

A dizzying, dazzling hike at the Blackstone Gorge

OUR OWN

GRAND CANYON

NORTH SMITHFIELD – Steep, gray granite cliffs stretch 80 feet above the eastern bank of the Blackstone River. On the western side, a footpath rises and falls across a high ridgeline and hills covered with huckleberry bushes and oak, pine and hemlock trees. • Between the cliffs, the river twists and rushes between exposed, jagged boulders, creating white-water rapids that roar through the Blackstone Gorge.



Walking Rhode Island John Kostrzewa Guest columnist

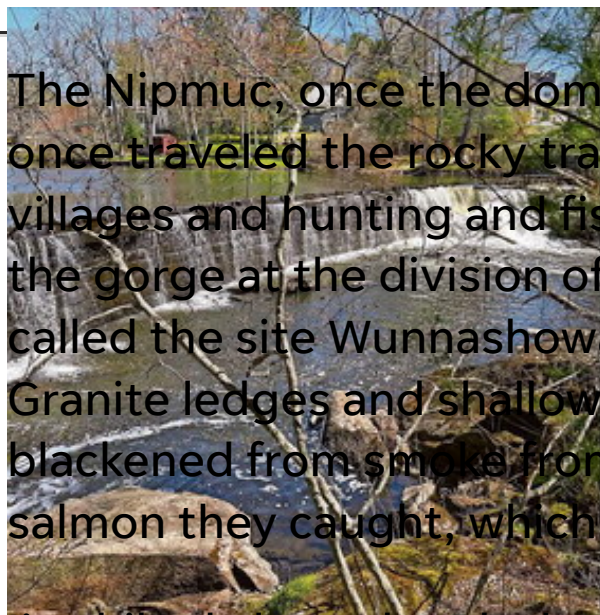
GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO Above: The Blackstone River creates white water rapids as it roars through the Blackstone Gorge and rushes over jagged boulders.

A dazzling hike at the Blackstone Gorge



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Right: The Rolling Dam was built in 1886 to create a mill pond and channel water through a raceway to the Blackstone Manufacturing Company. PHOTOS BY JOHN KOSTRZEWA/SPECIAL TO THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL



The Nipmuc, once the dominant tribe in northwestern Rhode Island, once traveled the rocky trails through the gorge to reach their villages and hunting and fishing grounds. They camped just south of the gorge at the division of the Blackstone and Branch rivers and called the site Wunnashowatuckcut, or “land where the river splits.” Granite ledges and shallow caves along the gorge’s walls are blackened from smoke from fires lit by the Nipmuc to cure the salmon they caught, which ran freely in the rivers.

I’ve hiked along the Blackstone River many times and seen the old textile mills, canals and villages that sprang up from Worcester to Providence and formed the backbone of the American Industrial

Revolution. But no mill could be built along the wild section of the river that winds through the stony cliffs in the gorge – leaving the terrain as natural as when the Nipmuc lived on the banks.

I knew I had to see it.

Preserve straddles Blackstone River in RI and MA

Several hiking buddies and I set out to explore the 250-acre, two-state public park – which spans both sides of the river – from a kiosk at a trailhead off East Harkness Road. The road may have been named for James Harkness, a local farmer and landowner, according to Rich Keene, president of the North Smithfield Heritage Association.

We headed north on a wide, dirt-and-gravel path, with a few houses in the woods on the left and stone walls on the right, that ran over wooded hillsides that were once part of Smithfield until North Smithfield was incorporated in 1871.

The wide trail, which may have once been a cart path, soon narrowed to a footpath and was crossed with many side spurs that are used by mountain bikers, hikers and local residents.

A little further ahead, we saw the first set of yellow, rectangular, plastic blazes that mark the trail we would follow to reach the river and the gorge.

At one point, we noted a side trail on the left and a stone pillar that marked the border between Rhode Island and Massachusetts. My friend, Andrew Grover, who hiked with us, researched land and census records and learned that the Harkness, Hunt and Thayer families once owned property in the area.

Southwick Harkness (1798-1875) was a farmer whose grandfather,

Adam Harkness, immigrated from Scotland to Boston. His family later moved to Smithfield. One of Southwick's children, Albert Harkness, was a professor at Brown University, and a building there is named for him.

