

# VII. HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCES

## INTRODUCTION

Historic and cultural resources are arguably among the most crucial aspects of any healthy community and an important quality of life factor. Woonsocket's historic and cultural resources are an integral part of its character. Preserving the City's many historic buildings, landscapes, places, and objects and opening them to the public enhances connections among residents, allowing them to recognize they have a collective past. Cultural resources can also be connected to the City's history, as well as the social and environmental aspects of Woonsocket today. These include the arts, educational institutions, and community traditions and events. All these resources collectively provide a sense of place in Woonsocket.

## Vision for Historic & Cultural Resources

*Over the next 20 years, Woonsocket will work to ensure our heritage is maintained and celebrated through preservation of our historic architecture and promotion of our cultural, arts, and tourism resources, including our location in the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor.*

For greater detail on data and statistics related to historic and cultural resources, see the Historic & Cultural Resources chapter of the Baseline Report of the Comprehensive Plan.

## WHAT WE HEARD

Based on community surveys and other methods of public engagement, residents want the City to focus on:

- Connecting owners of historic properties with the resources to maintain them.
- Balancing the need to preserve buildings against the danger of adding bureaucracy that hinders the redevelopment of older buildings.
- Understanding when historic buildings should be preserved and when old buildings simply need to be torn down (public hazards).
- Working with private developers to renovate neglected historic buildings, including mills.
- Integrating local history into the school curriculum.
- Planning or promoting historic and cultural tours.
- Hosting more culturally diverse events for all ages, including festivals, music, theater, and art.
- Celebrating all the many different cultures and heritages that exist in Woonsocket.
- Collaborating with other communities in the Blackstone Valley to draw more people to the area.

*“By promoting pride in [the] community, you provide a foundation for moving the city in a positive direction.” – Survey respondent*

*“New England's greatest asset is its mass of culture, including its people, location, and building structures. We should be taking advantage of opportunities to attract artists to this beautiful area, work together with other communities to continue our bike path and public services and be part of a great reinvention.” – Survey respondent*

## HISTORIC RESOURCES

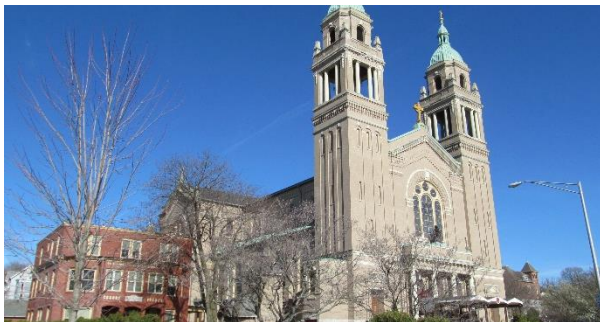
Woonsocket's historic resources are well documented and impressive, rivaling that of Providence and Newport in many regards. Although many of the City's historic structures and sites remain, others have been lost over the years. While these losses have certainly left gaps in Woonsocket's historical environment, the City's overall character has been largely preserved. Unfortunately, that character is now more fragile than ever, and additional losses could prove devastating. Every effort must be made to ensure that future losses of the City's significant cultural resources do not occur.

Over recent decades, Woonsocket has experienced an increase in the number of historic properties falling into disrepair and abandonment. There are several examples of historic properties that have been lost to demolition and even more examples of historic properties being renovated in ways that degrade the historic nature of the structures.

The City has a small but active Historical Society, which plays a large role in raising awareness of historic resources in Woonsocket. The Woonsocket Historical Society has offices and a collection of artifacts in a small space Downtown and has been working to increase their advocacy and services. They also conduct educational outreach to local schools and try to make their resources available to the public. They have successfully applied for grants and have added buildings to the historic register. The Society hopes to better promote themselves in the community and is seeking grants to help with marketing and public awareness, as well as working on their first website.

While there are several historic districts in the City as well as buildings and sites on the State and National Historic Registers, there is no local Historic District Commission. There has been general resistance to having a Historic District Commission since the last one was disbanded in the 1990s, but Society members believe this would be a useful tool for protecting and improving historic buildings. For any future Historic District Commission to be successful, it would need to be charged with balancing both a strong value of historic preservation and a realistic understanding of development and redevelopment challenges.

In the community survey, nearly 70% of respondents said “Preserving and protecting culturally and historically significant structures” was Important or Very Important. However, the creation or reestablishment of a local Historic District Commission to regulate the use and appearance of historic structures was viewed less favorably, at just under 50%. Voluntary design guidelines for owners of historic properties were viewed even less favorably, at 44%. Given this, the City may focus more on the preservation of City-owned, commercial, and institutional buildings and connecting homeowners with outside funding resources for preservation efforts.





