Report for The Blackstone River Valley Special Resource Study

In response to a recent site visit I and several other scholars made to the Blackstone River Valley, and drawing on the several yeasty discussions among the visiting scholars and representatives of assorted local, state and federal entities during the visit, I'm pleased to submit the following report. My understanding is that these remarks should be framed by the four major questions that guided our collective conversations on February 15th and 16th. And my comments will thus take up those queries in order.

I.) How do historians currently understand or define the Industrial Revolution in the United States?

With surprisingly little hesitation, the assembled historians agreed that scholars today tend to tackle the notion of the Industrial Revolution in the United States by rejecting it. The point, of course, is not that current historians deny the transformative implications attaching to "industrial" production--whether in North America or anywhere else. Rather, the point is that scholars have found it increasingly useful to understand the history of "industrial" less in terms of a single, one-off originating development than as a complex matrix of patterns: patterns that may have arisen at identifiable moments but that possessed multiple shapes and unfolded along multiple tracks. --There was not an identifiably particular Industrial Revolution in the United States so much as an array of industrializing processes.

This perspective we all seemed to share. My own view would be to build on this historical vision to posit industrialization in the American milieu as, fundamentally, a shift in manufacturing involving significant increments in division of labor that resulted in significantly increased output at (typically) reduced unit cost. Such a conception clearly facilitates construing industrialization as a phenomenon that took on many different specific forms--and I will return to the conceptual importance of stressing this heterogeneity presently. But alongside appreciation of industrialization-as-variegated, historians today often seem to me to stress several other interpretive motifs that bear mention.

First, my sense is that a good number scholars have for some while underscored the importance of treating American industrialization as being centrally about people. Which is to say, a good number of historians have for some while argued that industrialization--whatever its structural formations--characteristically entailed certain individuals who owned, managed, and invented and others who did the industrial work. It follows (these historians propose) that we should we not lose sight of the corollary that industrialization encompassed shifting relationships among people: between employees and employers, for example, but also along gender as well as ethnic and racial thresholds. So too (these historians contend), industrialization enfolded changing textures of power, yielded losers along with winners, was frequently (some would say chronically) riddled with conflict, and because of all this was never automatic or inevitable but continuously flavored with contingency and choice. In sum (according to these historians), the meaning of industrialization should not be allowed to grow so abstract (or triumphalist) as to preclude remembering that it always and everywhere involved real things happening to real human beings.

Second, it seems to me scholars have in many cases come to recalibrate the scale of their approach to the subject of industrialization. Put concretely, the community study--once a privileged format for exploring industrialization--is now commonly supplemented by mounting regard for context. Historians may continue to focus on particular settings. But they are attentive to the way the transit of raw materials and finished goods, of people, machines, and information, not to mention the swirl of political and economic currents, have constantly created linkages that extend beyond the local. Villages, towns, and cities are thus increasingly considered as bound into networks that tether communities to one another or to a region, and even further: to other regions and even to developments elsewhere in the world.

Third, it strikes me that students of industrialization have tended in recent years to place greater weight on the way contemporaries themselves comprehended what was happening to them and on the material "stuff" created by the industrializing process. It strikes me, in other words, that there's been greater interest shown in exploring, on the one hand, the assorted cultural mappings Americans adduced to explain, justify, or (at times) protest industrialization and, on the other hand, the evolving patterns and consequences of consumption. And finally, I think it's apparent historians have for some time shown notable interest in the physical environment of industrialization. The impact of industrialization upon the natural landscape, the influence of natural topographies and resources on industrializing ventures, the role of manmade structures in defining the experience of industrialization--these are issues that have been, and continue to be, of appreciable significance to scholars of American industrialization.

Such, then, are four motifs that I think run through current scholarly engagements with industrialization. But as indicated above these emphases nest within an overarching stress on the phenomenon's variety. Certainly, if industrialization is construed (as I'm suggesting) as a movement toward ratcheted-up divisions of labor, then it

could--and did--evince an extraordinary bundle of structures and trajectories. Indeed, even if the saga as a whole may be said to get underway in the late 1700s and early 1800s (even if, that is, this was when initiatives in heightened division of labor began emerging), the resulting spectrum of forms and pathways was impressive.

Thus there was the late 18th and early 19th century industrialization of textile production that famously introduced "automatic" technologies powered by inanimate energy. But there was also, in these same years, the industrialization of shoe and garment manufacturing: a process that relied almost entirely on reorchestrating handwork processes and made little if any use of new machine operations. Likewise, and in this same general era, there were some branches of industrialization took place in cities and others that flourished in the countryside, some that mobilized outwork networks and others that concentrated in central workshops, some that were administered through corporations and others through partnerships. And the labor harnessed by labor might be free or unfree, might be either attached to households or hired as autonomous adults.

