information about the availability of the report and scheduled public meetings.

The formal public review period began on Monday, July 25 and ended Friday, August 26, 2011.

Two public meetings were held. The first took place on Wednesday, August 10 at 3 PM at the Blackstone Valley Visitor Center in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. A second meeting was held on





Tuesday, August 16 at 7 PM at the Singh Theater at Alternatives, Inc. (Whitin Mill) in Whitinsville, Massachusetts. Nearly 250 people combined participated in these well-attended meetings with 64 people offering verbal comments. The proceedings of each meeting were videotaped and also captured on flip charts.

The vast majority of speakers (nearly 90 per cent) expressed their support for creating a national park in the Blackstone Valley or spoke particularly in favor of Management Option 3. Other significant clusters of comments called for the proposed park to be more inclusive and embrace more of the Blackstone Valley's natural, cultural, and recreational resources; to include the Blackstone River system and the Canal; and to include the City of Worcester, particularly the visitor center that is presently under development. Additional speakers raised concerns about a national park designation's impact on existing and potential hydropower projects throughout the Valley.

Two participants expressed their opposition to the Management Option 3. In one case, support was expressed for Management Option 1 due to the costs associated with a park designation. The speaker encouraged the creation of Special Assessment Districts to cover the costs associated with preserving, protecting, and interpreting the Valley's important resources. In the other case, it was proposed that the federal National Heritage Corridor Commission be authorized to continue in perpetuity and for a new park to be created that would operate under the aegis of the federal Commission.

One or more speakers also asked that NPS consider the following:

- Make the Blackstone River Coalition a formal park partner
- Recognize the role of Native Americans in the region's history and evolution
- Continue work on the Blackstone River Bikeway
- Continue NPS presence in Woonsocket, RI
- Recognize the geological significance of the region
- Protect historic cemeteries throughout the Blackstone Valley

#### Written Comment

Written comments were received from 115 individuals, agencies, and organizations. Not surprisingly, an overwhelming percentage of correspondence originated in the states of Massachusetts and Rhode Island and came in the form of letters, faxes, electronic mail, and postings to the project website in PEPC. Nearly half the correspondence came from individuals who did not identify an affiliation and were residents of the local area. About 20 per cent of the written comments were received from elected and public officials. Just fewer than 20 per cent of the comments came in from natural resource conservation and historic preservation groups (including historical societies and museums). The balance came from civic groups, businesses, recreational interests, and academic and professional organizations. Many of those submitting written copies also appeared or were represented at the public meetings.

The content and the volume of comments submitted in writing were very similar to those offered during the public meetings. As occurred at the public meetings, nearly 90 per cent of the written comments expressed support for creating a national park in the Blackstone Valley or wrote particularly in favor of Management Option 3. In fact, the remaining comments expressed during the public meetings (as described above) were also articulated in the written correspondence.



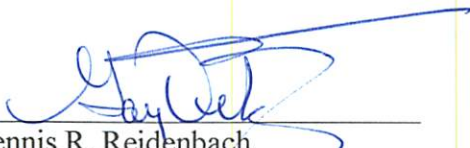
The written comments did yield a few additional comments. About 5 per cent of the written comments indicated a desire for more emphasis on natural resources. Others wrote to encourage NPS to consider interpreting more than the industrial development story in the Blackstone Valley. Finally, one correspondent wrote that the regional partner under Management Option 3 should be authorized by Congress to receive funds consistent with its role and responsibilities in its work with the park.

#### **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

The NPS has selected Management Option 3, Blackstone River Valley Industrial Heritage National Historical Park as the NPS most efficient and effective alternative. The Selected Alternative is described on pages 79-82 of the SRS/EA. The Selected Alternative will not constitute an action that normally requires preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS). The Selected Alternative would not have a significant effect on the human environment. Negative environmental impacts that could occur are minor or moderate in intensity. There are no significant impacts on public health, public safety, threatened or endangered species, sites or districts listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, or other unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the selected alternative will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection law.

Based on the foregoing, it has been determined that an EIS is not required for this action and thus will not be prepared.

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

  
for Dennis R. Reidenbach  
Regional Director, Northeast Region  
National Park Service

10/27/2011  
Date