The historic resources of Woonsocket demonstrate a wealth of religious, residential, industrial, and civic architecture. Examples include: Upper left: St. Ann's Church, 1913 (Wikipedia). Upper right: Henry Darling House, 1865 (Wikipedia). Lower left: Bernon Worsted Mill, 1919 (Wikipedia). Lower right: Woonsocket District Courthouse, 1896 (Wikipedia).



The Historic Districts of Woonsocket celebrate different eras of Woonsocket's social and economic history. Examples include: Upper left: Cato Hill, listed 1976 (Wikipedia). Upper right: Island Place, listed 1990 (Wikipedia). Lower left: Main Street, listed 1991 (Wikipedia). Lower right: South Main Street, listed 1982 (Wikipedia).

## CULTURAL RESOURCES

Culture (including the arts) and history are often intertwined, and all the City's historical resources also have cultural value and significance. It would be impossible to list every cultural resource in Woonsocket, which range from major institutions and organizations to smaller arts and theater groups to cultural food traditions like the dynamite to social clubs and societies. Places such as the Museum of Work and Culture, the Stadium Theatre, and the St. Ann Arts and Cultural Center draw visitors from all over the region. Cultural organizations such as Riverzedge Arts enhance the quality of life for young people and provide opportunities for employment and recreation.

There are many other organizations that support the arts and bring cultural experiences to Woonsocket. In fact, too many to be listed! Dozens of churches provide not only religious services, but enrich the community with music, art, and performances. Fraternal organizations provide activities for their members, families, and the public at large. And multiple organizations representing the wide array of cultural and ethnic communities in Woonsocket host festivals, parades, and other events throughout the year, most notably

including Autumnfest. These local organizations play a huge role in the community and culture of Woonsocket, grounding longtime residents and providing a welcome network for newcomers.

The resources discussed above scratch the surface of what Woonsocket has to offer culturally. Combined, they not only make quality of life richer for Woonsocket residents, but they also serve as a draw for visitors and tourists and a boost to the local economy.



Woonsocket's cultural resources enhance quality of life for residents and draw visitors from around the region. Examples include: Upper left: Autumnfest Parade (Autumnfest). Upper right: Stadium Theatre (Wikipedia). Lower left: Museum of Work and Culture (Smithsonian Magazine). Lower right: Riverzedge Arts (Valley Breeze).

### Cultural Diversity

Woonsocket is a City of immigrants. From its early days as a center of industry and mill villages, immigrants from Quebec, Italy, Portugal, and more flocked to Woonsocket for jobs. As they established roots in the area, they founded churches, schools, social organizations, and other networks, many of which survive today. That spirit of immigration has continued, with more recent arrivals of immigrants of Latin American and Asian descent, as well as an increase in African Americans. This cultural diversity is a great asset and something the City should celebrate and be known for. Our country, workplaces, and schools increasingly consist of various cultural, racial, and ethnic groups, and children raised in Woonsocket will have an advantage, having grown up learning how to interact with people of different backgrounds. Plus, this diversity makes Woonsocket a more fun and interesting place to be.



# BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

The Blackstone Valley was the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution. The waters of the Blackstone River powered this country's first textile mills. In recognition of the historical and cultural significance of this area, in 1986 the United States Congress established the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor. Woonsocket is located at the heart of this Heritage Corridor, created to "preserve and interpret for future generations the unique and significant contribution to our national heritage of certain historic and cultural lands, waterways and structures" within this area. In 1996 and again in 2006, Congress reauthorized the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor.

In 2014, the Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park was established. The same legislation also extended the authorization of the National Heritage Corridor. The National Historical Park, much like the National Heritage Corridor, was established to interpret the nationally significant sites and districts that convey the industrial history of the Blackstone River Valley, and works to support the network of partners, related resources, and facilities throughout the National Heritage Corridor. While the boundaries of the Park have not officially been set, all the resources in the Corridor, including the "Heritage Center" at the Museum of Work and Culture, are a part of the experience for visitors.

The Blackstone River Valley is historically significant for many reasons. It is the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution, influencing the rest of the country through the industrial use of waterpower and the development of the Rhode Island System of Manufacturing. It is an area characterized by ethnic and religious diversity. The Blackstone River Valley's remarkable history is revealed in its concentrations of historic, cultural, and natural resources that have survived through the past two centuries. The context of a "working valley" of mill villages, farms, cities and towns, transportation systems, river, and canal is what makes the individual elements of the Blackstone River Valley significant.

