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A LOCAL HISTORY OF THE BLACKSTONE CANAL

A Interactive Qualifying Project Report

submitted to the Faculty

of the

WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Science

by

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and

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# Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction   | 3  |
| The Push to Build the Canal                          | 5  |
| The Survey of the Land                               | 7  |
| The Bill for the Canal                               | 9  |
| The Forming of the Blackstone Canal Company          | 12 |
| The Projected Economic Effect of the Canal           | 14 |
| Estimates of the Cost of the Canal                   | 15 |
| The Expected Timeline for the Building of the Canal  | 15 |
| The Dimensions for the Canal                         | 16 |
| The Building of the Canal                            | 17 |
| Property Damage Caused by the Canal                  | 19 |
| Shipping Tolls Along the Canal                       | 19 |
| Cost of Transporting Goods                           | 20 |
| Goods Moved on the Canal                             | 21 |
| The Boats of the Blackstone Canal                    | 21 |
| Navigation of the Canal                              | 22 |
| Economy Along the Canal                              | 23 |
| Possible Expansion                                   | 24 |
| Rumors Among the People                              | 25 |
| Mills of the Area                                    | 25 |
| The Relationship Between the Canal and the Mills     | 26 |
| The Railroad and the Closing of the Blackstone Canal | 27 |
| Conclusions  | 27 |
| Bibliography   | 29 |
| List of Newspapers Consulted                         | 30 |

# Introduction

This project was undertaken at the request of Old Sturbridge Village. The Old Sturbridge Village research staff wanted to gather more information on the Blackstone Canal and its history. They felt that having such knowledge would enable them to give the public more information on the history of the region.

The previous Interactive Qualifying Project (IQP) on this topic covered a portion of the Blackstone Canal. The IQP covered the usage of canals as opposed to detailing the history of any one canal. After reading the previous IQP, more questions were raised than answers found about the history of the canal. Little was learned about the effect of the canal on the local areas; therefore this project was designed to cover the Blackstone Canal in detail.

Citizens of the states thought that a canal from Worcester to Providence would be a clear advantage since the railroad had not entered the area. The canal made transporting goods from both cities and towns along the canal much cheaper and more convenient than the previous method of stagecoaches. The citizens also thought that more canals would be constructed since the Blackstone Canal created an economic boom in the towns along the canal.

Considering the nature of the project, a large portion of the research focused on the local newspapers of the era in which the canal was constructed. Brian Zifcak concentrated on researching the newspapers. The newspaper articles were located at the Worcester Antiquarian Society through the use of the index in the newspaper card catalog. The majority of the research was done in this manner. Another reliable source of information was any historical book written specifically about the canal.

Unfortunately, only a few books were located on this subject.

Though the newspapers were a great help, they were not without some faults. For example, the only newspapers found were written in the 1820's and the early 1830's. This provided a wealth of information on how the canal progressed from an idea to a viable waterway for shipping. More information was still needed concerning the second half of the canal's life from the mid 1830's to 1848, when the canal closed.

A small number books that had some information on the Blackstone Canal were located, however, most were not helpful. William Alter spent much time looking for and through books for information. For example, most of the books that covered the local region, barely mentioned the Blackstone Canal. The most helpful book found covered the Blackstone Canal and Railroad. This book uncovered the history of the canal through the late 1830's and 1840's. Unfortunately, this book spent a large part of its time discussing the railroad and spent just one chapter on the canal. Once the information was gathered, we proceeded to retrieve some contrasting information on the Erie Canal. The book used for the information on the Erie Canal was found on the World Wide Web. The book mentioned several people who were involved in the Blackstone Canal.

After gathering the information, it was determined that the newspaper research was more applicable than originally thought. This meant that the bulk of the study dealt with the data revolving around the organization and building of the canal. The tone of the newspapers examined suggests that there may have been some propaganda surrounding the canal project. One reason for this assumption was that not all of the papers examined came from the Blackstone Valley area. Some of the papers were based out of Boston, which did not want a canal from Providence to Worcester but rather

wanted one from Boston to Worcester. Also, the facts that were gathered from the secondary sources told nearly the same story as the papers, but in much less detail. Another advantage to the newspapers was that they gave a better picture of how the communities surrounding the canal felt about its existence. After everything was sorted, both Brian and William spent much time writing the IQP. The IQP was focused around the timeline of the canal, specifically dealing with the organization and construction of the canal as well as the events that lead the canal to be shut down.

