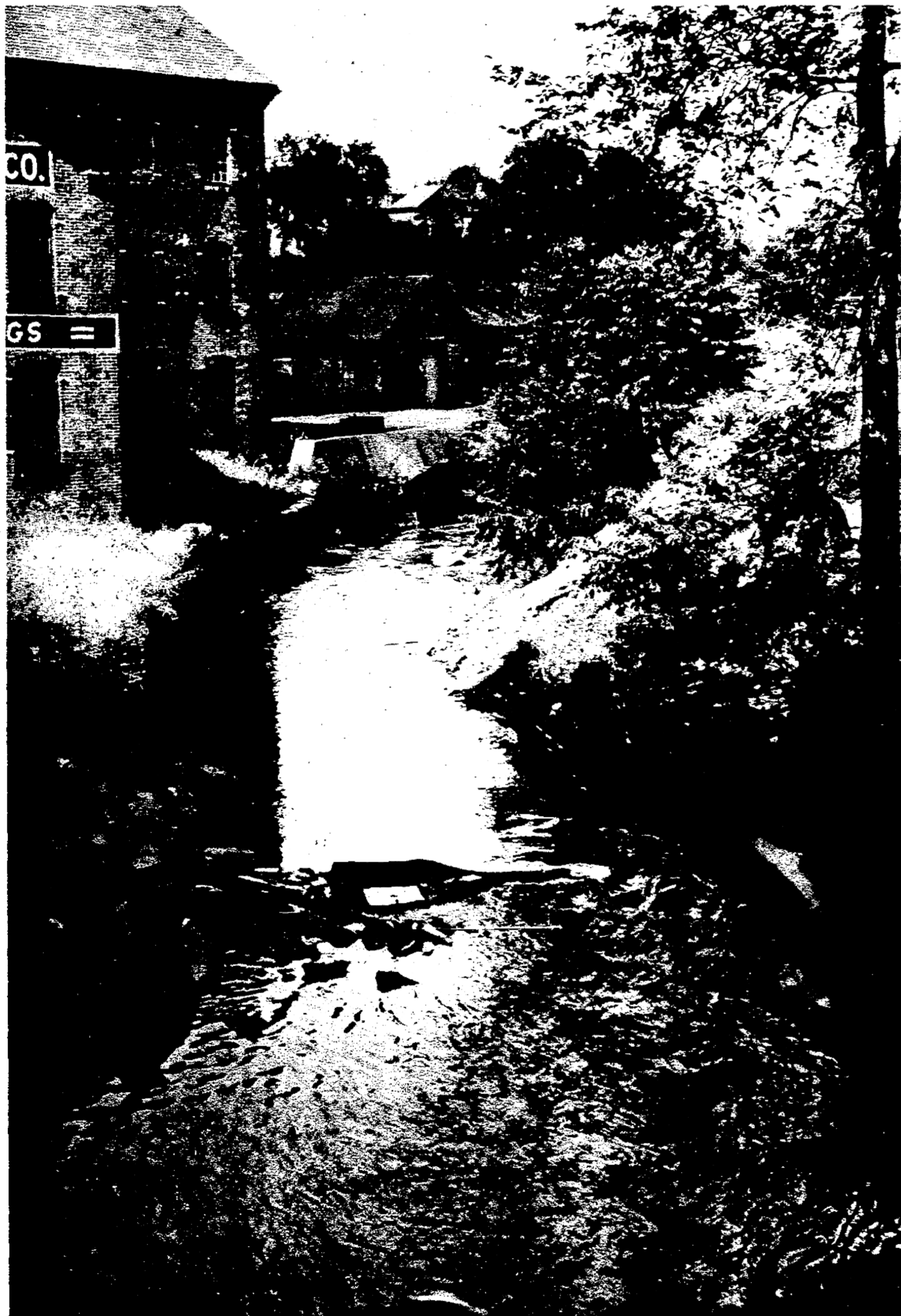


1830. Canal terminus, Market Square, Providence, showing waiting room built over river. Halftone of engraving on diploma of Providence Mechanics and Manufacturers Assn. Rhode Island Historical Society.



