Report to the Organization of American Historians and the National Park Service on the Blackstone River Valley Industrial Heritage Corridor

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Nineteenth-century industrialization emerged as a galvanizing subject in the 1970s and early 1980s for European and U.S. historians of varied interest. Historians of technology focused attention on the diffusion of technical knowledge and expertise in the transatlantic world and, in revisionist fashion, emphasized the role of values and conflict in the choosing of technological alternatives (thus rebutting notions of technological determinism). Historical geographers similarly stressed the interconnections between agricultural and manufacturing development—the links between hinterlands and industrial centers—and also the important exchanges of information and expertise occurring in clustered industrial districts (so-called agglomeration effects). "New" social historians of the period armed with computers and accessible software mined manuscript census records and other primary data sources to measure the impact of industrialization on residential and occupational mobility and social structures and inequalities. Finally, a new generation of labor historians shifted attention away from trade unions and skilled workers to working-class peoples generally and their communities and consciousness, seeing wage earners not as simple economic actors but motivated more significantly by customary senses of time orientation and justice, republican ideals, and familial, ethnic, religious solidarities and sensibilities.

The myriad surge of investigation generated a number of themes that dominate scholarship to this day:

- Industrialization unfolded in different nations, regions within nations, sectors of the economy, and trades in varied ways and at varying paces. "Uneven development" is the current catchword phrase as the term "industrial revolution" has been jettisoned.
- Context—material resources, labor supply, and social values and conflict—mattered greatly and shaped particular paths toward industrialization.
- Communities of actors counted—inventors and mechanics, investors and entrepreneurs, and workers operated in closely-knit worlds and shared knowledge and experience are key dynamics of industrialization.

The themes developed in the rush of research on industrialization in the 1970s and early 1980s form a standing consensus. The subject of nineteenth-century industrialization garners less scholarly interest today, but recent scholarship has contributed to adjustments in recent-received wisdom. Gender and race have provided new lenses to view industrialization—not just to measure the place of women and

peoples of color in manufacture (last hired, if hired at all, first fired, and with the least rewards, benefits and protections), but also to understand how gender and racial norms defined "worthy" work (on the shopfloor and legally) as the work of white males. There is also new attention to the financing of manufacturing enterprise and the marketing of goods. Finally, and not coincidentally, there is rising interest in placing American industrialization in global perspective and particularly in explaining the recent dramatic and rapid losses in the industrial capacities of the United States; deindustrialization, in this regard, is as "hot" a subject today as industrialization was thirty years ago.

The history of industrialization as now understood places the Blackstone River Valley in the spotlight. In the old story, large-scale, corporately-owned, bureaucratically-managed, fully-mechanized, standardized goods enterprises represented industrialization, purely and simply. Start the narrative in Lowell, Massachusetts and move on to Pittsburgh and Chicago: that's it, with perhaps sidebars on clockmaking and standardized parts production techniques in Connecticut and garment sweatshops in New York City and the gritty immigrant experience. The classic narrative has now been replaced by a much richer story which sees the rise of the United States to industrial preeminence by the turn of the twentieth century resting on production of vast arrays of goods in diversified settings in a nook-and-cranny swath of enterprise stretching through New England, the Middle Atlantic states and the Midwest (with a piece of the South).

At least four paths toward industrialization in the United States are now evident.

1. The diversified manufacturing center—marked by small-to-medium size, family (or partnership) owned and managed enterprises, diverse product lines and work settings, specialization in processes and/or products, profiting in niche markets, reliance on skilled labor, and flexible, small-batch operations. Philadelphia is a quintessential example, but the same characteristics mark New York City (with less specialized products) and Newark and Trenton, New Jersey and smaller cities such as Albany, New York, Zanesville, Ohio, and Grand Rapids, Michigan.
2. The one-or-two industry city—marked by large-scale, corporately owned, bureaucratically managed, fully mechanized, standardized goods producing companies. This represents the classic, big, smoke-stack industries, but concentrating on Lowell, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and Detroit misses the amount and quality of production and the technological innovations that occurred in less attention-grabbing instances and sites.
3. Industrial slavery: industrialization unfolded in the antebellum period in the South with the slave system in place, adding to the complexity of the greater story
4. The mill village: along the creeks and rivers of New England, the Middle Atlantic states and the South emerged countless mill village communities, of course, starting with Samuel Slater's Pawtucket, Rhode Island mill in 1793. Their prevalence is notable. By the time Lowell, Massachusetts had been established in the late 1820s, more than 400 mill village communities had been created in the United States, marked by the employment of families and the clear imprint of their founders on their physical, cultural and social landscapes. The mill villages of the U.S. were not quaint, ephemeral entities. They served as cites of extraordinary technological innovation and substantial production and they

endured, in some instances, far into the twentieth century to the very moment that the U.S. glaringly lost its smokestack industries.