## The Push to Build the Canal

The whole idea for a canal from Providence, Rhode Island to Worcester, Massachusetts came about far before a canal was ever built in the Blackstone Valley. Back in 1796, a man named John Brown had the idea to build a canal in this area. John Brown petitioned the state of Rhode Island to build this canal and spent a great deal of time surveying the land with the help of an engineer. He felt that a canal could be built along the Blackstone River and that the land would be fairly easy to work with. Unfortunately, John Brown's attempt failed. Although he had zealously attempted to get the idea on its feet, he failed to gain the money necessary to build the canal. John Brown spent too much time on the design of the canal and very little time in trying to gain the backing he so desperately needed.<sup>1</sup>

In 1821, a stagecoach line was created to transport goods from Providence to Worcester. Unfortunately the stagecoach only ran twice a week and cost three dollars per

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<sup>1</sup> Rhode Island American 1823

The citations used were due to the many articles spanning several months. Labeling all of the articles would take up too much space on the paper.

person round trip, which was a great deal of money at the time for a relatively short trip.<sup>2</sup>

In England, for a great deal of time, canal navigation had not been thought of, but in the early 1800's England built 2400 miles of canals to boost England's productivity. Also, in the early part of the century, canals had saved over \$130 million worldwide. Those countries that had canals at this time had seen great influxes in productivity and income. These countries had boomed because of the ability to transport more goods for less money within their own lands.

With all this information available to merchants, farmers, and others that relied on goods from outside sources, it seemed only natural that eventually these people would realize that something needed to be done. During the winter of 1821-22, the idea for a canal was discussed openly and the thought of one was met with a great deal of support. With so many people interested in the idea, a committee was formed of responsible citizens to investigate the idea more closely and to make recommendations on where and how a canal could be made.

Many people felt that constructing a canal would result in a stronger economy in which more businesses could develop. Studies were performed to determine whether a canal would give an economic advantage. Using these estimates, the committee found that if a farmer had fifty tons of goods to ship, it would cost that farmer ten dollars per ton to ship the goods by land using the present methods. If there were a canal available, the cost would be far less, approximately two dollars per ton. For fifty tons of goods, the farmer would save four hundred dollars. The projected savings would help a farmer enormously in turning a profit.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Columbian Centinal 1823

<sup>3</sup> Columbian Centinal 1823

Other advantages to building a canal were also considered. For instance, a canal would allow for many more people to disburse their goods around a much larger area and in turn allow for many more customers to be serviced. Merchants and farmers would profit five times over alone. Also, it is easier to transport goods along the canal than by using wagons and stagecoaches along dirt roads. Even if the canal boats only moved at three miles per hour, they would still be much safer and less costly than the other modes of transportation at that time. The boats on the canal could also be towed by horse, which would cost roughly twenty-five cents a day and travel approximately thirty miles. The horses would also allow for the boats to<sup>be</sup> unaffected by the wind and the tides. The group also realized that an increase in trade would result and this in turn would increase the land values along the canal, in some cases, as much as twenty to fifty percent.

Other towns in New England were also building canals. There was one that the committee believed was being built from Northampton to Southwick to New Haven in Connecticut. The idea that other canals were being produced added to the fuel that there was a need for a canal from Worcester to Providence. All these factors were taken into account and the committee decided that a canal should be built. They were not alone in this opinion because at this time, interest in the region had greatly increased for the building of a canal.

*Who was on the committee?*

## The Survey of the Land

Once the decision was made to build the canal from Providence to Worcester a location had to be determined. Early in 1822, the decision was made to have Benjamin

Wright survey the land. He was chosen because he was the man who did the surveys for the Erie Canal. Benjamin Wright had his assistant, Holmes Hutchinson, make the topographical survey of the route.<sup>4</sup>

Benjamin Wright had a checkered past. He did do the surveying for the Erie Canal, but his first survey was thrown out and he was forced to make a new one. Also, he speculated that the cost would be \$5 million and that the length would be 363 miles. The Erie Canal turned out to be 428 miles in length and the canal ran up a \$7.5 million debt.<sup>5</sup>