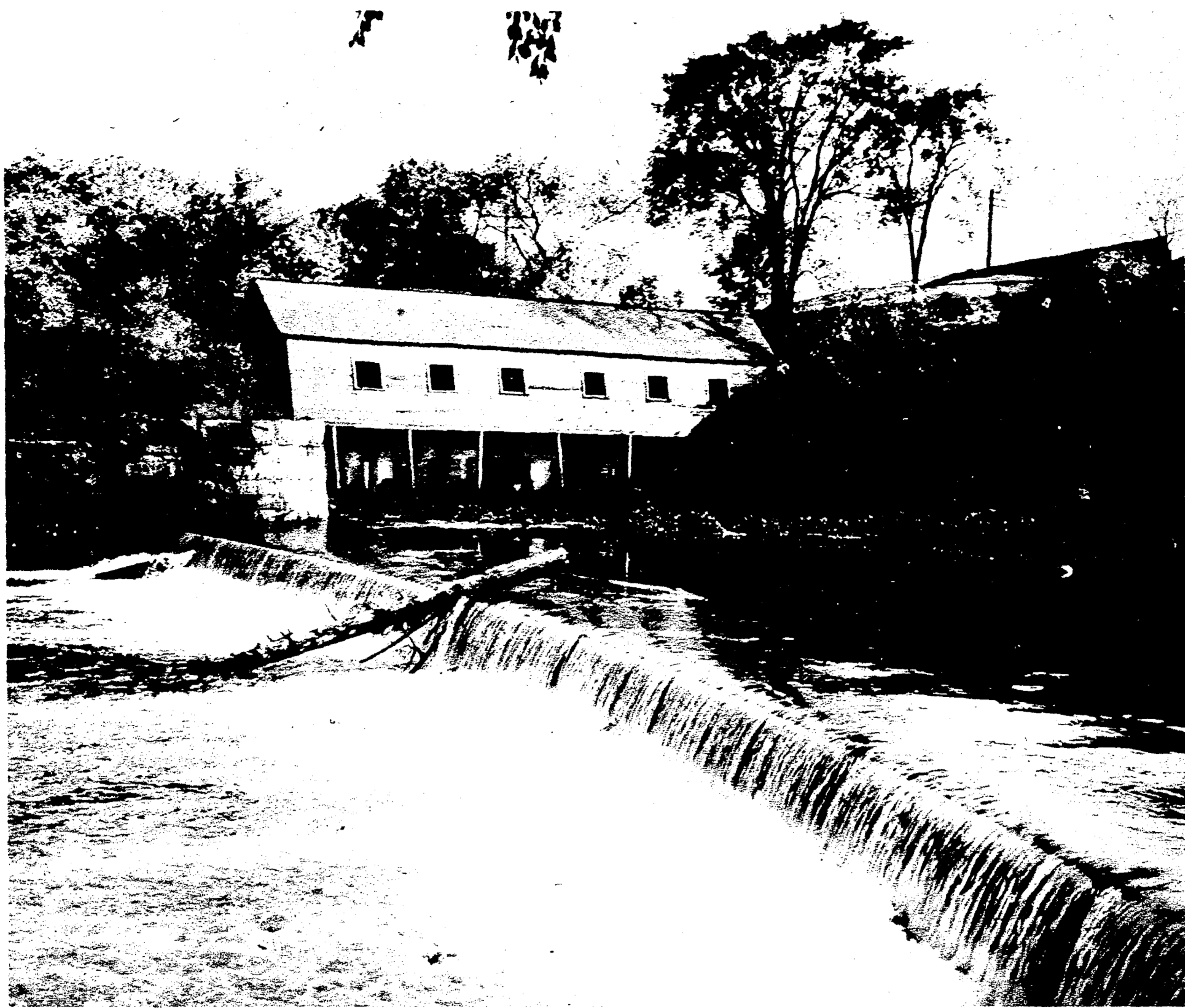
TODAY. Near downtown Providence view of old Blackstone may be had from Randall Street Bridge, where canal turned up Moshassuck Valley after straight course on Canal, Mill, lower Charles Streets.



ABOVE ASHTON where canal entered the Blackstone River. "Roadbed or riverway, 'tisn't one or 'tother," growled critics of complicated alternation of "digs," millponds, natural streams 45 miles long.



CUT STONE DAM near Ashton (once called "Sinking Fund") built to hold Blackstone at height of Ash-ton-Lonsdale level of canal. Such diversions of water power caused clashes of canal and mill interests.



CUTOFF between Blackstone, Mass., and Woonsocket, where canal took off on its own and sliced a long loop in the river including some picturesque rapids. Entrance to the Blackstone cutoff was where the long gatehouse now stands. Such cutoffs were numerous.

GENERAL CARRINGTON'S DITCH

The railroads licked the Blackstone Canal a century ago but you still can see where it ran between Providence and Worcester. It was a fighting project from the start.

TEXT BY ROBERT L. WHEELER — CANAL PHOTOS BY HENRY P. SHAY



THE year was 1828, the month July. John Quincy Adams was President under the Constitution and James Fenner was Governor of Rhode Island under the Charter of Charles II. Providence was a tidewater town of 15,000 souls, with no mayor or municipal government. The heart of the community was at Market Square and below the Great Bridge of Weybosset commercial life pulsed strongly. That pulse beat high with hopeful thumpings above the historic crossover, for at Mill Bridge of the Moshassuck, just above a broad triangular basin 300 feet wide, lay the consummately

decorated barge *Lady Carrington*, about to cast off for a ceremonial cruise upon the nearly completed Blackstone Canal.