Support for the Corridor and the Park and cooperation with all the other municipalities in Rhode Island and Massachusetts that are part of the Blackstone River Valley should be a continued goal for Woonsocket. A thriving Corridor and Park will mean more visitors to Woonsocket, which will mean more spending at local businesses and restaurants and other boosts to the local economy. To take full advantage of these economic benefits, it is important to maintain a healthy environment in and around the Blackstone River, make investments in transportation – including the Blackstone River Bikeway – to ensure sites in Woonsocket are accessible, and ensure land uses along the river and around important sites are compatible. To this latter point, a River Corridor Overlay District has been enacted by the City to better regulate future land use in the most critical areas. The City also has a Design Review Overlay District, which regulates new commercial and mixed-use developments throughout the City. This regulatory tool can continue to ensure that new commercial and mixed-use developments are sensitive to the historical context of Woonsocket as a Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor and Historical Park community.

In the community survey, nearly 2/3 of respondents said “Promoting Woonsocket’s identity as a Blackstone Valley community” was Important or Very Important. Just over 60% felt the same for “Promoting cooperation and coordination with other Blackstone Valley communities.” Woonsocket’s identity as a part of the Blackstone River Valley should continue to be a priority for the City.



Scenes from sites associated with the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor and Historical Park. Upper left: River Island Park (Visit Rhode Island). Upper right: Thunder Mist Falls (US Army Corps of Engineers). Lower left: Costa Park (Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor). Lower right: Cold Spring Park and Canoe Launch (City of Woonsocket).

## GETTING IT DONE

GOAL VII-1: The City’s historical and cultural resources are protected and preserved in an integrated manner.

POLICY VII-1.1: Preserve, invest in, and raise public awareness of Woonsocket’s significant historic structures and sites as valuable heritage resources.

ACTION VII-1.1.a: Encourage and support owners of historic properties to have those properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places, which provides access to funds for renovations and other benefits.

ACTION VII-1.1.b: Educate developers and property owners about the benefits of placing voluntary preservation easements on their historic properties.

ACTION VII-1.1.c: Update the City's inventory of National Register-listed sites and historic districts as additions are made, and prominently promote these resources on the City's website.

POLICY VII-1.2: Value and prioritize Woonsocket's historic Main Street (Downtown) and Blackstone riverfront as the central focus for historic preservation and revitalization.

ACTION VII-1.2.a: Review the Design Review and River Corridor Overlay Districts to assess what is working and what is not working and consider amendments that will help these districts work better together with the common goal of ensuring appropriate use of historic resources along Main Street (Downtown) and the Blackstone riverfront.

ACTION VII-1.2.b: Apply for funding to implement the changes recommended in the Wayfinding Master Plan for Downtown Woonsocket, the Main Street Livability Plan, and the Main Street Road Safety Assessment.

POLICY VII-1.3: Focus redevelopment efforts on the adaptive reuse of vacant and underutilized historic structures, especially former mill buildings.

POLICY VII-1.4: Recognize, protect, and preserve key historic and cultural resources utilizing innovative land use management tools, such as zoning regulations and incentives.

ACTION VII-1.4.a: Consider mandatory design review for historic districts tied to voluntary historic district guidelines.

ACTION VII-1.4.b: Strengthen the review process within City Departments when historic properties are involved or affected by development. Consider applying design review to larger residential developments and adding a "Historic Context" section to the City's Design Guidelines.

ACTION VII-1.4.c: Amend the Planning Board review process to require Applicants to compare their project to resource maps for all sensitive natural, cultural and archaeological resources and provide a narrative of impacts and how they will be mitigated.

POLICY VII-1.5: Embrace the unique cultural heritage of the City and use it as a selling point.



ACTION VII-1.5.a: Amplify and educate residents about our City's multitude of cultures, providing and promoting opportunities for people to dialogue and engage with folks outside of their normal social circles.

POLICY VII-1.6: Coordinate local historic, cultural, and arts organizations to more efficiently use limited resources and volunteer time.

ACTION VII-1.6.a: Partner with local organizations to raise public awareness of cultural resources in Woonsocket through increased signage, marketing, and promotional events.

ACTION VII-1.6.b: Continue to support public art in public and private outdoor spaces, such as murals, sculptures, and temporary works, as well as in public buildings such as City Hall, the library, the senior center, and schools.

