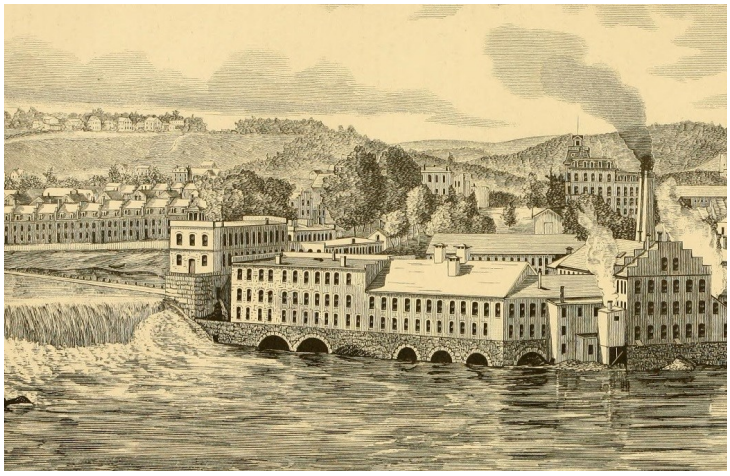
On a Roll: The Story of Paper in Turners Falls

Great Falls Discovery Center

SELF-GUIDED HISTORIC WALKING TOUR



Welcome

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, various industries thrived here in Turners Falls. ***But it was the paper industry that left the most enduring imprint.***

The story of the paper industry here is about people—innovative, determined, and resilient people. From visionary entrepreneurs to skilled mill workers, the cast of characters left its mark. Meet them, as you walk where they walked. Uncover stories of community, commitment to quality, stress, and loss. As you explore the ups and downs of paper manufacturing here, you'll see creative problem-solving along the way.

About the Tour

The walking tour begins at the Great Falls Discovery Center, 2 Avenue A, Turners Falls, MA. It includes portions of the Canalside Rail Trail. The relatively easy paved **route is just less than one mile**. See paper tour map and legend on page 2 for more details.

Things To Know

- **Accessibility:** Some sections of the route have long slopes (D-E and G-H) and there is rough pavement along Canal Street. For an alternate route, you may enter the Canalside Rail Trail from the parking lot on First Street (see the wheelchair symbol on the Tour Route Map) and reverse course at G instead of taking Canal Street.
- **Safety:** Keep to the right and be courteous of other users on the rail trail. Look out for bicyclists. Use sidewalks and crosswalks when traveling along streets.
- **Winter:** Icy conditions may exist. The rail trail is not maintained in winter.

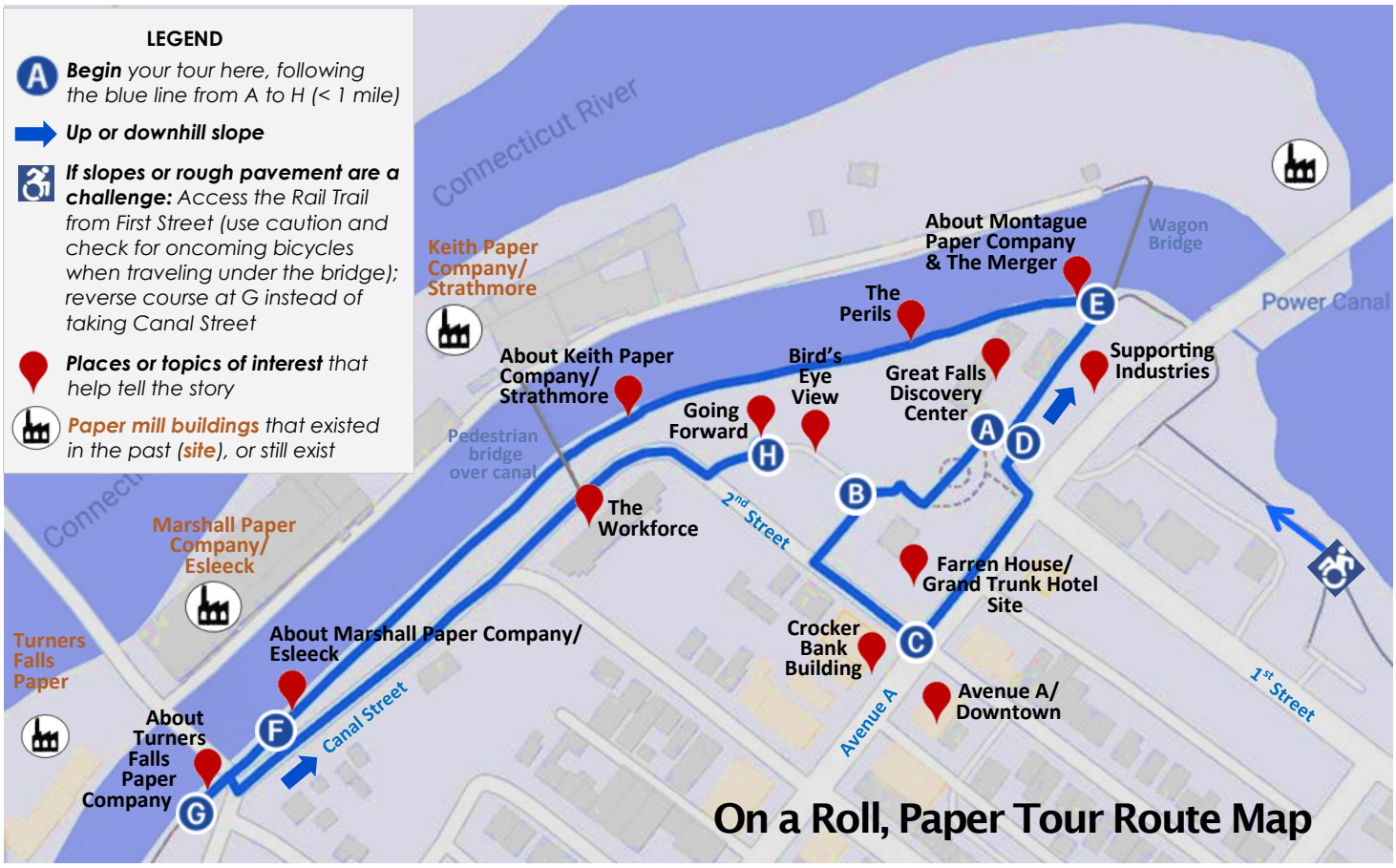
Paper, Paper, Everywhere!

