



Foundation Document Overview

Lowell National Historical Park

Massachusetts



Contact Information

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Description



Growth and change have long dominated the American system of values. Industry flourished in 19th-century America as major technological advancements in transportation, power production, and industrial manufacturing facilitated a fundamental shift from rural farm-based communities to a modern urban-industrial society. Lowell, Massachusetts, 30 miles northwest of Boston, was founded in 1822 as a seminal planned industrial city and became one of the most significant textile producing centers in the country. The city of Lowell is not, as is sometimes claimed, the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution in America. Most of the developments associated with this phenomenon in the nation's history had their origins elsewhere. But, it was in Lowell that these developments converged in a way and on a scale that made them revolutionary.

Lowell served as America's model industrial city during the first half of the 19th century, offering the hope that the country would profit socially as well as economically by adopting industrialism as a way of life. The early Lowell system was distinguished by state-of-the-art technology, engineers, and inventors who worked in its water power system, monumental mill architecture, enormous production capabilities, rational city planning, a dependence on cotton grown by enslaved peoples and, most of all, by its much-heralded workforce of Yankee "mill girls." As industry grew in New England, Lowell's factories aged and became less competitive with newer industrial cities. Profits fell, working conditions deteriorated, and wages were cut. The "mill girls" became disillusioned with the system and were replaced by a succession of immigrant groups eager to find work at any price.

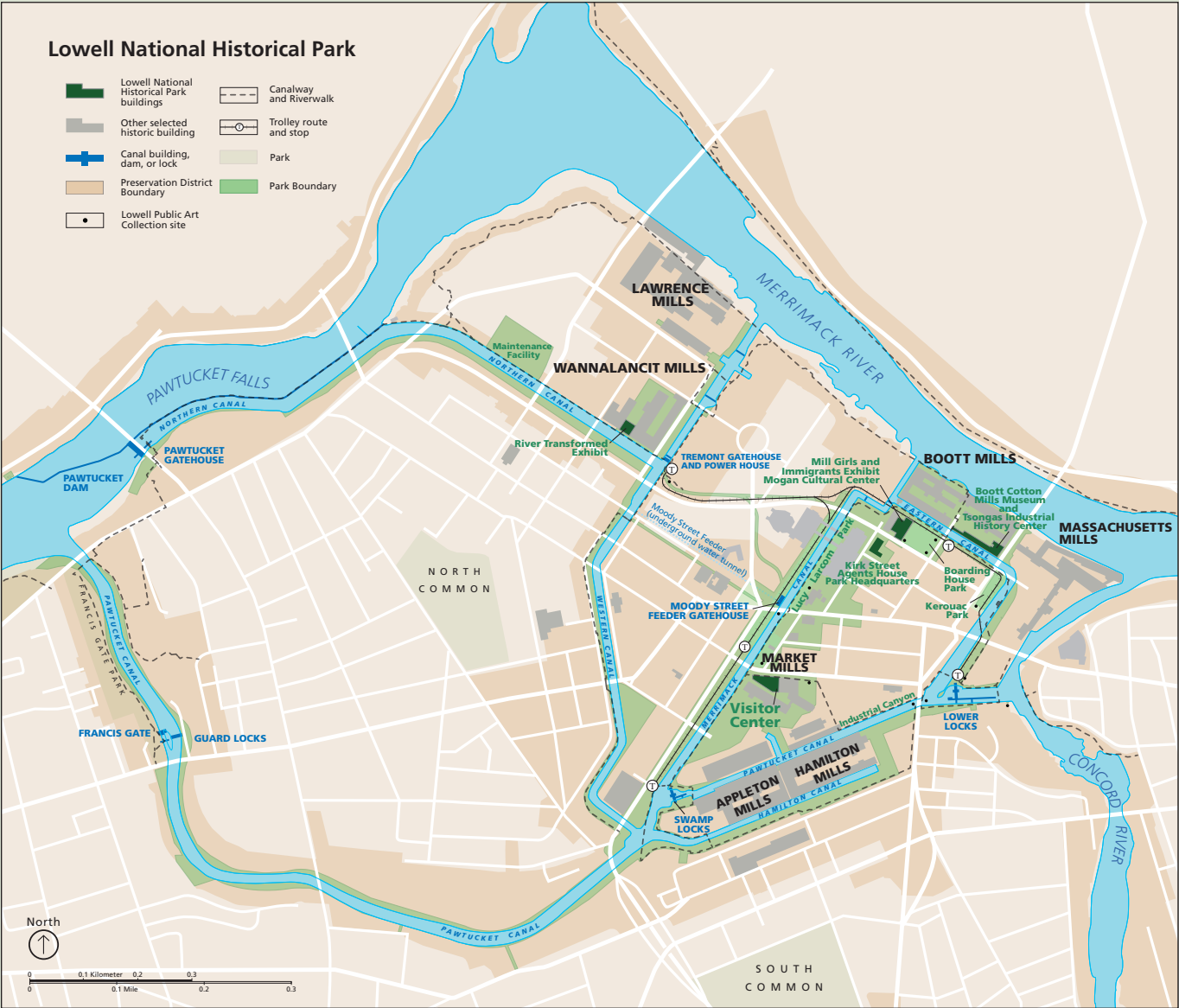


As crowded tenements took the place of Lowell's well regulated system of boarding houses, Lowell became an industrial city similar to others in New England.