GOAL VII-2: Woonsocket is fully integrated into and identified as a critical part of the broader Blackstone Valley region and is an active partner in regional efforts.

POLICY VII-2.1: Interpret the Valley's importance and sponsor activities which lead to public education and engagement about Woonsocket's and the Valley's local historic and cultural resources.

ACTION VII-2.1.a: Incorporate interpretive features of historic information into public projects when appropriate, with the assistance of the Woonsocket Historical Society and other partners.

ACTION VII-2.1.b: Encourage the Education Department to develop an interpretive education curriculum for grades K-12 involving the Museum of Work and Culture, the Historical Society, and other key partners.

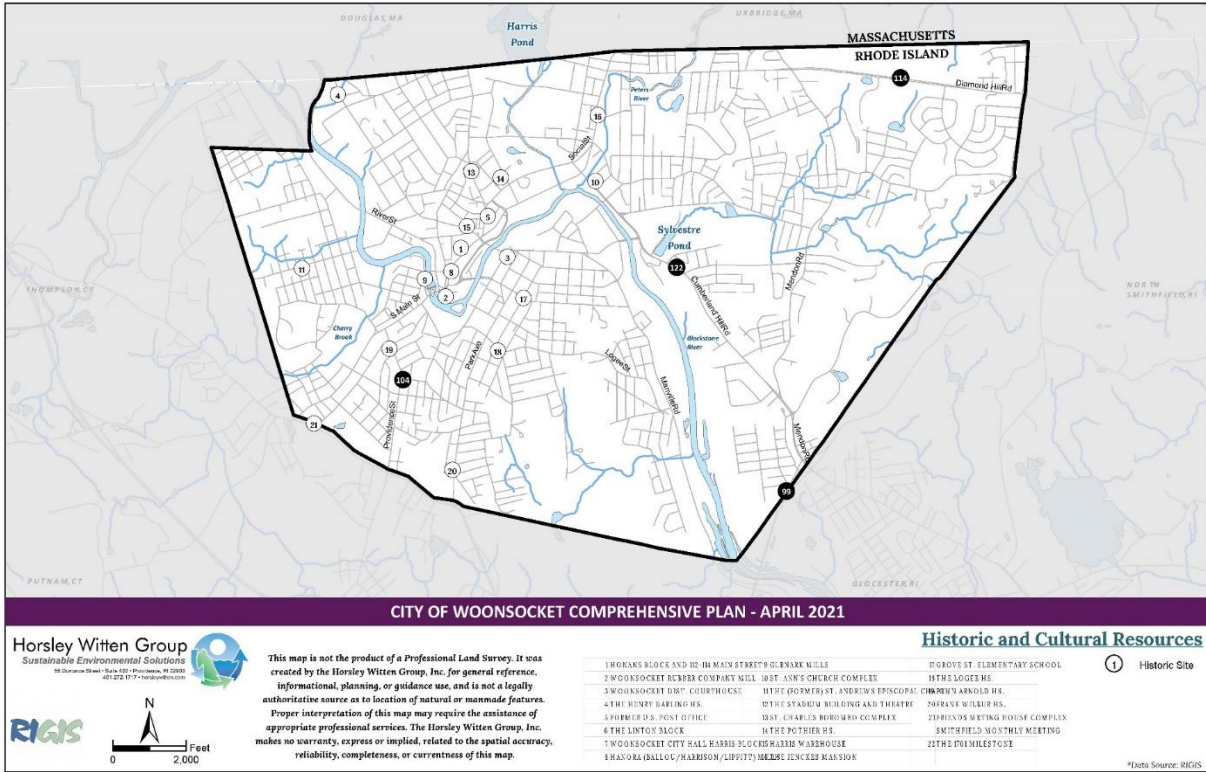
POLICY VII-2.2: Expand heritage tourism opportunities as a means of preserving Woonsocket's heritage resources and as a sustainable economic development tool.

ACTION VII-2.2.a: Advocate at the State level for the continued presence of the Blackstone Valley in the tourism plans for Rhode Island.

ACTION VII-2.2.b: Utilize the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council's Tourism Plan and the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor's plans as a basis for developing appropriate local tourism strategies and programs.

POLICY VII-2.3: Actively partner in Valley-wide historic and cultural heritage projects and initiatives.

ACTION VII-2.3.a: Collaborate with the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, the Blackstone Watershed Collaborative, and others for continuation and promotion of events and activities that draw visitors to the region.



Map VI-1. Historic & Cultural Resources  
Source: RIGIS