Think for a minute about paper and its offspring, cardboard. Picture a trip to the supermarket, wheeling your cart down aisle after aisle of cereal boxes, jars with paper labels, and toilet paper. And that's just one part of a day in your life of paper, even in our digital age now.

It's hard to imagine a world that isn't filled with paper. But, until the 1800s, craftsmen made it exclusively by hand, and it was an expensive commodity.

How is paper made? Papermakers beat and mix plant fibers with water—lots of it. Spreading the mixture over a screen allows most of the water to drain away. The artisan presses out the rest. When dry, the result is paper. But the Industrial Revolution meant that new machines could make it faster and cheaper.

So, why was Turners Falls ideal for manufacturing paper? In a word—**water!** Making paper by hand takes a lot of water, but making it by machine takes much more. Huge paper mill machines also needed power to drive them. The Connecticut River was an ideal source for both purposes. With new technology and a water source for power, by the 1870s, the paper industry in Turners Falls was well established and lasted here for almost 150 years.

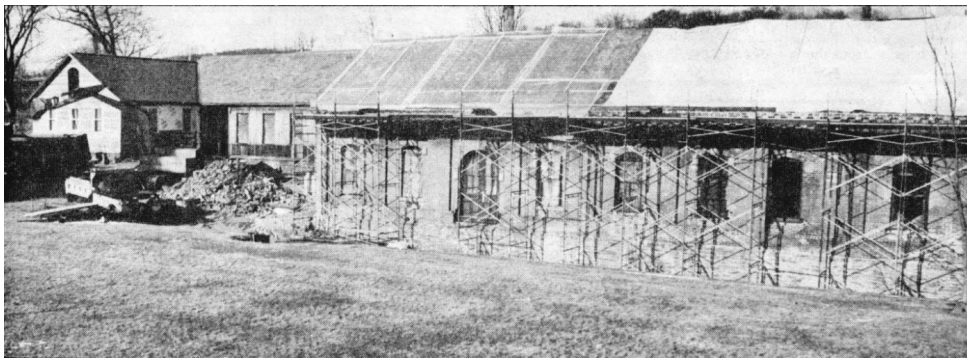


The Walking Tour

Refer to the paper tour route map above as you walk. Follow the route in alphabetical order. Your tour begins right outside the Great Falls Discovery Center entrance.

A

Great Falls Discovery Center ~ History Saved!



The Discovery Center is housed in buildings formerly used by the Montague Paper Company. Preservation efforts in the 1990s (shown at right) saved the buildings. Ten more years of collaboration led to a new heritage park, a highlight of the village's economic revitalization. Through the vision and determination of creative problem-solvers, the Discovery Center is now a Massachusetts State Park. Tens of thousands of tourists and locals enjoy the site each year. Stop in and explore during open hours.

Walk to the Discovery Center parking lot on Second Street. Follow the sidewalk to the right to catch a glimpse of the Power Canal.

B

Bird's Eye View ~
Want to Build an Industrial City? First Step: Harness a River!

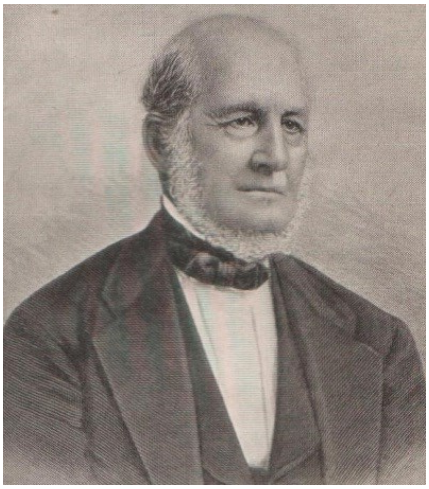
Look down at the power canal, the Connecticut River is beyond. An 1877 illustration (at right) shows the river's capacity to supply water for paper-making. The dam and canal harnessed and channeled the water to turn turbines underneath the mills, which powered them. Until this time, cotton rags provided most of the fiber for pulp. But now machines could make paper so fast that rags became scarce. Time to innovate!