Southwick's wife's maiden name, Thayer, was that of another local property owner. Town records also show that a George Hunt lived in the area in the 1860s.

Private owners held the land where we hiked until the 1990s, when partnerships of state agencies, local communities, nonprofit groups and others made separate transactions to acquire land on both sides of the river.

The patchwork of parcels eventually was consolidated into a contiguous public park that straddles the river in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. The preserve, which some maps identify as High Rocks Gorge, links a 40-mile chain of historical and recreational areas that form the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor.

Continuing our hike north into Blackstone, Massachusetts, we followed the yellow blazes down a long, gradual decline that was badly eroded in places, and passed through a junction of five separate trails with a makeshift fire ring in the center. Parts of the trail were muddy and deeply rutted from all-terrain vehicles and motorized bikes.

Hikers report seeing deer in the wooded areas. In less than a mile, we spotted through the trees a calm finger of water that formed an inlet just to the south of the Blackstone River. A line of houses was visible on the far side.

Turning right, we headed northeast and had our first look at the Blackstone River, which flows southeast for 46 miles from Worcester,

Massachusetts, to Pawtucket Falls in Pawtucket and then merges with the Seekonk River before emptying into Narragansett Bay.

A tale of two dams

A short path led down to a chain-link fence on the riverbank and the sites of two old dams – one is long gone and the other is still holding back the river. Just upstream, the dam that is no longer there was built of logs and earth in the early 1800s and channeled water to power a cotton spinning mill.

Thomas Bik, a Blackstone Valley Heritage Corridor trail ambassador, said the dam once could be crossed by wagons and foot traffic on an extension of what's now County Road that ran into Old Harkness Road and all the way to Worcester. Water from behind the dam was also diverted from the 1820s to the 1840s to the canals that had been dug along the river to service the mills.

When the river is low, you can still see some vestiges of the old dam just below the surface.

Just downstream from the log dam site is the second dam – called the Rolling Dam – built in 1886 of stacked stone blocks in a 300-foot long crescent shape for strength against the strong currents of the rushing river.

Bik said water from the mill pond above the dam flowed through a raceway dug inland around the rocky shoreline and cliffs to a series of mills run by the Blackstone Manufacturing Co. – one mill was about a half mile downstream near the junction of the Branch and Blackstone rivers.

The company was acquired by the Lonsdale Company in 1924 and later sold to Tupperware, which used the mills to make plastic containers. Water from behind the dam is now diverted to a nearby

hydroelectric plant.

For quite a while, we watched and listened to the river tumble 10 feet over the dam and continue its journey downstream for about 2,000 feet through the narrow gorge.

On the far side of the river, I spotted a lone angler casting a line from the shore below a fenced landing and the trailhead for a path that traces the eastern bank of the river. (I headed there later.)

Continuing east, we followed the trail that was cut into the hillside and rose about 50 feet above the river. Below us, we saw the river cascading over exposed slabs of stone and downed trees that narrowed and quickened the current.

Two of my friends descended the steep hillside, at times sliding down the thick bed of oak leaves, to reach the river and reported white-water rapids coursing around huge boulders and by the high cliffs. I stayed up top because I realized if I made it down to the river, I'd have to climb back up, too.

While waiting for my buddies, I thought about the glaciers that crept down from Canada 10,000 years ago during the Ice Age and carved out the spectacular gorge. The rugged terrain, cliffs and river reminded me of upstate New Hampshire, and I realized I was just a few miles west of downtown Woonsocket.

Continuing on, the trail rose steeply at times through thickets of mountain laurel.

Just off the path. Keene said there is a cut granite stone that is an example of the "plug and feather" technique used by Colonial farmers to cut bedrock into rectangular shapes with square corners that were used for construction. By using a plug or star drill and a hammer, they drilled holes every few inches in a straight line across a

rock. Two shims, called feathers, were inserted in the hole and a plug was wedged between the feathers to split the stones. Broken or partially defective stones were left behind.

Land where the Nipmuc once camped

Downriver and through the trees, we could see the confluence of the Blackstone and Branch rivers and a flat area where the Nipmuc once camped.

