Research Note

Federal Investment Attracts Private Investment in Industrial Historic Sites

Abstract:

This Research Note discusses why people are returning to the Blackstone Valley, America's industrial birthplace. Beginning in 1790, with cotton manufacturing, the Valley became the place to achieve the "American Dream." By the 1940s, industry was leaving. The Valley went into an economic freefall, people moved on, and mill villages decayed. In 1986, the National Park Service, with special legislation, and the Valley's historic resources, began to tell the story about this special landscape. Using education, the Blackstone River is cleaner, historic properties are being thoughtfully restored, and visitation is growing. Private investment in the Valley is now 15 times the US National Park Service investment.

Key words:

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Robert Billington, President
Blackstone Valley Tourism Council Inc

Chairman, Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission

Blackstone Valley Visitor Center
175 Main Street
Pawtucket, Rhode Island, 02860 USA
BVRI@AOL.COM

Introductory Footnote:
Robert Billington is a Certified Tour Professional. He holds an MBA in Hospitality Administration from Johnson & Wales University. He is the founder of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, a regional tourism planning, and development organization. He is Chairman of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, and a member of the National Tour Association, the American Bus Association, and the Travel Industry Association of America. He is a third year doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island, USA. He seeks to improve the way tourism planning, and development is learned in the United States.

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The Blackstone River Valley is unique. It played a "seminal role in transforming New England, and America, from a colonial landscape of farmlands and forests to one of riverside mills and urban factories" (ntaonline, 2003). According to the US National Park Service, the Blackstone Valley, is: "one of the Nation's richest and best preserved repositories of landscapes, structures and sites that recall a neglected era of the American past: the age of industry" (CHLMP, 2001). The Valley is situated in New England, 200 miles north of New York City, 40 miles south and west from Boston, Massachusetts and 10 miles north of Providence, Rhode Island. It encompasses 2 states, 24 communities, and is home to 450,000 people.

The Blackstone Valley takes its name from the Reverend William Blackstone, the first European settler to make his home on the banks of the river in 1635 (Boucher, 1986). The 45-mile long Blackstone flows from Worcester, Massachusetts to the top of Narragansett Bay in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, dropping 450 feet along the way (CHLMP, 2001).

The Valley rose to prominence in 1790, when English immigrant Samuel Slater built the first successful water-powered cotton-spinning mill in America (SMHS, 2002). "More than any other single event this…can be said to mark the birth of the American Industrial Revolution, and the complete transformation of American life, and character" (CHLMP, 2001). Slater was barely an adult when his work in America served to sever the economic tie between America and England making America economically, and politically free.

This unusually steep drop of the Blackstone provided Slater, and his successors with the ability to harness the Blackstone for waterpower (CHLMP, 2001). Because of his unique understanding of manufacturing, and business, Slater went on to become known as the *Father of American Manufactures.*

The Blackstone Valley had the technology, knowledge, and ingenuity to capitalize on the energy of the river. Hundreds of mills were built throughout the Blackstone Valley after Slater's success. These textile mills provided the underpinning for the United States, to become a world economic leader. Immigrants flocked to the Blackstone's textile industry from every nation to create a new life.

After 150 years of aggressive growth, and prosperity, the textile industry in the Blackstone Valley hit hard times. Companies moved south, and the mills grew silent. Outdated technology, labor troubles, and the climate were to blame (CHLMP, 2001). The region was plagued with decaying mills, contaminated landscapes, a toxic river, and plunging community morale. The textile industry that built America eventually killed the Blackstone River, and devastated its environment.

The social turmoil, and restlessness in the United States in the 1960s led to positive action along the Blackstone River. In 1972 change began to emerge. The people of the Valley had enough of their polluted river, and wanted to do something to bring it back to when it ran clear. Leadership from volunteers, and support from Rhode Island's major newspaper, they organized under the banner, *ZAP the Blackstone,* and built a 10,000-person cleanup project in September of that year. This effort, which cleaned the river of trash, refrigerators, washing machines, and thousands of tires, coincided with environmental activism around the world (Providence Journal, 1972).