The invention of grinders to chew up logs meant that papermakers could now also use wood for pulp. Logs arrived by farm wagons or rail. Lumberjacks up north also sent their harvest down the river for both pulp mills and sawmills during annual log drives. Investors imagined a booming industrial city here. *Are the dam and canal still used?* Yes, the river is still harnessed for power. But now it generates electricity at the Cabot Hydroelectric Station downstream.

Cross over 2nd Street. Follow the sidewalk to the corner of 2nd Street and Avenue A. Look at the building on the corner at right.

C

Crocker Bank Building ~ A Visionary Leaves His Mark

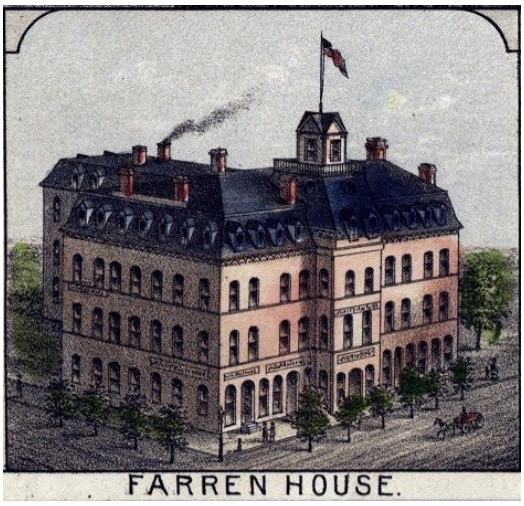


In the late 1700s, business leaders built a small dam and canal here to move barges around the Connecticut River's "great falls." But, soon the new railroad industry took over the job of transporting goods and the last boat passed through the canal in 1856.

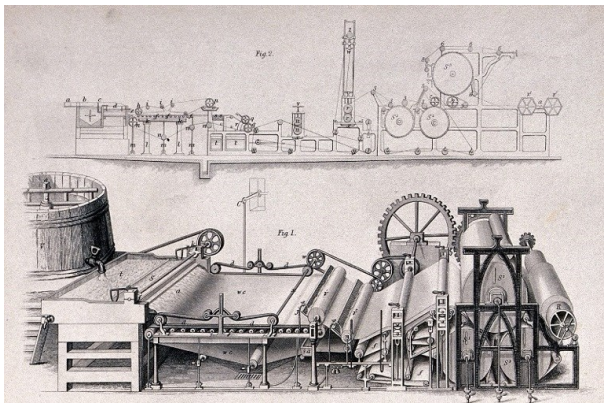
A decade later, an ambitious industrialist and railroad champion from nearby Fitchburg saw opportunity in the abandoned canal. **Alvah Crocker** (at left) began working in paper mills at the age of eight and started his own paper mill when he was 26.[1] With investors, he enlarged the dam and canal in Turners Falls, so it could now power mills. He purchased and sold water rights along the canal. A planned industrial community was born. As he strove to create his vision, Crocker left his mark all over town, including this former bank he had built in 1869.

Cross back over Second Street to the opposite corner along Avenue A.

Farren House/Grand Trunk Hotel Site ~ Innovators & Entrepreneurs Build a Lively Business District



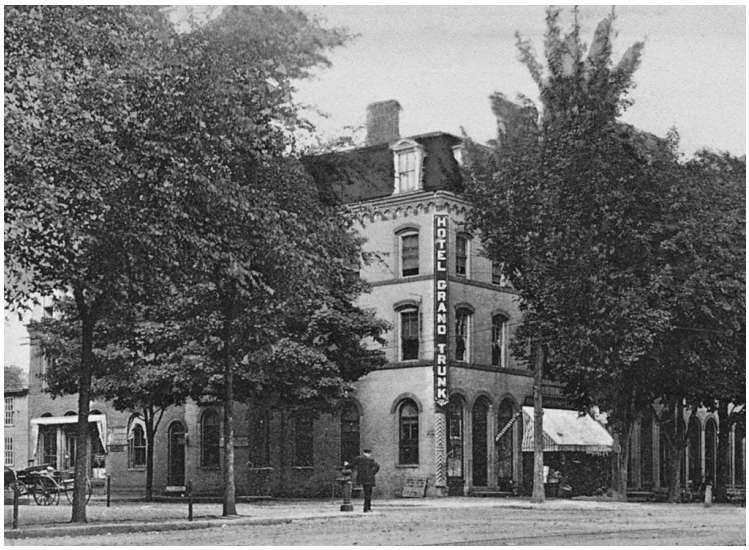
Paper used to be made one sheet at a time. In 1798, a supervisor at a paper mill in France got tired of the crew arguing. So, he invented a machine to do all their jobs instead. A few decades and some improvements later, this machine—the **Fourdrinier**—(one version shown below) could make a continuous sheet of paper limited only by the size of the roll it held.[2] Add new technology for using wood for pulp—and the paper industry took off, especially in Turners Falls.



Paper machine based on Fourdrinier design

Paper mill industrialization sparked a business district that brought Turners Falls to life. Take a look at the artist's depiction of the long-gone **Farren House,** later known as the **Grand Trunk Hotel** (shown above) which stood here on your left. The hotel built here in 1872 once housed 40 rooms, a barbershop, bank, and—eventually—a bar. Its builder, Bernard Farren, was an influential board member of several paper companies in town. Described as *"a leading spirit…taking a kindly personal interest in everything,"*[3] he also built a hospital in Montague City down the road.