For thousands of years, Nipmuc territory stretched across central Massachusetts, northwest Rhode Island and eastern Connecticut. They traveled along the river during seasonal cycles to hunt, plant, fish during annual salmon and herring migrations and trade with settlers and other tribes.

The name Nipmuc, and its many variants, has been translated to mean “people of the freshwater fishing place.” The Nipmuc people called the area “Kittacuck,” or “great tidal river.”

Early settlers, including fishermen and traders, reported contact with the Nipmuc in the early 1600s. Roger Williams, the founder of Providence, learned the Nipmuc language, mediated disputes and negotiated land purchases with the tribe’s sachems.

Later, after settlers took Nipmuc land by royal decree and tensions rose, the Nipmuc allied with other tribes to fight the colonists in King Philip’s War (1675-1676). After their defeat, many Nipmuc were imprisoned, died of disease or malnutrition, executed or enslaved in the West Indies.

Despite the population decline, the Nipmuc survived, maintained their identity and still live in the area.

After a good, long look, we followed the trail as it rose to a high

point and then flattened and meandered west through stands of bright green young pines. We passed several white percolation test pipes, and I learned later from a neighbor that there was once a plan to pave a road deep into the woods and build houses. But opposition from local homeowners and conservationists halted the project.

There was also a proposal to build a freestanding cell phone tower on the high ground off Harkness Road, but it was halted after the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor and others said the construction would blemish the natural landscape.

The trail eventually reached the path we had walked on earlier, so we turned left, retraced our steps and after about 3.2 miles, returned to where we'd started.

Exploring the eastern side of the river in Massachusetts

But I wasn't done exploring. Two days later, I drove to the eastern side of the river in Blackstone, Massachusetts, setting out from a trailhead at the site of the Rolling Dam that I'd seen from the other side.

I followed the red-blazed trail as it climbed the riverbank. A lower path runs along the river and crosses from Blackstone into North Smithfield, noted with a granite block on the riverbank that is marked with Massachusetts on one side and Rhode Island on the other.

The trail, lined in places with mountain laurel and witch hazel, then continues to rise and snake along a narrow footpath over rugged, rocky and rooted terrain to the edge of granite ledges 80 to 90 feet above the river. I followed the path through deep crevices between ice-split boulders and found small caves and cutouts in the rocks that are marked with black carbon from old and new campfires. I also

noted some small plateaus and overhangs that were marked with graffiti.

In places, I could look straight down from the path to the rumbling rapids pounding the rocks and drowning out the tweets of birds in the trees. Several people have slipped and been injured while walking along the cliffs, which in some places, are covered with loose gravel or get slippery when wet.

From the high point, I descended the red-blazed trail and reached a small beach at the split of the Blackstone and Branch rivers. A fishing bobber and line were caught in the branches of an oak tree.

I followed a path lined with ferns and small bushes east along the banks of the Branch River, which originates in Burrillville and flows northeast through North Smithfield and past Slatersville and Forestdale before reaching the Blackstone River.

As I walked a narrow footpath, I noted the meadow where the Nipmuc once set up a summer camp in the flat, fertile flood plain. The land is sheltered by the rivers to the south, the gorge to the west and a long ridge of hills to the north. Nearby is a sandstone quarry that the Nipmuc may have used to make pottery.

Bik, who is a member of the Blackstone Valley Historical Society and Metacomet Land Trust, said the area was once called Intervale and was used by baseball teams fielded by mill workers. Nearby is the site of the old Tupperware Mill, which is now the site of condos.

I followed the riverbank until the path turned inward and I saw buildings across the river and just ahead on the trail.