Competition within the textile industry increased continually throughout the 19th century. Eventually, the combination of a cheaper, less unionized workforce; newer, more efficient factories and machinery; cheaper real estate; and lower taxes persuaded the textile industry to move south. Eight of Lowell's original 10 textile firms closed their doors for good during the 1920s, and the remaining two closed in the 1950s. The city fell into a long depression that lasted through the 1960s. Gradually, over the course of 50 years, businesses shut down, real estate prices fell, and unemployment rose. By the 1970s, one could stand almost anywhere in downtown Lowell and see blight and decay that had resulted from decades of deindustrialization.

Established on June 5, 1978, Lowell National Historical Park represented an innovative partner-driven management concept between federal, state, and local governments, the private sector, and the local community. Through this approach, the park and its partners work collaboratively as a vehicle for economic progress in the community and encourage creative and cooperative programs to support the preservation and interpretation of Lowell's historic and cultural resources. The park encourages visitors to explore how industry has and continues to influence technology, environment, socioeconomics, and politics in cities and economies across the world. Although the character and physical roots of Lowell lie in the Industrial Revolution, the city and its people are ever evolving. Their dynamic human stories extend far beyond the park's borders to illustrate industrialization and its legacies on a global scale.

Park Map



Purpose



LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK preserves and interprets the historic structures and stories of the Industrial Revolution and its legacies in Lowell, serving as a catalyst for revitalization of the city's physical and economic environment and promoting cultural heritage and community programming.



Significance

Significance statements express why Lowell National Historical Park resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Lowell's (economic) success was based in innovation, from manufacturing technology and processes, to new business models, to city planning designed to benefit both industry and the worker. Unique industrial concepts were implemented and demonstrated at a massive scale at the Lowell mills, which served as a model for textile production and industrial cities.
- A very large proportion of original buildings, structures, and urban landscapes have survived in Lowell's park and preservation district and now are recognized as important historical artifacts. These include the entire 5.6-mile power canal system with its sophisticated dams, locks, and gatehouses, 7 of the original 10 mill complexes, and significant examples of early housing types, institutions, and transportation facilities.



Significance



- The Lowell canal system is nationally recognized as one of the most impressive civil and mechanical engineering achievements of the 19th century because of its grand scale and technological complexity, and is the site of origin for the famed “Francis” turbine. The canal system, used as both a transportation corridor and power source, facilitated the growth of the industrial city.
- Lowell National Historical Park preserves and interprets the stories and heritage of the people of Lowell, including the early female workforce (aka “mill girls”) and those who came from across the globe seeking opportunities. Today, Lowell’s residents continue to shape the culture of the city and contribute to its revitalization.



- The collaboration between Lowell National Historical Park and its partners has resulted in the rehabilitation of almost all of the 5.3 million square feet of historic mill space and hundreds of additional buildings in the downtown historic district. This effort continues to serve as a successful example of leveraging public-private partnerships for economic development through historic preservation.
- Lowell National Historical Park embraces partnerships as an integral approach to accomplishing park and community goals. Lowell National Historical Park serves as a model for leveraging collaborative public-private partnerships and community engagement.

Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Water Power System / Canal System.** The Lowell National Historical Park boundary includes 9.6 miles of major riverbanks and all 5.6 miles of historic canals in Lowell, all of which comprise the waterpower system that harnessed waters of the Merrimack River to power the city's mills. In fact, the Merrimack River and its natural attributes dictated the location of the city itself. The water power and canal system includes the Pawtucket, Merrimack, Hamilton, Western, Eastern, Lowell, and Northern Canals and canal banks, as well as several associated locks, gatehouses and dams, and Pawtucket Falls. This system, which still operates as a source of hydroelectric power, provides an opportunity to interpret both the historic significance of water in industry, as well as the engineering of a waterpower system. Public access has been expanded over the years to support these interpretive opportunities, including creation of a pedestrian canalway and riverwalk and the development of related exhibits and programs such as the Suffolk Mill Turbine Exhibit.