Avenue A/Downtown ~ A Distinctive Sense of Time and Place



This c.1912 glimpse (at right) of the **Grand Trunk Hotel** on Avenue A, is from the diagonal corner. Contributing to a vibrant and attractive downtown, it served residents, traveling businessmen, and the log drivers who periodically descended upon the town. Turners Falls still has a *"distinctive sense of time and place,"*[4] as it was seemingly built overnight. The Grand Trunk Hotel graced this corner for many decades. But the paper industry's eventual decline contributed to economic hardship.

By the 1960s, the hotel needed costly updates. Today's preservation movement had yet to take root here. Thus, the Grand Trunk was demolished. For decades, stakeholders could not agree on the value or use of the site. But, more than half a century after it was taken down, plans are under consideration for a mixed-use building that will respect the past while supporting economic development in the future.

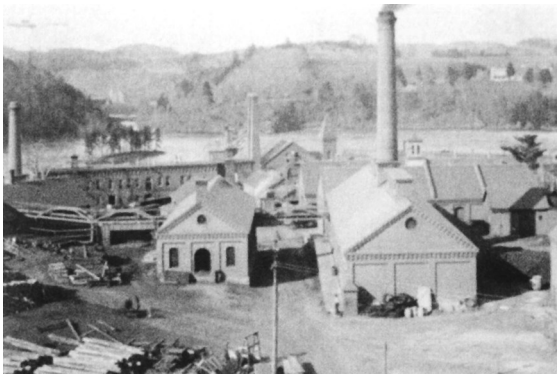
Continue your walk along Avenue A toward the Canalside Rail Trail.

D-E

Supporting Industries ~ From Machinery to Music

Paper mills required blacksmiths, machine shops, and steam power to keep the constantly strained machine parts in working order. Imagine the clamor of men and machinery and the haze and smell of smoke and steam in this historic scene (shown at right).

The Montague Paper Company's machine shop remains today for us to enjoy as the Great Falls Discovery Center's beautifully restored "Great Hall" (on the left in both photos and on your walk). The rolling hoist inside the building no longer lifts heavy iron machine parts. Instead, voices and musical instruments can frequently be heard lifting the spirits of appreciative audiences during programs, concerts, or gallery openings.



> *We doubt if there is a town in New England where so rapid strides have been made in the last three years ... Employment given to about four thousand persons, over three fourths of whom reside in the town and the march is still onward.*

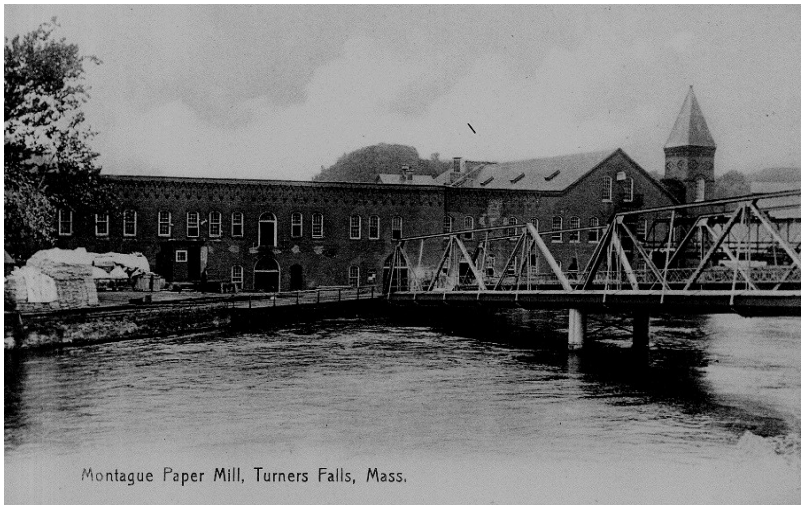
Turners Falls Reporter, July 21, 1872

At the rail trail turn left. Walk until you are directly below the Great Falls Discovery Center. This is the same vantage point as seen in the historic postcard below. (There is a public access opening to the right of the gate if you want to cross the footbridge and explore more.)

E

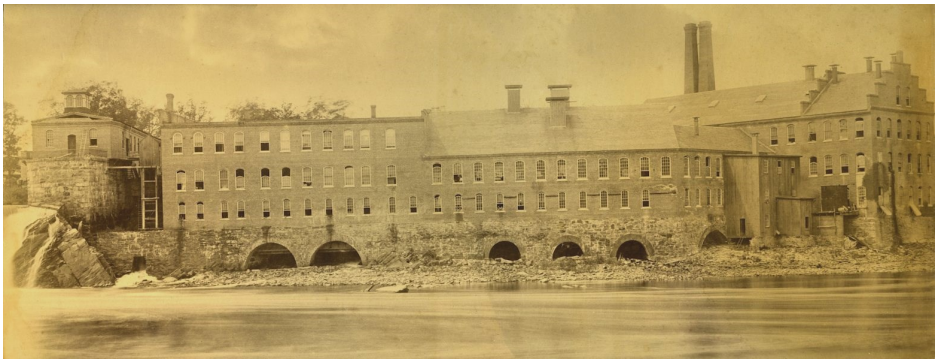
The Montague Paper Company ~ Pulp Mill Puts Turners Falls On the Map

Today's wooded view across this same bridge belies the hustle and bustle of the past. When the Turners Falls Pulp Company opened in 1869, it put Turners Falls on the map as one of the first pulp mills in the country. Then industrialist Alvah Crocker built a paper mill right next door. The two companies soon merged as **Montague Paper Company** and climbed to the top of the industry. This dynamic group of innovators was awarded patent after patent for inventions and improvements to the mills' machines.