In the fall of 1822 the survey for the Providence-Worcester canal was completed. The survey that Benjamin Wright and Holmes Hutchinson produced for the Blackstone Canal was better than the first survey that they made for the Erie Canal. The report called for 62 locks, each measuring 70 feet by 10 feet, which failed to match the final numbers of 48 locks measuring 80 feet by 10 feet. Also, Wright claimed that the land would be easy to dig out and that very little rock would need to be moved. His report concluded that the distance of the canal would be 45 miles and descend 451.5 feet. When estimating the cost for the canal, he assumed that wood lock gates would be used and therefore arrived at a projected cost of \$322,000.<sup>6</sup> His survey also called for a depth of 3.5 feet for the canal and a width of 32 feet at the top and 18 feet at the bottom. The report added that a towing path could also be easily added along the side of the canal. Also included were the use of the Blackstone River as a guide for the canal and the use of

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<sup>4</sup> National Aegis 1822

<sup>5</sup> National Aegis 1822

<sup>6</sup> Columbian Centinal 1822

<sup>7</sup> Columbian Centinal 1823



North Pond as the feeder lake to the canal.<sup>7</sup> In the beginning of 1823, the plan seemed feasible to the committee in charge and they felt that the water supply would be enough. As a result, committee then decided that it would be a good idea to build the canal.

## The Bill for the Canal

The canal idea was well on its way, but there needed to be an act of incorporation in order for a company to be formed to oversee the building of the canal. With the approval of both Rhode Island and Massachusetts, this task could be accomplished. There were some initial concerns that Massachusetts would reject the idea of a canal that would use Providence as its port city and not Boston. This proved to be excess worry, since the bill was passed nearly unanimously with the exception of the Boston area representatives. The act of incorporation had nineteen sections and explained how the Canal Company would be set up and how it would operate.

“Sec1. Nichols Brown, Edward Carrington, Thomas P. Ives and their associates and successors are hereby created and constituted as the Blackstone Canal Company.

Sec2. That the company has full authority to build, excavate, and fully create a navigable canal. Whereas tow paths, basins, dams, locks, wharves, tollhouses, will be set wherever need be on the canal along the state borders. and there along the canal. Have all purpose of using and means of water sources available Scott’s Pond and Cranberry Pond in Smithfield as so with other marshes and feeders can and will be used for the canal.

Sec3. James Rhodes, Peleg Wilbur JR. and Nicholas brown to be appointed commissioners for the purpose of fixing monuments along the pond, rivers, and lakes respectively in the State of Mass. and RI. respectively.

Sec4. The company is here authorized to use any rivers, streams, or water sources there along the path of the canal. Except for in the dry season that the canal does not exceedingly use the water in the Blackstone River so that the water table and the area will have a water source.

Sec5. That any water that is used by the locks and monuments be replaced there soon after so that the water balance will stay the same. Violation of this part is a \$50 fine for each offence, and there shall be settled in court.

Sec6. That the said company will keep the water table for the mills and factories along the Blackstone so that production can stay the same through out the year.

Sec7. Is said there by the feeders and other means of water to deviate the canal are foreseen and authorized.

Sec8. A toll is hereby granted for the canal. No more than charging 6 cents a ton per mile.

Sec9. The company is to determine the size and relevance of the boats to be used on the canal. Determine the times for passing of what locks thereof, what commodities will and can be transported on the canal.

Sec10. Any person maliciously damaging the said canal, feeders, locks dams, monuments and where abouts along the canal shall be brought forth in front of the court of law... a fine if convicted not to exceed \$150 and no lower than \$35.

Also no more than three years to be served in prison for such acts.

Sec11. That all persons along canal report any mishaps and that the paper employs the canals efforts. Any damages caused by the canal shall be taken upon the disgression of the court and therefore handled by the company so named.

Sec12. Damages with feeders and other forms of waters can and will be assessed the same as for the main river itself.

Sec13. Edward Carrington seen as general Assembly for the Canal Company.

Sec14. That shares of stock in \$100 increments shall be sold to those who wish to hold shares in the said Company. One share one vote. No stockholder shall get more than ten votes allotted to them.

Sec15. New shares of stock are to be created if thereof the stockholders do not bear forth their monies. New stock may be implied for the payments for the canal. Those who do not provide for their new shares will loose the right to vote.

Sec16. Estates along the canal are in respect to that which who owns the land thereof.

Sec17. No stockholder is to pay more than \$100 per share. And that the stock is not to be taxed for eight years after this act.

Sec18. If 20 years thus far passes and the canal is not completed this act is null and void.