With the *ZAP the Blackstone* project taking hold of people's imaginations, plans for a cleaner community, and the idea of a linear park along the river were born. By 1985, an effort to develop a program to attract visitors to the Blackstone Valley was launched. Although tourism development was laughable to many in Rhode Island because of the past 200 years of environmental degradation in the Valley, after five years the programs of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council began to work, and people became believers in this new industry. The

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planning and development of tourism in the Blackstone Valley became a priority in every community in the Valley. The idea of the Blackstone Valley becoming a visitor destination was launched.

The former textile mills were seen as important places of heritage, and key to the future of the Blackstone Valley. They were to become a necessary part of a success story. “Tangible heritage, includes all assets that have some physical embodiment of cultural values such as historic towns, buildings, archaeological sites, cultural landscapes, and cultural objects, or items of movable cultural property” (McKercher & duCros, 2002). Some empty mills were being considered as places to convert to living, and work places in the early 1980s.

It took years before the river’s natural life began to show signs of recovery, and many more before it will be clean enough for swimming, but the river regeneration has progressed. People were considering a return to the river for purposes other than industry. Tourism, historical preservation, and landscape planning were beginning to work in unison. The first condominium mill-reuse project to be built on the Blackstone River in the mid 1980s was Blackstone Landing in Pawtucket. Collette Vacations, the oldest tour operator in America, makes their high-tech world headquarters in a major portion of this building employing hundreds.

Officials in the State of Rhode Island, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts knew that if the health of the river were to be improved it would have to be accomplished in a different way; it would have to be done across state jurisdictions. In the early 1980s the two states petitioned the National Park Service to review the Blackstone River Valley, and all of its historic, and cultural resources, to determine any level of national significance. The idea of the creation of a visitor destination had a greater chance of success if National Recognition was achieved.

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According to August R. Carlino, Chair of the Alliance of National Heritage Areas:

> Heritage development – the conservation of historical and cultural resources, the protection of natural resources, the development of tourism and community revitalization programs, along with the establishment of education and interpretive projects – has become a critical element in the economic strategies that are being crafted in communities, cities and states across America (ANHA, 2002).

Congress in 1986, designated the Blackstone Valley a National Heritage Corridor for the purposes of: "preserving, and interpreting for the educational, and inspirational benefit of present, and future generations the unique and significant contributions to our national heritage of certain historic and cultural lands" (Public Law 99-647, November 10, 1986). All improvement, redevelopment, and regeneration projects would remain in state, local, or private hands, with the National Park Service lending leadership, technical assistance, financial resources, and their imprimatur to the region.

Visions for significant change, and future success, had to be made graphic, and clearly communicated so community; state, and federal leaders could understand what was possible for the Blackstone Valley. This was done through a call to action to develop community driven plans; ones that could be implemented, and from which the community would benefit. It was critical that residents shared a common vision, a national vision. "Increasingly, it is recognized that cultural heritage management needs to adopt a community wide or regional perspective, rather than focusing on individual buildings or sites" (McKercher & duCros, 2002).

Education on all levels of the community has brought about change, both attitudinally, and financially. Since the creation of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, approximately $21 million in federal funds have been invested in the Valley. These funds have assisted 24 communities, and hundreds of projects in both states. Each project leverages these federal funds, to tell the Blackstone Valley National story.

The National Park Service funding has been key in creating a high profile context for private investors. This federal investment is beginning to shrink as a percent of what private

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investors are investing in the historic resources of the Valley. Close to $300 million in private funds have been attracted to the riverfront in the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor. Most of these funds have been invested in the last five years.

It took several years for change to be noticeable in the Valley. The public investments in culture, heritage and land-use planning are bringing improvements in quality of life along the Blackstone River. The length of time to see change was to be expected.