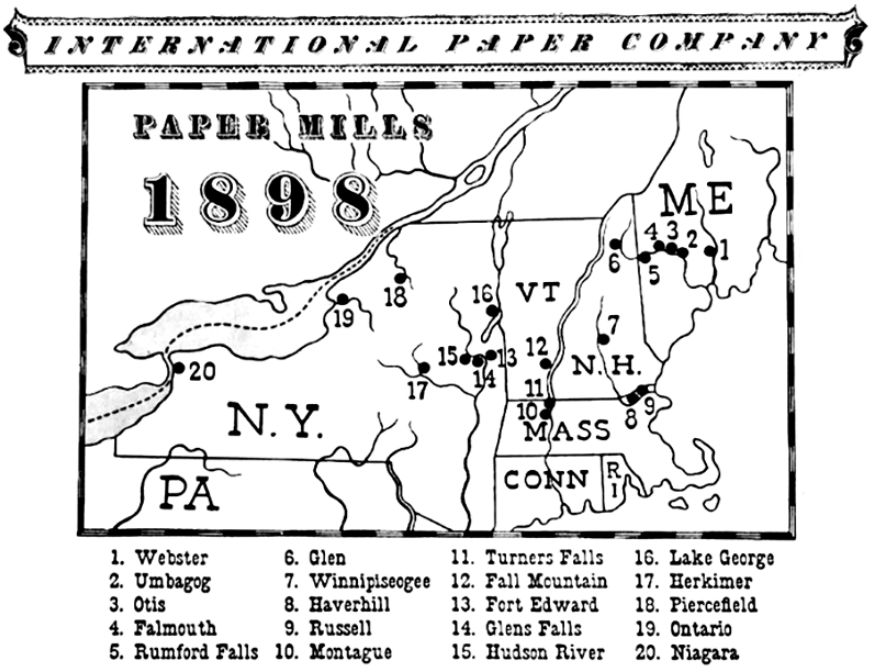
The mill combined cotton and wood pulp to make high quality newspaper for publications *"of the highest class as the Brooklyn Eagle, the Washington Star, and the Springfield Republican."*[5] The buildings are gone now, but remnants of the tailrace arches still exist along the river (as seen in the historic photo on the following page).

You might ask yourself, "What happened to all those buildings?"



The Merger ~ Buildings Are Gone— But the Legacy Remains

For several decades, Montague Paper Company grew and thrived. Hailed as one of the largest and best equipped mills in the country[6], it led the industry with cutting-edge technology. But complex factors ultimately led to its demolition. In 1898, local owners sold the mill to a new merger—**International Paper Company** (IPC). Many wondered what the impact of this change in ownership would be.[7]

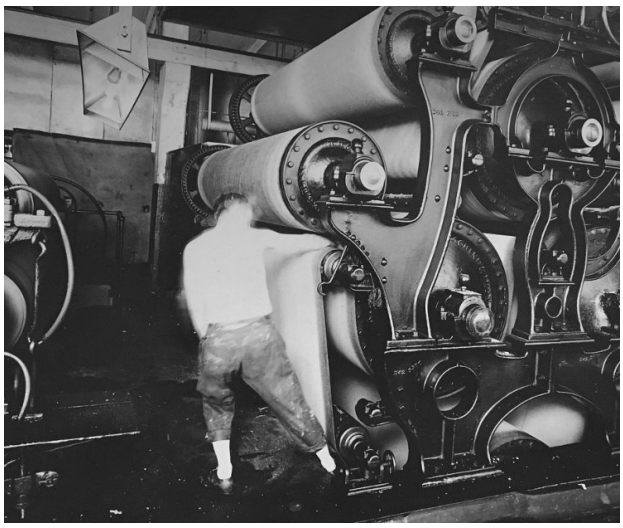


The mill operated, despite increasing costs, fluctuating markets, and competition with new and larger mills built near forests. In the Great Depression, workers reeled from intermittent layoffs, hoping for the occasional reopening[8]. But still, the company held on—until the flood waters of 1936 crashed over the dam. While two other paper mills along the canal dug out from the muck and carried on, IPC decided to raze the 15 mill buildings that occupied five acres for financial reasons.[9]

Continue walking along the rail trail.

The Perils ~ High Risk and Anxiety

Within a decade of Alvah Crocker's arrival here, three paper mills already lined the canal. Men ran the huge machinery and women sorted rags. Families prospered. But industrial jobs were fraught with peril. In the US today, workers benefit from OSHA safety regulations.[10] But in earlier times, mill work created life and death risks as the machines produced roll after roll of paper.



Many unfortunate accounts of injuries and fatal accidents filled the village's newspaper. Injuries were not the only worry. Although mills invested in fire prevention equipment, potential unemployment from fire-damaged mills was always a fear.[12] Workers and families coped with these stresses day in and day out.

