That race to catch up and compete with England—price wars raged for decades as the nations vied to produce and sell the most goods—also coincided with the seminal debate between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton over which governing and economic engines would prevail in the new country, and America’s push for independent commerce and trade. Definitions and measures of “progress” and “success,” for both individuals and the nation, began to be standardized and, literally, weighed and clocked by the wealth-holders: the new textile-manufacturing and other producers who increasingly controlled workplace conditions and the demand for labor. Over time, Klyberg notes, that also led to the influx of immigrant workers, the rise of labor unions, widespread railroad infrastructure, and even corporate-like business structures: “So much of what we consider modern America starts in the stories of these little valley towns and villages along the Blackstone River.”

Waves of industrial activity through the nineteenth century, he explains, resulted in “almost constant innovation, change, and expansion.” During the first half of the 1800s, fights over water rights accounted for a third of the lawsuits filed in Rhode Island, according to Klyberg. Farms and food production also evolved fairly quickly, growing from subsistence farming to production levels that fed valley neighbors now working in the mills. The advent of rail lines and travel to the Midwest “meant that grains and meats could be produced more cheaply out there and shipped east,” he adds, “so local farms went to eggs, dairy, and vegetables—perishables that don’t travel well.” Worcester and Pawtucket became the commercial hubs, but mills and factories sprouted up along the river and its tributaries. Industrialization, like the crucial power looms manufactured in Hopedale, Massachusetts, at the Draper Corporation (once one of the world’s largest producers), spread beyond textiles to hundreds of different products: rubber, wire, tools, steam engines, toys, and paper. Production peaked in the post-Civil War era, in the age of steam, roughly between 1870 and 1920. But the majority of enterprises were shuttered before, or by, the Great Depression.

Efforts to highlight and preserve the tangible aspects of this early history led to the 1986 designation of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, which covers 25 communities within the watershed, each with its own self-guided tours. The Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park, estalished in 2014, encompasses six non-contiguous sites within that corridor: the Old Slater Mill complex, Captain Wilbur Kelly House Transportation Museum/Blackstone River State Park, Ashton, and Slaterstown (in Rhode Island), plus the Massachusetts communities of Whitinsville and Hopedale.

Of the national park venues, the Old Slater Mill landmark site—which includes the 1810 Wilkinson Mill and machine shop and the 1758 artisan’s cottage once lived in by Sylamus Brown—and the Kelly House Transportation Museum, offer exhibits, events, lectures, and guided tours from early spring through October. Klyberg reports that the innov-