Sec19. Incorporation of John Davis, William Green and associates to be building the canal thereof in Mass along the border of RI to its destination in Providence, RI. Any sales of stock are to be used for the sole purpose of

producing the said canal. All intents and views are here by said in the State Of Mass. where there said by the corporation.”<sup>8</sup>

## The Forming of the Blackstone Canal Company

The first commissioners of the Blackstone Canal Company were Edward Carrington, Moses B. Ives, and Steven Smith from Rhode Island, as well as John Lincoln, Sylvanus Holbrook, and John Davis from Massachusetts. The job of these commissioners was primarily to get the company moving by raising money to build the canal. The consensus was that the company should sell stock in order to raise the money needed for the construction of the canal.<sup>9</sup>

The company sold its stock to the residents of the Blackstone River Valley. A proportion of the stock was reserved for each town along the proposed path for the canal. This allowed for the people in these towns to have a fair shot at owning the portions that would pass through their towns. The public responded to the selling of stock. They bought nearly enough stock to pay the projected cost of the canal three times over. The company wanted to raise \$500,000 through these sales, but as it turned out, they sold roughly \$1,230,000 of stock, about \$730,000 more than the company had hoped to sell. The interest was so great that many people felt that if the books had remained open longer, another \$500,000 could have been raised. The advantage to the stock was that there was no risk involved and no insurance required. The purchaser might not make his money back from buying the stock, but the stockholders would not be held accountable

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<sup>8</sup> Rhode Island American 1823

<sup>9</sup> Worcester County Republican 1823

<sup>10</sup> Columbian Centinal 1823

for the company's decisions.<sup>10</sup>

It turned out that two thirds of the stock was bought by people that lived in Rhode Island while Massachusetts had bought just the remaining one third. This made some people worry that Rhode Island would try to claim that the board of commissioners would have to be re-arranged since the board was set up with three commissioners from Rhode Island and three from Massachusetts. This, however, did not create a problem.

Dividends were the main means for direct repayment of the stock from the Blackstone Canal Company. Unfortunately, the company was only able to pay dividends in the early years of the canal operations. The dividend payments for the first five years of the canal's operation can be seen below.

|      |        |
|------|--------|
| 1832 | \$1.00 |
| 1833 | \$0.60 |
| 1834 | \$0.40 |
| 1835 | \$0.50 |
| 1836 | \$0.25 |

What this means is that in 1832, for each stock certificate held a payment of \$1.00. In 1836, a payment of \$0.25 was received for the same stock. Since the stock was sold at \$37.50, the investors were not able to get their money back from their investments this way. Many of the investors made their money back indirectly, by having their goods shipped along the canal or purchasing goods at a lesser price than before the canal was built. Still, many people did not see how they were making their money back; therefore, many people became upset with the company for failing to make enough money for dividends.

Rhode Islanders paid nearly all of the fees because Rhode Island people bought most of the stock. This, in turn, made Rhode Islanders hope that they would receive their

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fair share of the profits, but since the canal never really made enough money; very little money was handed back to the public.

## The Projected Economic Effect of the Canal

Many people from the region were excited about the idea for a canal, however, there was some opposition. The objectors felt that the canal would cost too much and that there would not be any real benefits from the canal. Some even questioned if the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

The initial cost of the canal, for construction and setup, estimated at \$322,000 from the survey, was a rather high price, but the Canal Company felt that it was reasonable and that in the long run the money would be made back. The surveyor, Benjamin Wright, believed that the land surrounding the canal was very fruitful and that the land would be good for crops. With good land in the area, many felt that farmers would move to the region to be able to ship and sell their crops to many more people.<sup>11</sup>

The cost to send goods on the canal would also be far less than the cost to send the same goods on land. The canal would charge by the ton, the same way goods were charged on land, however, the cost would be one cent per ton per mile, while the present land shipping rate was twenty-five cents per ton per mile. The canal would enable farmers and merchants to ship their goods to market twenty five times cheaper than by roads.<sup>12</sup>

The effect on these farmers and merchants would be enormous. The canal would be reliable and in turn the farmers and others could calculate when their goods would

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<sup>11</sup> Columbian Centinal 1823

<sup>12</sup> Columbian Centinal 1823

reach market and calculate with precision the sales of his products, which would allow him to make a formidable profit with the new low budget transport. A merchant could charge the same amount that he did before the canal opened, and if he did so; he could save himself nearly \$10,000 in a single year. With this new argument available from the Canal Company, more people were willing to back the idea for the canal.<sup>13</sup>

## Estimates of the Cost of the Canal

The cost to build the canal would not be cheap. People in the area knew this, but were still unsure how much the canal would cost. The survey done by Benjamin Wright produced some tangible numbers. The estimate from the survey was \$322,000.