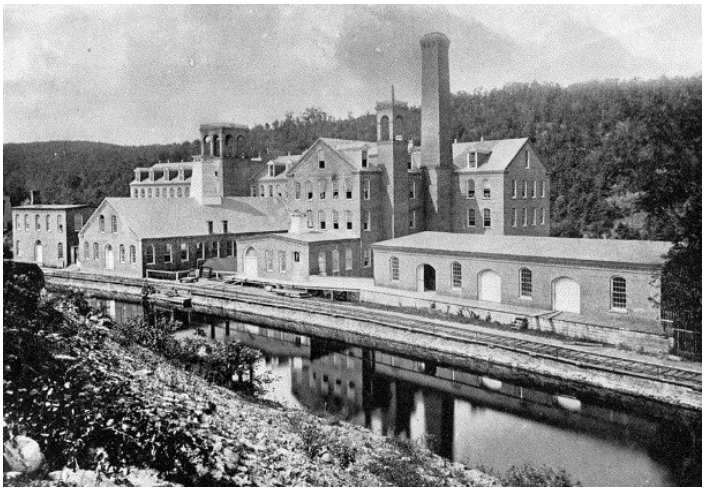
Continue along the rail trail. Look over at the mill buildings across the canal.

E - F

Keith Paper Company/Strathmore ~ Determination Then, Uncertainty Now

Villagers knew well the sound of the fire gong. In 1877, five years after **Keith Paper Company** began production, 300 *"well paid operatives"*[13] lost their jobs after fire destroyed the mill. But *"through the indomitable perseverance of President John Keith, the mill has been again put in operation, in better shape than before, inside of four winter months . . ."*[14]

The local paper's prediction that the mill would be *"a rival of the most formidable character"* came true.[15] Its reputation grew for producing fine writing paper. *"A box of choice Keith stationery is the last word in elegance . . ."*[16] The physical plant grew too and the Keith mill operated under that name until 1953. **Strathmore** bought it, then Hammermill, then International Paper.



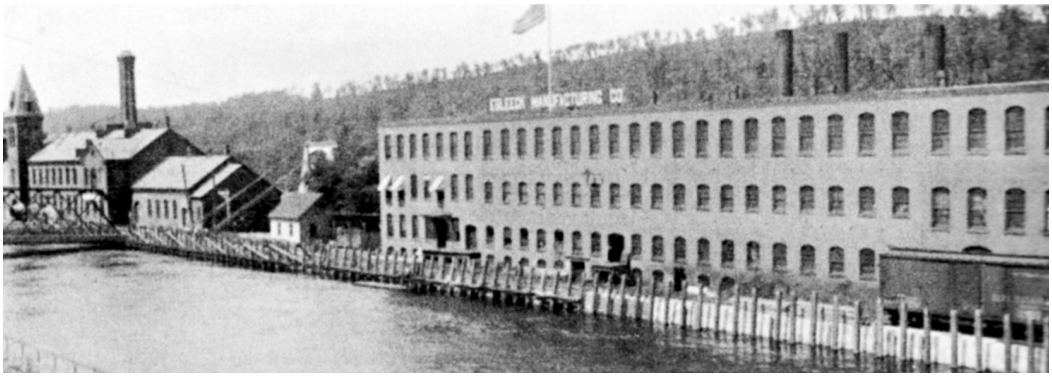
But in 1994, the mill closed, laying off 150 workers.[17] In 2007, arson destroyed part of it. A year later, the town took "the Strathmore"—as locals still call it—for unpaid taxes. Town of Montague staff are working to determine redevelopment feasibility of the mill complex.

Continue on the rail trail. Stop just before the green bridge. Look across the canal.

F

Marshall/Esleeck Paper Company ~ The Last Mill Closes—What's Next?

Frank Marshall was a well-respected machinist and inventor, but the mill he started here in 1895 went bankrupt within a few years. A. W. Esleeck took over. The company that bore his name operated for *over a century*! This photo (at right) also shows the once-thriving Turners Falls Paper Company further down the canal. Esleeck specialized in thin papers, perfect for typing carbon copies before the days of copy machines.



The U.S. government placed large orders and the mill produced blue ultra-thin **Air Mail Paper** (shown at left), once in common use. In one Labor Day parade, the company's float featured *"young women peering from cornucopias of various hues [of paper], wearing dresses of corresponding colors, showing the splendid product of the famous mill."*[18]

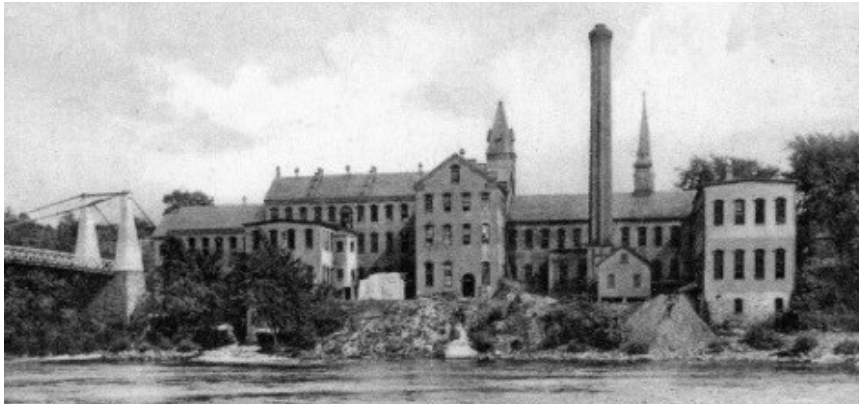
In 2006, Southworth acquired Esleeck, operating as Paperlogic. It could change products rapidly to fill small special orders. In 2016 it abruptly closed. The nearly 150-year era of papermaking in Turners Falls ended. A new owner purchased the mill in 2019, and redevelopment plans are in progress. The Town of Montague has been working to revitalize the Canal District through infrastructure improvements near this mill site.