- **Boott Cotton Mills Complex.** This complex is architecturally and historically the most significant mill site in the city, and the only one with buildings owned and managed by the National Park Service. The millyard was constructed and then adapted over a 100-year period by the Boott Cotton Mills company, one of the 10 major textile corporations in Lowell. Of the city's original millyards, the Boott Cotton Mills complex is the most intact example of Lowell's historic mill complexes. Changes in technology and production capability influenced the development and appearance of the millyard over time. Its clock tower, completed about 1865, survives today as one of the most distinctive architectural monuments in Lowell and has become a symbol of the park. Today, the restored mill complex houses the park's Boott Cotton Mills Museum, the Tsongas Industrial History Center, and several NPS Northeast Region offices.
- **Immersive Experience.** Lowell National Historical Park provides a variety of hands-on interpretive and educational opportunities that allow visitors to immerse themselves in Lowell's industrial past. Key park experiences include exhibits that feature a working turbine and weave room, as well as boat tours of the canal system and rides through the park on historic replica trolleys, which are among the most popular and unique experiences in the park. The Tsongas Industrial History Center, a partnership between Lowell National Historical Park and the University of Massachusetts Lowell Graduate School of Education, is a hands-on center where students can learn about the American Industrial Revolution through interactive activities such as weaving, working on an assembly line, creating canal systems and testing water wheels, and measuring water quality.



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Fundamental Resources and Values



- **Cultural Heritage and Arts Programming.** Immigration and cultural expression were a part of Lowell's story from the beginning—from the Yankee "mill girls" who flocked to the city in search of economic independence to the Irish, French-Canadians, Greeks, Poles, Portuguese, and other ethnic groups that came in search of the American Dream. This cultural heritage, its evolution over time, and its impacts on the cultural character of Lowell today are expressed through programming and exhibitions at the park, including the Mill Girls & Immigrant Exhibit at the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center, the Lowell Folk Festival, and the Lowell Summer Music Series. Cultural heritage and arts events are among the most well known and best attended at the park, and feature a range of activities that appeal to local and nonlocal visitors alike.
- **Historic Urban Industrial Landscape.** Lowell is often recognized as one of America's most significant industrial cities, and, as such, the assemblage of buildings, structures, and public spaces that comprise its historic urban industrial landscape are critical to telling the story of the mills and the Industrial Revolution in America. Lowell was an innovative mill town where the focus was on both industry and the worker, and it includes not only extensive mill space and supporting structures but also boardinghouses, churches, and parks. Although the landscape is central to the story of Lowell, many of the buildings, structures, and greenscapes are owned and managed by other entities. Lowell National Historical Park works with the community and partner organizations as well as private owners and developers to ensure continued preservation of the historic urban industrial landscape, including mill buildings and smokestacks. This collaborative preservation effort is fundamental and will continue to be a central focus for Lowell National Historical Park into the future.



- **Partnerships.** Since its establishment Lowell National Historical Park has embraced partnerships as an integral tool for accomplishing park and community goals. Partnerships with entities such as the City of Lowell, the state, and community organizations have allowed the leverage of funds for historic preservation and supported the economic growth of the city. These partners have been critical to meeting the mission of the park, assisting with interpretation, education, and resource stewardship. Through strong, mutually beneficial relationships with its partners, the park has not only succeeded but thrives as a model for community cooperation in the National Park Service.
- **Museum Collections.** The museum collections at Lowell National Historical Park contain more than one-half million artifacts and historical documents, spanning from the early 19th century to the present. These objects and documents provide a tangible link to the Industrial Revolution in Lowell and its enduring legacies.



Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The creation of the Waltham-Lowell system helped to change the nature and meaning of work by revolutionizing labor relations in the United States and transforming gender, racial, and ethnic identities ultimately leading to socioeconomic opportunity and inequity.
- The accumulation of capital led to new investment opportunities in the United States centered on industrialization. Innovations in large-scale production systems in Lowell affected society in social, political, and economic ways and became a model for the future.
- Through innovations in textile production, transportation, waterpower, and canal engineering, Lowell became a premier industrial city and helped propel the United States into a new industrial age. Cycles of innovation and technological development shaped, and continue to shape, the city and Lowell's influence on the world.
- The commodification and use of abundant natural resources in Lowell, as part of a global Industrial Revolution, changed human relationships with the environment and modernized societies throughout the world but resulted in environmental damage that presents challenges today.
- Lowell is a microcosm of the historical and contemporary shifting of cultural identities and tensions brought about by broader social changes such as industrialization, urbanization, and globalization.
- From its earliest days as a planned industrial city, through boom and bust economic cycles to today's historic preservation renaissance, Lowell's urban landscape has evolved and now serves as a model of development and revitalization.