Although this was a great deal of money at the time, people in the area still wanted the canal.

The estimated cost from the survey did not stay. The expected price continued to rise as time passed on. Soon, the estimated price was \$500,000 to \$550,000. Even with such a jump in price, the Canal Company forged ahead with the canal.

## The Expected Timeline for the Building of the Canal

In this time period, many thought that canals were inexpensive to build. Many areas would base their timelines on these surveys, yet the surveys would mislead them. Those that performed surveys felt that if they did not see many rocks, then excavating in that area would be easy when in fact, just below the surface there would be granite, shale, or ledge.

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<sup>13</sup> Columbian Centinel 1823

During the time that the Canal Company was looking at the survey and deciding upon a timeline, a new route along a portion of the canal had been found in Mendon. The Canal Company sent Benjamin Wright back out to the site to examine the area again. He concurred and thus part of the canal route was changed.<sup>14</sup>

The Canal Company continued to evaluate the survey in order to set up a time line. They felt that with the expected workload, the canal would be completed in 1827. They felt that all the excavation and the granite locks would be in place so that the canal could open that year.

## The Dimensions for the Canal

The canal was thought of as just a way to transport goods along the Blackstone Valley. This enabled the Canal Company to help decide upon the dimensions of the canal. The waterway would extend from Worcester, MA to Providence, RI and cover a distance of forty-five miles. There would be forty-eight locks each one eighty feet long and ten feet wide. The cost of the locks had changed since the Canal Company decided that the doors on the locks would be granite and not wood -- the product of choice in the survey. Also, the rest of the canal would measure thirty-two feet across at the top, eighteen feet across at the bottom and be four feet deep. The most expensive part of the canal was located in Millbury. In a span of four miles there were nine locks, with eight of those locks coming in a distance of 1.25 miles.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> New England Palladium 1824

<sup>15</sup> New England Palladium 1824



## The Building of the Canal

Excavation started in 1824 in Rhode Island. High hopes were present and the Canal Company expected to have at least one mile completed in the first month.

Northern excavation began at Thomas St. in Worcester on July 8, 1826. The main tools for excavation were picks and shovels and the dirt was removed by wheelbarrow and horse carts.<sup>16</sup>

The workers were paid ten to twelve dollars a month exclusive of room and board. Many unforeseen difficulties arose and they were dealt with properly. The construction of the canal proved to move along rather well. At this point many felt that the progress was excellent and that the canal would be completed on time.

Soon, heavy rock beds were found along the canal route and so the construction crews needed to blast through the area. Even though blasting was dangerous at the time, only one man died, Simon Howard age 22, during the blasting process. At the end of the season in 1826, small portions had been built in Worcester and work would continue the following spring.

The next spring, dams were built up so that floodwaters would not destroy and damage land and homes along the canal route. The spring was filled with rain, but this did not dampen the spirit and work ethic of the workers, for they trudged on and work did not cease.

In Woonsocket, three of the five locks had been built. In fact, seventeen locks between Worcester and Providence had been constructed, however, three of these had not been finished. Each lock had been built using granite in order to last a long time. Each

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<sup>16</sup> New England Palladium 1826

lock therefore, cost \$4000.<sup>17</sup> Roughly 5000-6000 men worked on the canal. Progress seemed slow since heavy rains in autumn and spring had washed out some of the areas being worked on. During construction, many dams were needed to hold back the rain water and to control the water levels on the canal. There were dams at North Pond, Lake Quinsigamond at its junction with Round Pond, Flint Pond, Dorety Pond, Ramshorn Pond, at Pratt's Pond, and two more at Mendon Pond. All of these dams had the words canal dam engraved in them so that it would be clear who insured them. Even with all these dams, more were still needed. There needed to be another dam at Dorety Pond, at Badluck Pond, and across Beaver Brook.