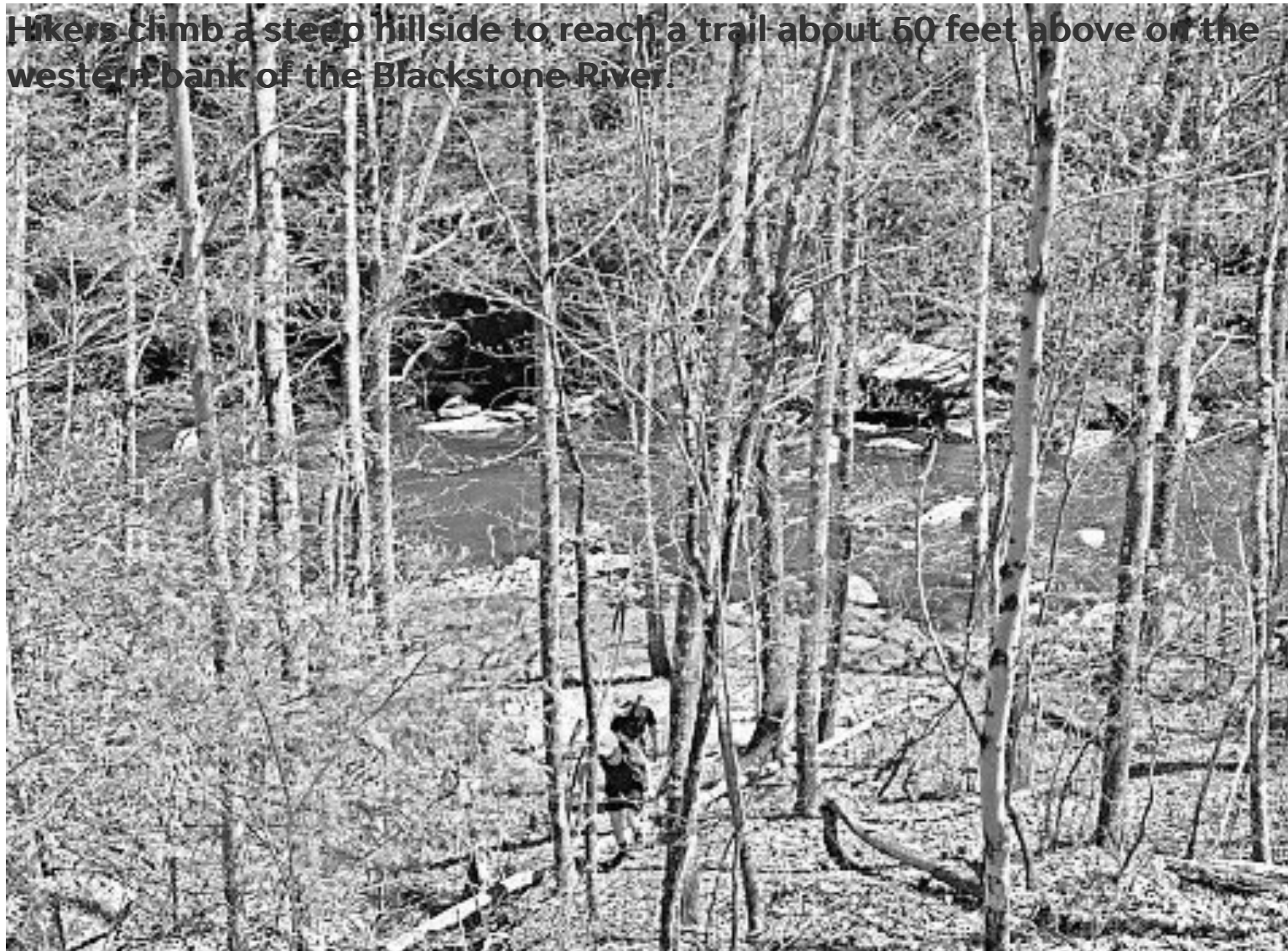
Respecting the private property, I retraced my steps and followed a red-blazed trail slightly inland from the path on the cliffs and walked back to where I'd started after a 1.6 mile hike.

The high cliffs and raging river rushing through Blackstone Gorge make for a unique Rhode Island hike.

