

# Reviews

## LANDSCAPE OF INDUSTRY: AN INDUSTRIAL HISTORY OF

the Blackstone Valley

Worcester Historical Museum

Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2009. 196 pp.  
hardcover, ISBN 978-1-58465-777-4

Reviewed by Anne Knowles

Geography Department, Middlebury College,  
Middlebury, VT

Efforts to preserve historical landscapes face growing challenges in the early twenty-first century. Historic sites have to earn their keep by drawing tourist dollars while teaching school-children the significance of local history year after year. Fund-raising, never easy, becomes harder during economic downturns. The current slump is forcing many states and the federal government to slash funding to non-essential services such as staffing and maintaining historical parks. Industrial sites can be particularly difficult to establish and maintain because they often stand on prime downtown real estate that could be turned to more profitable uses by private investors, and because industrial history is not to everyone's taste. These circumstances make it all the more important to tell compelling stories about industries whose productive days are long over.

The contributors involved in creating *Landscape of Industry: An Industrial History of the Blackstone Valley* embraced these challenges. Their book, which aims to attract armchair historians and students new to industrial history, shares the comprehensive view of regional history that has informed the creation of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor over the past twenty-five years. The essays in the book cover leading entrepreneurs, workers and labor movements, transportation, community life, and the connections among textile manufacturing, slave cotton, and abolitionism in the region. Collectively, the authors argue that the valley's industrial history is unique in the United States. English immigrant Samuel Slater famously built the country's first textile factory on the Blackstone River falls in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. The textile mills that Slater, his relatives, and American entrepreneurs built anchored a series of manufacturing villages up the Blackstone River. Other kinds of industries joined the mills at water-power sites that became crowded but intensively productive urban-industrial places. The river's knotted strand of industries drew an early canal and then railroads, as well as tens of thousands of workers from industrializing Europe and rural New England.

The claim of uniqueness rests chiefly on the influence of Slater's mill, built in 1790 – 93, the first fully mechanized textile factory in the United States. The mill's construction and the company's paternalistic model of management together formed "a blueprint that was repeated and imitated across the region" (p. 85). Although some essays mention the competing model established by Boston investors in Waltham and Lowell, Massachusetts, the book focuses almost entirely on the Blackstone Valley as a region where "industrial transformation" dramatically changed the American way of life. That phrase comes from the fertile, sometimes contentious

scholarly debate in the 1980s and 1990s that strove to determine just when, and how willingly, Americans shifted from an economy based on barter and exchange and fair use of natural resources to one governed by the principles of competitive capitalism. Scholars such as economic historian Winnifred Rothenberg and social historian Christopher Clark drew on the wealth of economic data, court decisions, and company records for firms located in Providence, Worcester, and many towns in between. The significance of this debate lends heft to the more scholarly essays in this book. It also gives some interpretive weight to the argument that the issues worked out in the Blackstone Valley were important to American economic development more broadly.

One could take issue with just how influential the Slater mill and its immediate descendants were as models for American manufacturing. I think the book's more justified claim is that events in the Blackstone Valley were representative of many major themes in nineteenth-century American history. Labor relations in the region ran the gamut from local people living in industrial villages who labored under the careful eye of the factory owner (as at Slatersville, owned by Samuel's brother John Slater) to very large, corporate concerns where recent immigrants fought for their rights with and without the aid of unions. The book powerfully conveys the character of industrial communities, work culture, and the built landscape in the Blackstone Valley. It is a superb field guide to the region; the text is generously illustrated with locator maps and photographs that document past industrial activity and what one can see in the landscape today. My only wish regarding this part of the book is that the authors and illustrators had worked together more closely, as the maps and photographs do not always match their textual references.

Few books on a region's industrial history strike such a good balance between the accessibility and clear story line of public history and the depth of detail and documentation that scholars require. The contributors include representatives from both fields. They have wisely been allowed to play to their strengths, with more substantive chapters by historians and more general overviews and bridging anecdotes by park rangers. One gets the sense that the book was a collaborative effort — or it was well edited — as the authors rarely tread on one another's material. *Landscape of Industry* will stand as an excellent point of entry for anyone interested in understanding the economic history of the Blackstone Valley and how that history became embedded in place. I hope it helps make the case for the long-term preservation of the remarkable remnants of the valley's industrial landscapes.