Watch for oncoming traffic as you cross the road at the bridge. Continue just briefly on the rail trail. Look across the canal.

G

Turners Falls Paper Company ~ Fire Ravages Mill

Soon after the Turners Falls Paper company launched in 1879, one publication praised *"its finely-built walls, iron and cement floors, fire-proof tower and generally well-arranged deparments."*[19]



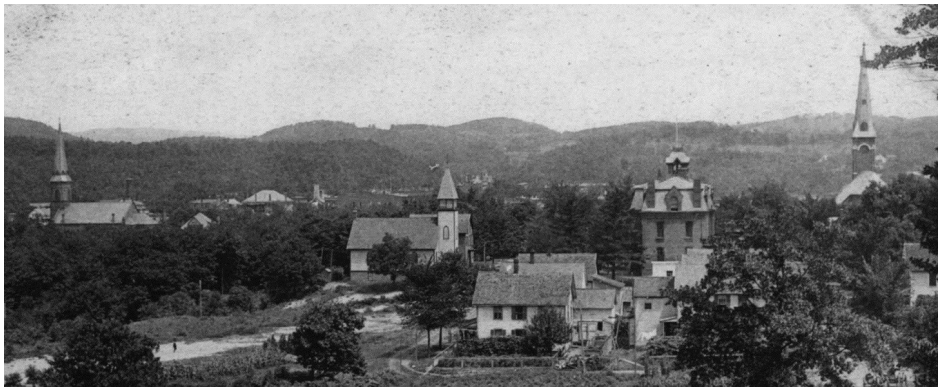
Producing newsprint, it was one of the mills that merged to form International Paper in 1898. Within a decade, management ceased operations, citing the increased labor costs associated with having three shifts a day, rather than two.[20] In 1917, the Keith mill bought the buildings, using them for storage.[21] In 1956, a fire destroyed most of the structures. A small modern brick addition sits next to one remaining original building (shown at left). Since then, many different businesses have used the buildings.

Leave the rail trail. Take a sharp turn and walk up Canal Street on the left side. Notice the pedestrian bridge high above the canal (now closed to foot traffic).

G-H

The Workforce ~ Immigrants Leave Their Imprint

Crossing the railroad tracks on each side of the canal was a hazard for Keith mill workers, so the company built this bridge. Here, in front of the former Keith boarding houses (now Senior Housing), imagine workers rushing to or from their shifts. Many were Irish, German, Polish, or French-Canadian. They built homes and businesses. As early as 1872, the local paper reported that in just three years *"over three hundred houses and stores have been erected."*[22] To worship in their own



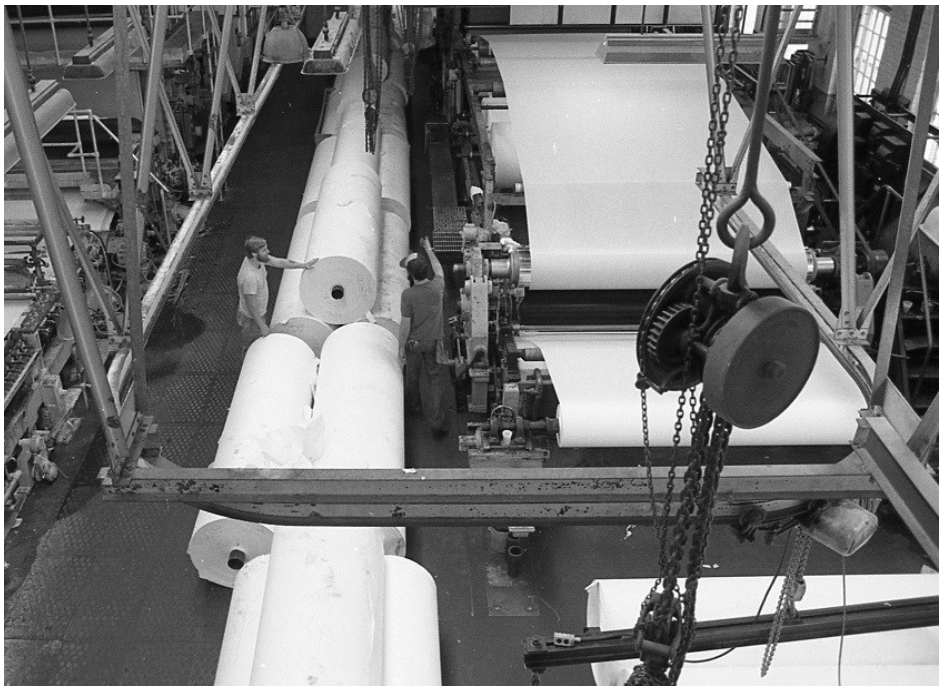
language and traditions, they also built churches—as evidenced by the steeples in this view from across town.