> Even though the end products of regional tourism planning should include stimulation of tourism awareness, new interagency governmental cooperation, greater public-private collaboration, and identification of zones of greatest potential, seldom does this process immediately result in brick-and-mortar new tourism development (Gunn, 1994).

According to the planning documents of the National Heritage Corridor, community-wide education is the way in which their mission is being accomplished. “The Commission will focus on education, support for recovery programs at the various governmental and grassroots levels, and opportunities for the River to become a vital part of the community and economic revitalization” (TNTY, 1999).

Businesses, and financial institutions are now considering the Blackstone Valley a sound place to invest their money and future. Private investors are following these public investments, and their funds are spilling-over into the riverfront downtowns, that are begging for revitalization dollars.

Some of the private investments in riverfront projects in the National Heritage Corridor:

- In Pawtucket the American Heritage River Building in Pawtucket, purchased in 1999, has undergone a $4 million renovation to office space.
- Also in Pawtucket, reconstruction of the Green and Daniels Mills in Pawtucket to condominiums and offices. $4 million (est.)
- Additionally in Pawtucket the construction of a Holiday Inn Express Hotel on the Pawtucket River is ready to break ground - $16 million construction

- And in Pawtucket the $14 million Riverfront Lofts, a live-work former textile mill condominium project is under construction.
- In Central Falls the Central Falls Landing is underway with a projected $6 million private investment. (M. Cook, personal communication, March, 2003)
- In Cumberland a former textile mill adjacent to the Blackstone Bike Path and Blackstone River is being converted to market-rate housing at a cost of $25 million.
- In Lincoln, Highland Falls, a former cotton mill, are now riverfront condominiums, $5 million (est.) (S. Sheppard, personal communication, March, 2003).
- In Woonsocket, the former Narragansett Knitting Mills is being developed as market-rate housing. A $1 million conversion. (M. Presbilowitz, personal communication, March, 2003).
- In North Smithfield, there are three riverfront projects in early stages that are valued at $25 million.
- In East Providence planning at the former Ocean State Steel Company is underway with a $200 million conversion to housing, offices and retail space.
- In Sutton Massachusetts a $45 million river view condominium construction project underway.

Artists, and small business owners, are finding the Blackstone Valley an interesting place to live, and work. Affordable historic mill buildings, and a welcoming can-do attitude in each city and town, are bringing artists back to the Valley where innovation, and creativity was launched in America two hundred years earlier. Professionals are eager to establish a residence, and build their businesses in the Blackstone Valley.

The federal investment of National Heritage Corridor dollars since 1986 has fueled redevelopment. Based on this foundation, programs to develop tourism, clean up the river,

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create heritage museums, restore theaters, build a bike path, and plan a river access system, including the construction of two riverboats, are investments that are drawing significant private funds to the Valley. Public investments throughout history have done the same thing.

Private investment along side the interstate highway system exits is an example of how private investment follows public investment. Several more buildings, in historic districts, are being sought by preservation minded private investors. This could mean sustainability of the historic fabric of the Blackstone Valley, which is vital to residents, their cultural history, and the visitor industry.

The Blackstone River Valley has halted its economic free-fall. Each community, working with their respective states, the National Park Service, and dozens of non-profit organizations, is making the Blackstone Valley a region in which to live, to invest, and to visit. Through education, and investment, the Valley is cleaning up its environment, preserving its past, drawing visitors, and is telling its story of national significance to the world. In the Blackstone Valley, leadership and involvement on all levels of the community, has created positive change.

Community revitalization, based on education, historic preservation, landscape improvements, private and public investments, are causing this new found awareness to ensure the Blackstone Valley is not just a place to make a living, but a place worth living.

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Professor Kaye Chon
Chair Professor and Head
Dept of Hotel and Tourism Management
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Hung Ho, Kowloon, Hong Kong
hmkchon@polyu.edu.hk