The Erie Canal was also built during this period; in fact it was opened in 1825. The Erie canal was much larger than the Blackstone Canal, in truth the Erie was 428 miles compared to just 45 miles for the Blackstone. Even though the Erie was far bigger, it was still finished in eight years. That meant the workers on the Erie built just over one Blackstone canal a year, but the Erie Canal had over 15,000 workers. Most were Irish immigrants and they worked with shovels and picks and used oxen as well. The original cost estimate for the Erie Canal was five million dollars but by 1825 the canal was 7.5 million dollars in debt.

Work continued on the canal but not until July 1, 1828 was it possible to take a trip over part of the canal. The work continued on the rest of the canal for the rest of the summer and into the fall. On October 11, 1828 the canal was finished. The first boat, the Lady Carrington, traversed the canal at this time with a load of salt and corn. The canal was ready for business.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Worcester County Republican 1824

<sup>18</sup> Yeoman 1828

## Property Damage Caused by the Canal

The Canal Company felt that the damages caused to the land by the canal outweighed the injuries that occurred on the canal. They believe that it would be better to have fewer humans hurt than to worry about the land that was being damaged. The Canal Company would send estimators out to each estate that reported damage to their property. All claims of this nature were forwarded to the company, which addressed the claims in a timely manner.<sup>19</sup>

Rains and dam overflows caused severe damage in some areas. Some claims went up to \$40,000 but most were much smaller. The Canal Company wanted to take care of the claims quickly in order to stay in good faith with the people that lived in the area. The Canal Company kept their word and fixed all that was not proper.<sup>20</sup>

## Shipping Tolls Along the Canal

The tolls on the canal seemed high, but were better than the cost to ship the same amount on land. The Canal Company set the tolls at their prices because they felt that eventually these tolls would pay for the canal itself, but this never happened. Boats would leave from both Providence and Worcester every morning except for Sundays. No singular package was taken for fewer than twenty-five cents.

The following were the rates for the canal for shipping goods per 100 pounds:

|                          |         |
|--------------------------|---------|
| Providence to Worcester: | 17cents |
| Milbury:                 | 15.5    |

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<sup>19</sup> Yeoman 1828

<sup>20</sup> Yeoman 1828

|                   |      |
|-------------------|------|
| Wilkinsonville:   | 15   |
| Leland's Landing: | 14.5 |
| Farnumsville:     | 14   |
| Holbrook Mills:   | 13.5 |
| Batch'r'sbasin:   | 13   |
| Uxbridge:         | 11.5 |
| Milville:         | 9.5  |
| Blackstone:       | 8.5  |
| Woonsocket:       | 7    |
| Mansville:        | 6    |
| Albion Mills:     | 5.5  |
| Kelly's dock:     | 5.5  |
| Lonsdale:         | 5    |

Freight traffic along the canal increased early on but after 1832, a decline in freight traffic along the canal declined due to the advent of the Boston and Worcester railroad. The canal tolls per year can be seen below.

|       |      |             |        |
|-------|------|-------------|--------|
|       | 1829 | tolls were: | \$8606 |
|       | 1830 |             | 12016  |
|       | 1831 |             | 14944  |
| peak: | 1832 |             | 18907  |
|       | 1833 |             | 17545  |
| by    | 1836 |             | 11500  |

The canal throughout the second half of the 1830's continued to have a decline. People were able to ship their goods faster with the railroad and also send them to Boston, which was a bigger city then Providence.<sup>21</sup>

## Cost of Transporting Goods

The reason the canal was successful during the early years was that it did not cost a great deal of money to ship goods along the canal. It cost much more to ship goods on land when compared to the canal. For a person in Worcester, it would cost \$3.80 more per ton to ship goods on land than <sup>4</sup>on the canal. This was the main reason that people all

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<sup>21</sup> Yeoman 1829

along the canal used it over stages and ground transportation.

## Goods Moved on the Canal

The canal enabled for people to ship just about anything they needed to ship from Worcester to Providence. So much more than just lumber and grain was shipped between the two cities and amongst the towns along its path. Shipping goods was the main reason for building the canal in the first place, and the canal was able to do well.

The canal was used to ship lumber, grains, corn, beef and fish, though much more was also transported. Things such as gypsum, shingles, lead pipe, castings, munitions, cotton, molasses, oil for candles, regular candles, wine, gin, groceries, rum, cider, apples, and beer were amongst the list of goods transported. Also, there were limestone quarries in Smithfield, anthracite coal in Cumberland, and granite quarries in Worcester, Northbridge, Uxbridge, Milbury, and Sutton. The fact that the canal was close to all of these areas allowed for easier and cheaper transportation of these products and minerals.<sup>22</sup>

## The Boats of the Blackstone Canal

The boats that were used on the canal were designed for the canal. They were 70 feet long and just over nine feet wide. These boats just fit in the locks that were 80 feet long and ten feet wide. All along the canal companies and people were building warehouses and docks for the boats to stop at and offload.