In fact, the diversity of industrialization can even be traced into textile production. Because if the manufacture of cotton and woolen goods in this period was widely known for its mechanization, it also involved establishments that combined division of labor with substantial continued reliance on handwork (in Philadelphia, for example). Nor were the mills that more fully appropriated technologies run by water (and ultimately steam) all of a piece. For these enterprises encompassed the enormous, incorporated ventures following the so-called "Waltham" or "Lowell" model: factories that were entirely committed to entirely centralized production, that were sited in urban or urbanizing settings, and that (at least initially) sought to employ mainly young single women. But textile mills using automatic machines also included Southern manufactories that relied on slave labor. And--not insignificantly--they included factories organized around the so-called "Rhode Island" style: the mills of southern and central New England that (at least initially) fused outwork with centralized production, were financed and administered through partnerships, and persistently filled their labor needs with child and adult family mills.

All of which leads on to an attendant proposition. Because what also looms large in current scholarly formulations is the recognition that the marked variety attaching to early industrialization persisted. While admittedly evolving in different ways and degrees, the discrete threads of industrialization evident before the Civil War are now widely understood by historians to have continued ramifying out throughout the remainder of the 1800s and into the 20th century--by some reckonings even finding expression in the mixed nature of de-industrialization overtaking parts of America during the last several decades. If present-day scholarship has by and large exchanged belief in a single Industrial Revolution for exploration of the numerous routes the early Republic followed <u>into</u> industrialization, so this scholarship has also constructed the <u>later</u> chapters of America's industrial history as equally a house of many mansions.

2a.) <u>What important themes in American history are represented in the Blackstone River Valley</u>?

This question is, I think, best answered from several angles. First, and most obviously, there's the rudimentary truth that inasmuch as textile production did in fact have a crucial role in the overall saga of American industrialization, the mills of the Blackstone Valley need to be taken into account. Starting in the 1780s and through many decades thereafter, they were a vital component of a vital sector of America's industrializing economy.

But to say this, of course, effectively underscores the further truth that the mills of the Blackstone Valley punctuate the compelling aspect of variety characterizing the textile industry. For during extensive swathes of their history, these establishments exemplified the Rhode Island style of textile factory organization. They were not literally the <u>only</u> instances of this format. As already flagged, textile enterprises along similar lines existed generally in southern and central New England; and by some estimates they popped up in other regions as well. But the Blackstone Valley was where this mode of manufacturing--manufacturing accomplished in comparatively modest, non-corporate, rural factory villages that (at first) intersected with outwork and (continuously) depended on family-based labor--was introduced into America and where it flourished. And as such the Blackstone Valley was preeminently where a kind of textile manufacturing took shape that was substantively distinct from other versions of industrial production in the textile slice of the economy. Or to put matters concretely: The Blackstone Valley was home to a kind of textile manufacturing that warrants just as much attention in histories of American cotton and woolen production as either the manufactories of Philadelphia or the mills that tracked the Waltham/Lowell model.

But the message of the Blackstone Valley has broader echoes. Because if not just the textile business but the full sweep of the post-Revolutionary industrial economy was marked by variety, then at least portions of what happened along the Blackstone River represents a particular strand of industrial undertaking that found expression, not just in textiles, but within the aggregate medley of America's industrial enterprises. Specifically, the Blackstone manufactories can be taken to signal a branch of comparatively modest (often non-corporate) manufacturing establishments that were located in concentrated but decentralized and often rural (or at least non-metropolitan)

settings and that for long stretches depended on family labor. Across the 1800s and 1900s, this inflection of industrialization was widespread, salient, and consequential--every bit as widespread, salient, and cumulatively consequential as giant industrial ventures like Ford and U.S. Steel. If the factories of the Blackstone Valley are useful reminders that Lowell was far from the only form of textile manufactory, they are thus equally useful in signaling the presence of a less-than-giant but persistently trenchant stratum of American industrial history.

In sum, the Blackstone Valley embodies the basic theme of heterogeneity in America's industrial history by evincing particular inflections of that history. Beyond this, though, it's surely also worth remarking that the Valley exemplifies--if not uniquely still with marvelous forthrightness--virtually all the interpretive motifs, noted above, that scholars currently attach to the chronicle of industrialization in the United States. Certainly, this milieu provides ample opportunity for documenting the human dimensions of industrial transformations. It contains rich sources bearing on inventive entrepreneurs and larger-than-life proprietors, as well as on working households struggling with greater and lesser success to navigate economic conditions by turns promising and difficult, supportive and sharply constrained. By the same token, the Valley offers splendid resources for exploring unfolding intra-and inter-family relations, ethnic (and occasionally) racial interactions (and tensions), as well as the complex boundaries (and sometimes conflicts) between employees and employers that characterized the lived experience of American industrialization.