She was painted white and there were red curtains at her windows. Seventy feet long she was and of 23 to 25 tons burden. Her skipper was a Captain Easdell, an old East Indiaman who had taken many a tall ship to the tropic seas for old John Brown, who had dreamed of a Providence-Worcester canal back in 1796 but had not lived to see the two towns linked by a waterway 44½ miles long and 4 feet deep, with a top width of 45 feet and 48 locks to conquer the 451½-foot drop from summit level at Worcester to the rise and fall of the Atlantic tides.

Aboard her were a 10-piece band and 50 bigwigs—Governor Fenner, Gen. Edward Carrington (for whose lady she was named), the entire Blackstone Canal Company of which the General was

president, and refreshments. At 10 o'clock Captain Easdell gave the signal to a man on the towpath who shouted "Giddap" to two of the stoutest horses that ever lived to die. Simultaneous explosions of *Hail Columbia* and artillery occurred afloat and ashore. Amid cheers from the mercantile and banking aristocracy aboard and the hoi polloi on the banks, the *Lady Carrington* began to move.

Never once exceeding the speed limit of four miles an hour decreed by the company charter, she made the five miles to Scott's Pond in two hours, over dug waterway and Moshassuck's silver tide as of 1828. At each of the 10 locks between Scott's Pond and Providence the band played spirited airs while the *Lady* was being locked through. At Kelly's Factory, directly upon the canal, scores of Neatly Dressed Females came to the window and cheered. After disembarking at Bishop's Tavern for clams, the voyagers proceeded on to Albion, five miles farther.

The *Lady Carrington* returned to Providence about 7 o'clock. A more enjoyable excursion could not have been imagined and almost all the directors and stockholders present had taken a turn at the tiller. A Mr. Arnold who kept a store on Smith Street fell overboard while telling a funny story to a Mr. Olney and had to be fished for with a boathook. The gentleman from the *Rhode Island American and Advertiser* said it was to be hoped that the next excursion would be participated in by the ladies, "whose presence always tempers the excess and heightens the purer pleasures of the other sex."

And the *Lady* really did make other excursions that summer for it became the fancy of "the fashion" to go up-river for clams instead of down. But pretty soon, after the Blackstone Canal

Continued on Next Page



STILL WATERS. Looking south along old Blackstone Canal below spillway at junction of Oak Street and Hartford Avenue, Uxbridge, today. Here, as at many places, rough stones protected bank against the wash.



NEAR WORCESTER TERMINUS canal has been mostly covered over and used for storm sewer. Walls of Blackstone waterway still show at end of street called Keefe Place. Michigan lumber once passed this way.



SUMMIT LEVEL. Every canal must have primary supply of water. Picture shows Indian Lake, two miles north of downtown Worcester and within city limits. In Blackstone Canal heyday it was called North Pond.



BLACKSTONE CANAL
WORCESTER,
 MASS.

JOURNEY'S END. Billhead showing Worcester terminus of Canal at Thomas and Central Streets with basin, boats and storehouses. Print in collection of American Antiquarian Society, Worcester.

THE BLACKSTONE CANAL

*Continued from Preceding Page**

opened for business (Oct. 7), parties of junketers seeking Agreeable Promenades and Romantic Trysting Places gave way to cargoes of domestic goods, coal, paper, butter and cheese.

And flour, corn, salt, iron, nails, tacks, brick, logwood, cotton, alum, tobacco, figs, glass, mackerel, codfish, satinnet, brandy, snuff, leather, plaster, coffee, sugar, rum and gin. At the rate of 6 cents per ton per mile prescribed by the charter as against the \$25 per ton per mile it cost to freight merchandise from Providence to Worcester by horse and wagon or ox-cart.

On Nov. 19 the *Massachusetts Spy* of Worcester noted the arrival in that city, by canal boat, of a load of cherry plank and joist from Michigan. It came down the Lakes by timber-drover to Buffalo and moved over the Erie to Albany, where it was picked up by a sloop which brought it to Providence. The Blackstone Canal bore it the rest of its 900-mile journey from the sawmills of the Northwest.

By Dec. 17, when navigation closed, a fleet of eight or nine boats was operating on the canal. Central Street in Worcester, the principal road from Main Street to the Canal Basin at Thomas Street, was alive with wagons and low-gears coming and going. Isolated villages along the canal's 45 miles of dug ditch and riverway were waking up. Wharf rats were moving inland to country stores.

Seventy to 100 tough Yankee canallers from New Hampshire and Vermont were working for \$13 a month and found and tangling joyously with hostile teamsters and freighters when the latter looked their way and raised their mugs with the Wagoner's Curse:

Bad luck to the man who invented the plan,

For he ruined us wagoners and every other man!