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<sup>22</sup> Yeoman 1828

The boats were only able to run in the spring, summer and fall due to the fact that parts of the canal would freeze over and make passage impossible. Also, one of the locks in Blackstone needed to be fixed because that lock was causing delays for the boats in the trips between Worcester and Providence.

The entire canal had twenty boats. Some of the boats were named after important people from the area such as the Lady Carrington, John Brown, Gov. Lincoln, John Davis, General Green, Isaac Davis, Lafayette, and the Washington. Some were named after the towns and areas that encompassed the canal such as, Uxbridge, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, Salisbury, Smithfield, Massachusetts, Blackstone, Mendon, and Lincoln. Also, there were three other boats the Independence, the Enterprise, and Superior. All of these served as cargo ships on the Blackstone Canal.<sup>23</sup>

## Navigation of the Canal

The Lady Carrington made the first full-length trip on the canal. She left Providence on the morning of October 6, 1828. The ship arrived in Worcester the next day. The Lady Carrington then left for Providence on the tenth and returned to Worcester on the twenty-fifth of October. On November eighth, serious canal activity began in Worcester. Six ships arrived in the basin each containing 30-40 tons of cargo.

Unfortunately, in December, the canal froze over so shipping had to stop. The company realized that the canal would be closed for about four months every winter due to the canal freezing over. Navigation resumed in late April in 1829 and every year thereafter that the canal was in business, traffic was halted during the same time period.

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<sup>23</sup> Yeoman 1828

There also was a speed limit on the canal in order to prevent the boats from “racing” one another. Also, there were restrictions on the time that any one of the canal boats was allowed to run during the day. They were limited to starting two hours before sunup and stopping no later than one hour after sundown. These restrictions made the 45-mile trip last two days. Stages from the same time period made the trip in one day, but it cost much more to ship on a stage ~~than~~<sup>^</sup> on a canal boat.

Also, few people rode the boats. The trip took too long and there was nothing designed for the transporting of passengers on any of the ships. Only the first ever trip were there many passengers, and most of those were commissioners and their families.

## Economy Along the Canal

The area around the canal started to change with the advent of the canal. The towns that lay along the canal’s path saw their land values increase while mills and other business moved into the area. A typical farmer could sell his farm for roughly \$10,000. Many new boat making companies opened up along the canal and commerce as a whole increased in the area.

Most farmers did not sell their farms because they could make a lot more money ~~than~~ they had before. The farmer’s market was greatly expanded and crops and food could now be shipped to Providence and even to New York City. The farmer could also purchase items from places further away and not have to worry about the cost of shipping it back home.

Worcester also started to grow as a result of the canal. At the end of the canal in Worcester, before the canal opened, there was just a hayfield. Once the canal business

had started, warehouses and stores were popping up in that same area.

The people from Worcester County were able to live better because of the canal. More goods could be shipped into the area and also the costs of goods went down due to the cheapness of shipping items on the canal. This allowed for the people to buy not just what they needed to survive, but also some of the things they had always wanted.

## Possible Expansion

With the early success of the canal, the commissioners and the people felt that more could be done. Soon plans and ideas for extending the canal were being talked about. There was an idea to extend the canal from Worcester to Fitchburg. This proposal would add 26.75 miles onto the present canal and cost \$278,300. The Canal Company petitioned the legislature to allow for the expansion to occur.<sup>24</sup>

The proposal never got off the ground. Boston saw the early success of the canal and wanted in on the profits. In 1829, Boston had a plan to build a canal from Boston to Springfield that would go through Worcester. It would run from Boston to Millville, where it would connect with the Blackstone Canal. From there the Canal would run to Worcester using the Blackstone Canal and then continue on to Springfield. The estimated cost was \$1,125,000. The Boston to Worcester to Springfield canal was never built.

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<sup>24</sup> Massachusetts Spy 1825



## Rumors Among the People

In the early years, there were many rumors floating around. The main one that was most talked about was that the canal was going to be abandoned in 1824. Part of the reason for this rumor was that many people felt that a canal was going to be built from Troy or Albany, New York down to Connecticut. They worried that this canal would serve more interests than a Worcester to Providence canal.