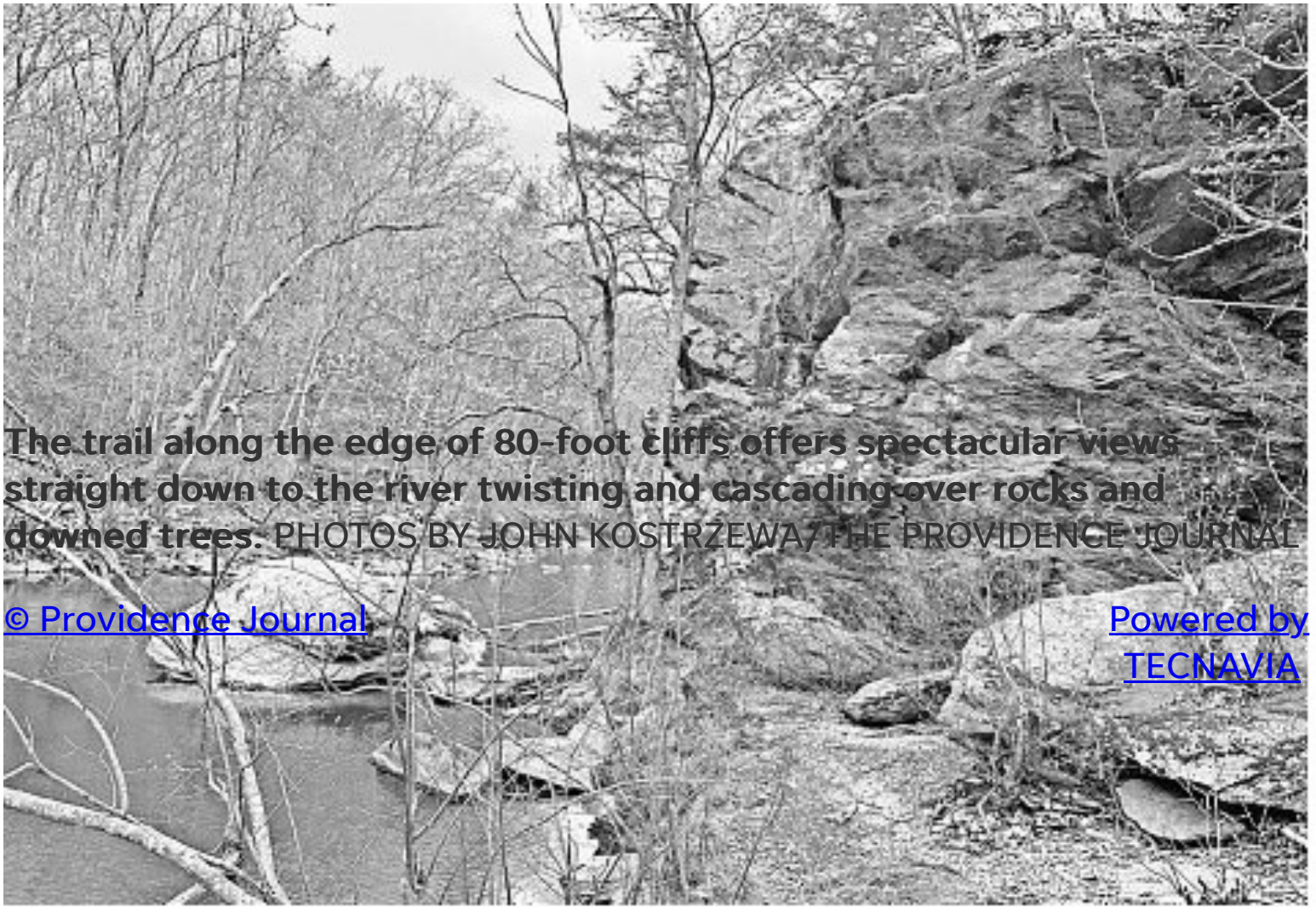
If you have enjoyed the Blackstone River Valley – whether by walking on the bike path that traces the river’s course and follows the adjacent canals or visiting the mill villages on its banks – you should also hike through the gorge. In many places, the terrain hasn’t changed for thousands of years since the Nipmuc traveled the paths, and you’ll get a good look back into a lesser-known chapter of the river’s history.

Kostrzewa, a former assistant managing editor/ business at The Journal, welcomes email at johnekostrzewa@gmail.com.

Hikers climb a steep hillside to reach a trail about 50 feet above on the western bank of the Blackstone River.



Ledges and caves along the river are blackened from smoke from fires lit by the Nipmuc to cure salmon caught in the river.



The trail along the edge of 80-foot cliffs offers spectacular views straight down to the river twisting and cascading over rocks and downed trees. PHOTOS BY JOHN KOSTRZEWA/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

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