So also, the history of the Blackstone Valley enfolds chances to link place and context. The evidence of individuals moving among the separate industrializing sites of the Valley, the intriguing political byplays apparent as people of the Valley jockeyed between employment in one or another industrial enterprise and citizenship in on or another civic jurisdiction, the way cotton itself connected the Valley to regional, extra-regional and ultimately trans-Atlantic communities--all this illuminates the motif of connecting locales with their surroundings. Then too, the rural backdrop to industrialization in the Blackstone supplies an opportunity to foreground the way Americans through much of the 19th century turned the fact of mills-in-the-countryside into a powerful cultural mapping of the industrializing process and of consumption. Unlike Europe (so this formulation ran), the outpouring of goods generated by industrial manufactories need not be tarnished by the rise of hellish cities and corrupting luxury; the country mill village (with its ongoing alliances to farmers and agriculture) was proof that the plenitude of industrialization could come to Americans in ways that avoided urban slums and preserved the simplicity of rural existence.

And of course the Blackstone Valley exemplifies, to genuinely remarkable degrees, the role that was played by the physical environment of industrialization and that scholars have come to ponder with considerable energy. The presence and import of the Blackstone River, the assorted changes wrought on the River (and Canal), along with the buildings of the factory villages--these are just some of the signs, available in documents and embedded in the extant terrain, illuminating the defining engagements between people and settings that transpired in the Valley across the sweep of its industrializing history.

2b.) <u>During what period(s) were these themes represented in the Blackstone Valley to a significant degree</u>?

The short answer is: From the late eighteenth century on.

Part of what's remarkable about the Blackstone Valley is that it remained an arena of viable industrial production from the late 1700s through the antebellum and postbellum 1800s, and on still further until well into the 20th century. The Valley's capacity to represent the key theme of variegated industrialization thus effectively plays out during sequential chapters of America's industrial history. And this is all the more the case because the existing artifacts of the Valley's industrialization--the buildings, machines, and farms, the River and Canal--themselves cover a spread of discrete moments stretching from Samuel Slater's earliest projects to the latest experiments in refitting mill buildings to contemporary purposes.

3.) <u>Given the history and integrity of the Blackstone River Valley, should our resource evaluation focus on individual sites, an accumulation of sites, or the landscape as a whole</u>?

While appreciating the need for selectivity, I'm afraid my answer to this query moves in several directions at once.

On the one hand, it does seem to me sensible to focus on a few sites, with the aim of preserving, developing and/or at least acknowledging their place in the Valley's history. For example:

-The factory building and machine shop at the Old Slater Mill provide intriguing introductions to many of the issues, and some of the luminous protagonists, wrapped up in the Rhode Island style of industrialization.

- The structures at materials present at the Ashton Village Historic District struck me as offering rich potential. The Kelly House exhibit bearing on transportation issues (especially the River and Canal) might be expanded. And I wonder whether the examples of mill housing that (as I recall) are present at this site might not be marshaled into exhibits dealing with the nature of workers' residences, perhaps at separate moments. (A model here might be the Tenement Museum in New York City, with its meticulously researched replication of rooms at different periods.)

-The Hopedale and Slatersville sites provide opportunity to signal (at least) the presence of buildings devoted to manufacturing in the 20th century and of structures recommissioned to new residential functions.

On the other hand, it seems to me of major importance to communicate the core proposition that the Valley existed historically as a coherent whole: that it was in fact a network of sites knit together by both shared interests and competition, by the steady movement of materials and people, and--manifestly--by the Blackstone River.

This proposition might be transmitted in several ways. Exhibits at particular sites could be designed to give greater attention to the overall context of the Valley. But I'd hope it would also prove possible to further promote and facilitate tours through the length and breadth of the Valley. Existing roadway signage might be expanded and regularized into easily recognized indicators for drivers; and they might be aligned with various electronic voice-guides. Bus and boat tours might be expanded, and the bike path preserved, expanded, and more widely advertised. I also wonder if it might not be possible to create tours that retrace the routes taken by particular individuals--both entrepreneurs and workers--as they moved through the Valley in years gone by, so that visitors could follow the paths of known inhabitants across space and time: an industrial version of Boston's Freedom Trail.

I trust it's evident I regard the Blackstone River Valley as a precious component of the American heritage. I hope the foregoing comments will prove helpful in composing plans to acknowledge and celebrate that heritage.

Respectfully Submitted,

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