The place and contribution of mill villages to American industrialization are principally exemplified in the Blackstone River Valley; since the mill village is a critical component of America's industrial history, then, more accurately, American industrial history is critically exemplified in the Blackstone River Valley. The Blackstone River Valley, to be sure, has its rivals, most notably with the important mill communities established along the Connecticut and Naugatuck Rivers in Connecticut. But the Blackstone River Valley is more significant and illustrative.

Samuel Slater's pioneer mill and community—the "cradle" of American industrialization—is an obvious marking point setting the Blackstone River Valley apart, but Slater's mill is not the prime justifier of greater significance. The extent of entrepreneurialism, technological innovation and pure production manifest in the string of mill village communities established in the corridor stretching from just south of Worcester, Massachusetts to just north of Providence, Rhode Island is unprecedented for this pathway toward industrialization. The stamp placed on the planned communities in the Valley by the company-town founders is archetypal (and tangible to this day). The mill villages of the Blackstone River Valley contained small and large-scale renowned enterprises—they belie quaintness—and they endured into the twentieth century (not ephemeral contributors to American industrial history).

Mill village communities decisively warrant commemoration if the story of American industrialization is full told and the Blackstone River Valley provides the most telling example. The Blackstone River Valley also illustrates other aspects of American industrialization, not uniquely in this regard, but finely.

The relationship between colonial-era accumulated commercial wealth (much earned in the slave trade) and industrialization is well evident in the Blackstone River Valley: the role of Providence, Rhode Island merchants in bankrolling manufacture is classic. The links between agricultural development and industry in the region is equally clear (not farm "to" factory, but farm "and" factory as there were symbiotic exchanges of goods and people between hinterland and mill community). The mill communities stretching through the Valley formed a thriving whole, interconnected (and each impacted by) a shared waterway, but also linked by common investors and distributors, swirls of technological information, and circulating employees providing expertise and labor. Although strung out—not compacted as in an urban industrial district—the Blackstone Valley mill communities operated as an enterprise zone (America's first silicon valley is not a far-fetched metaphoric phrase), illustrating well agglomeration effects. Finally, as in other industrial settings, conflict marked the Blackstone River Valley. The company-town founders may have planned harmonious communities, but labor strife and ethno-religious hostilities are no small part of the history.

The Blackstone River Valley then speaks definitively to the critical role of mill village communities in American industrial history and manifests critical aspects of industrialization in general. This industrial heritage corridor is to be valued—for commemorative and educational purposes. There are lessons to be taught and learned throughout the Valley, but various constraints require selection. The following is a prioritized wish-list for future focus and investment (it should be noted that the whole

Valley should not be conceived as a single museum piece to be frozen in time in Sturbridge Village-fashion, not just because it is unrealistic, but more importantly, because the mill village communities were never static and always evolving, as stressed earlier).

- **Slater's Mill** in Pawtucket is a national treasure. The mill and its grounds should be conserved and their interpretative function enhanced. Purely focusing on the Pawtucket mill, however, obscures the historical record. The mill was just the first instance of a chain of communities formed northward through the Blackstone River Valley.
- **Slatersville** is the more developed and greater mill village. With its surviving mills, company houses and planned layout, Slatersville is primed for interpretation. Most important, the created mill basin, dam and canal system central to the town presents extraordinary opportunities to educate on the ecological impacts of industrialization.
- **Whitinsville** remarkably manifests the imprint of a remarkable family, the Whitins. With the mill village community the first generations of Whitins laid out and the parks, libraries, churches, and worker homes later generations built, there is probably no better surviving example of a company-town. But, Whitinsville affords even more possibilities for industrial heritage learning. The Whitin Machine Works produced the finest textile machinery (into the mid-twentieth century) and was a site of noteworthy technological innovation. A unique working museum exhibiting the manufacture of machines, from pattern and mold making to casting, parts finishing and assembly would be a great complement to Slater's textile mill in Pawtucket and show the interconnected mushrooming of enterprise in the mill village corridor of the Blackstone River Valley. If the Whitin's family farm could also be preserved and restored, Whitinsville could also serve to educate on the linkages between agricultural and industrial development.
- **Hopedale** supplements the Whitinsville story, but with fascinating variations on a theme of the mill-village company town. Hopedale began as a classic antebellum utopian community and then evolved under the firm (and benevolent) grasp of George Draper to house an important and enormous machine works. There is intrigue purely in that story, but Hopedale also shows that mill villages could be sites of massive, technologically-advanced enterprise and again into the mid-twentieth century.
- The **Blackstone River** was the facilitator and spine of industrialization in the region and tells the story of waterway, canal and railroad transportation innovation critical to development. Further investment in environmental clean-up, recreation and interpretation are in order. The river links the history and the river could comprehensively educate hikers, bikers, and boat and auto travelers not just through occasional markers and small museums, but written guides and podcasts.
- **Farmsteads** for further articulation of the connections between hinterland and manufacturing site should be considered for investments, but a full development of Whitinsville could serve the purpose.