Also, there were those that were speculative about the whole canal. They spread even more rumors without going to the Canal Company or their engineers to gain firsthand knowledge of what was actually going on. Some of these people felt that the delays in starting the canal were caused by engineers surveying land for a Boston to Hudson canal. The Canal Company worried that such a problem could create problems for the canal so they issued a statement to stay away from rumors and to go ask the engineers that were staking out plot of land for the canal if they were worried or had any concerns.

## Mills of the Area

The success of the canal lured many new businessmen to the area. Many of these people set up mills along the canal. What was once mostly a farming area was now turning into a powerhouse of mills and factories.

For example, Pawtucket was seen as one of the country's most important towns since they had nearly ten cotton mills. Woonsocket, a town the Blackstone Canal ran through had three cotton factories and two woolen factories and also had more water power than Pawtucket. In a short period of time, more mills were being built in

Woonsocket then Pawtucket.

In 1812, Uxbridge had five mills, two cotton and three woolen. By 1827 had five cotton factories alone. Also in 1827 there were at least twenty-seven factories along the canal and yet not all the waterpower was being used. That meant ore and more factories could move into the area.

## The Relationship Between the Canal and the Mills

All did not remain quiet between the mills and the Canal Company. Mill owners were actually constantly fighting with the Canal Company. Canal men would find the lock gates held shut by stone dumped by mill owners. The mill owners then feared retaliation and would hire guards to protect their mills from arson.<sup>25</sup>

With all the mills that were now located on the canal, they became less willing to share the water with the canal boats. In the Canal Company's charter, there was a plan to alleviate this situation. The Canal Company had to restore proper water levels by one hour after a boat had passed through the locks. This plan proved difficult in the late summers because of water becoming scarce from few rains and hot, dry days.

In 1833, mill owners took the Canal Company to court and in 1840 the mills finally won. The canal company was assessed \$8,450 in penalties. In 1841 the Canal Company petitioned to change its charter to avoid paying the fees to the mills. They claimed that they could not pay the fine because a flood had caused more than \$3,000 in damages to the canal. The mills continued to press for payment and continued to fight

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<sup>25</sup> Massachusetts Spy 1826

the canal.<sup>26</sup>

## The Railroad and the Closing of the Blackstone Canal

In 1832, the canal was dealt a devastating blow to its future. The Boston and Worcester railroad was opened. In time the railroad was extended to Albany and was in effect the substitute for the planned canal over the same area.

The railroad had many advantages over the canal. First, the railroad did not close down in the winter. Also, the railroad was faster and more reliable than the canal and therefore traffic in the Worcester area was diverted from the canal to the railroad. Finally, in late summer, when the water levels on the canal were low, the boats had to wait for rain and therefore whole boats of food would rot.

The final deathblow was the building of the Providence and Worcester Railroad. In 1845 the Massachusetts section of the canal was shut down and sold to the railroad. The Rhode Island section remained open until November 9, 1848 when the last toll was collected in Woonsocket. Thus ended the life of the Blackstone Canal.

## Conclusions

The Blackstone Canal was both a success and a failure. The canal was a success in that the area around the canal saw a great increase in economic activity and Worcester itself began to grow up into a city because of the canal. The canal forced Boston to take Worcester seriously as an economic area and not just a county seat. The canal was a

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<sup>26</sup> Yeoman 1832

failure because it never made money. The canal struggled financially after the Boston and Worcester railroad was built and when the mills attacked the canal in the courts. The idea to build a transportation system to Worcester was a good idea for the economic success of Worcester but the canal fell victim to its success at drawing mills and money to its area. That is why Boston got involved, to get themselves in on the money that could be made in Worcester.

In the future, people can look at the effect of the Blackstone Canal and see that improving the ability to move and transport goods plays a very important roll in the success of the local area. Transportation has change a lot since the 1830's in terms that it matters less how far you are from your customers and more on your ability to get your customers the products that they want and need quickly and cheaply.

As far as using new technology to aid in transportation, the Blackstone Canal offers a warning to future investors in this area. Make sure that the new technology is not a fad and that there is not something right on the horizon that will outdo and outperform what you are investing in. New technology is a risky business and should be approached with caution when you are just an investor.

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