The bad luck was not long in coming. For the merchants of Boston were getting madder by the minute. And there were other factors that operated to make the Blackstone Canal a financial tragedy.

It is a vile canard that the only time the Blackstone paid dividends was when the company cut the grass along the towpath. In 1832, with toll receipts at \$18,907, the stock paid a dividend of \$1 (its first). But that was the year the Boston and Worcester Railroad was completed.

Almost immediately the railroad began to eat into the canal's business. By 1836 canal tolls had dropped to \$11,500. That year the Blackstone paid a picayune dividend of 25 cents (its last).

After that it was only a matter of time. By 1844 boats had ceased to run clear through to Worcester and in 1846 navigation stopped altogether. The opening of the Providence and Worcester Railroad in 1847 was merely the coup de grace.

Stock that had opened to the tune of a nominal \$100 a share (and an actual \$37.50) closed out at \$1.25.

In 1849 the conjunctive Rhode Island-Massachusetts charter was withdrawn.

What had happened?

Several things. The Blackstone Canal was built at the height



HAULING INTO WORCESTER. View of canal from Union Hill. Canal stimulated business. American Antiquarian Society print.



IN TOWPATH DAYS. Woodcut from "Geography of Worcester County." Shows canal and river near Worcester. The canal had 14 locks between there and Millbury. American Antiquarian Society.

of the canal era (1817-1837) and at the crest of a wave of enthusiasm for inland waterways. The day the sale of stock was opened here people almost fought to buy it and the rumor that there were unsold shares lying around in Worcester sent horsemen spurring north to buy them.

Everybody was going to be rich. The Providence institutions involved in financing the construction of the canal, the Providence Bank, the Exchange Bank, the Providence Washington Insurance Company (and later the Blackstone Canal Bank, 1831, created as a bailer) didn't see how they could miss.

Wasn't the Erie Canal a big success? And hadn't the route of the Blackstone been surveyed in 1822 by Benjamin Wright, who surveyed the middle section of the Erie?

It certainly had been. And Wright, to keep construction costs down, had led the canal to Worcester through a complicated alternation of digs and millponds and natural streams which recked not of droughts, washouts, ice, freshets or mill privileges.

The result was an estimate, \$500,000, which was \$250,000 on the short side. This too-low estimate in turn resulted in insufficient capitalization.

The canal venture was born with the screws turned on because Benjamin Wright figured a canal dependent, largely, upon slack water ponds and running rivers. Plus a summit level water supply of 48,787,000 cubic feet obtained by damming North Pond in Worcester.

The situation, imperfectly comprehended by Wright, was that the natural streams, Blackstone, Moshassuck etc., fed the millponds and the millponds ran the mills. In seasons of low water there were times when there was simply not enough water to float a canal boat and at the same time turn a mill wheel.

This resulted in a good deal of litigation and a perennial feud between some of the millmen and all of the canallers. Most of the trouble centered in the Woonsocket area. There were mornings when the skipper of the *Independence*, the *John Brown*, the *Enterprise* or the *William Wirt*, bellowing "Lock Ho!" at the gates, might find that a load of stone had been dumped in them overnight. And there were nights when the hirelings of the millmen stood to their muskets for fear the bully boatmen of the Blackstone would burn their blasted bobbins.

All things considered, it was the railroads that licked the canal. But the Blackstone wasn't a very good canal anyway.

It was not, however, a complete failure, except from an investment standpoint. There happen to be other values. It opened up a lot of back country, it stimulated business, it forced the building of railroads. It increased town populations.

The Boston and Worcester Railroad was the direct result of the scare the canal gave the Boston merchants. As long ago as old John Brown's day the *Boston Centinel* had said:

"If that canal is not counteracted by some similar enterprise in this town, Boston will be in a few years reduced to a fishing village."

In 1913 there was still living, in Providence, an old man who in his childhood had stolen rides on canal boats from Charles Street to the Smith Street Bridge (Shingle Bridge) where the canal proper started.

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THE Providence and Worcester Canal-Boat Company, have commenced running a daily line of boats from Providence to Worcester, and the intermediate places, leaving at 4 o'clock, P. M.

Rates of Freight from Providence.

	First Rate.	Second Rate.
To Worcester,	14 cts.	12 1-2 cts per 100 lbs.
Milbury,	13 "	12 "
Wilkinsonville,	12 1-2 "	11 1-2 "
Leland's Landing,	12 1-4 "	11 "
Faruum's Mills,	12 "	10 1-2 "
Holbrook's Mills,	11 1-2 "	10 "
Uxbridge,	10 "	9 "
Millville,	8 "	7 "
Blackstone,	7 "	6 1-2 "
Woonsocket,	6 "	5 "

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FREIGHT RATES. Advertisement in Providence Journal in 1829. Woodcut looks more like a Roman galley than a canal boat.

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