They built something else here: community. The newspaper reported union meetings, outings, sleigh rides, and debates over the merits or pitfalls of an 8-hour shift. Dances at Hibernian Hall featured the Paper Makers Band. Today, the children and grandchildren of past generations of mill workers live and work here. They are an enduring part of the paper industry's imprint on this village. *Together newcomers and long-time residents contribute to this story of community.*

Continue walking until you reach the Second Street Parking lot where the tour ends.

Going Forward ~ Calling All Future Creative Problem-Solvers

Huge machinery dwarfed these Esleeck workers in the 1980s. Similarly, immense new mills located near forested tracts elsewhere in the US, Canada, and overseas eventually dwarfed the Turners Falls paper industry. All four paper mills still existed in 1935 (as shown in photo on next page). But the scene changed quickly. Fires, floods, technology, and an ever-fluctuating economy all contributed to the industry's decline.



Today, resilient and creative residents and community leaders continue to reimagine and reshape this vibrant historic village.

What might your imprint on this village be? There are many civic, recreational, and cultural opportunities in town. Pick your favorite and join in. Find out more from DCR staff at the Great Falls Discovery Center.

If you're from out of town, thank you for your visit and appreciation for our history. What ideas will you take home with you?

Thank you for joining and rolling with us on this Turners Falls paper tour! We hope you enjoyed it. Share your impressions of this tour with park staff.

Acknowledgements: This historic walking tour adapts an exhibit that was created in 2018 at the Great Falls Discovery Center, in partnership with the collaborative art group, Exploded View, for their exhibit "Paper Jam." There is also a related article in the Winter 2020 *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* available online in the archives here. Many thanks to those whose work helped us understand and tell this story and who contributed photographs and archival content. Special thanks to local historians Ed Gregory and Bill Wilson.

Notes: 1. *Builders of the Hoosac Tunnel*, Cliff Schexnayder, pages 92, 93. 97; 2. Frogmore Paper Mill website; 3. *Turners Falls Reporter (TFR),* June 1, 1910; 4. Heritage Park draft proposal, early 1980s, GFDC archive; 5. *Western New England*, Vol. 2, 1912, "Industries of Turners Falls," Julius B. Robinson; 6. *1792-1892 Centennial Gazette*, Greenfield, MA; 7. *TFR*, Feb. 9, 1898; 8. *Greenfield Recorder-Gazette*, March 27, 1934, March 14, 1935, Dec. 21, 1934; 9. *1995 Historical Walking Tour of Turners Falls Villages*; *Greenfield Recorder-Gazette*, Sept. 17, 1936; 10. Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970; 11. *TFR* injuries: Dec. 21, 1904, Feb. 11, 1880, July 4, 1877, Sept. 3, 1879; 12. *TFR* Aug. 2, 1882; 13. *TFR*, Nov. 7, 1877; 14. *TFR* April 24, 1878; 15. *TFR*, April 30, 1873; 16. *TFR*, Dec. 28, 1921; 17. 1995 *Historical Walking Tour of Turners Falls Villages*; 18. *TFR*, September 8, 1915; 19. *Picturesque Franklin*, Charles Warner, 1891; 20. *TFR*, July 17, 1907; 21. *TFR*, Feb. 21, 1917; 22. *TFR*, July 24, 1872 .

Image credits: Title: *History of the Connecticut Valley in Massachusetts*, L.H. Everts & Co, Philadelphia, 1879 **Introduction:** *The Book of Trades* , Jost Amman, (Frankfurt, 1568) **A. Great Falls Discovery Center:** *Greenfield Recorder*, Feb. 20, 1993 **B. Birds-Eye View:** Turners Falls, Mass, detail, O.H. Bailey & Co., C.H. Vogt (Milwaukee, 1877) **C. Crocker Bank Building:** *The Life & Times of Alvah Crocker*, William Bond Wheelwright, 1923 **C. Farren House/Grand Trunk Hotel Site:** Birds-eye view, Turners Falls, Mass, detail, 1877; *Tomlinson's Cyclopaedia of Useful Arts* (London, 1852) **C. Avenue A/Downtown:** Ed Gregory archives, c. 1910 **D. Supporting Industries:** FirstLight Power Resources archives, 1904; A. W. Howes & Co., Montague Public Libraries; **E. About Montague Paper Company;** Al Shane postcard, c. 1910; Ed Gregory archives, 1873; **E. The Merger:** *International Paper Company–After Fifty Years,* 1948; **E-F. The Perils:** Strathmore, GFDC archives**; E-F. About Keith Paper Company/ Strathmore:** Ed Gregory Archives, 1872; *Picturesque Franklin*, 1891; **F**. About **Marshall Paper Company/Esleeck:** Ed Gregory archives, c. 1917 (Esleeck on right, Turners Falls Paper Company on left); airmail envelope, Museum of Our Industrial Heritage collection; **G. About Turners Falls Paper Company:** Al Shane Postcard, c. 1902; Ed Gregory archives, 1956; **G-H. The Workforce:** Memorial Hall Museum archives, c. 1900; GFDC archives; **H. Going Forward:** Ed Gregory archives, c. 1980s; WMECO archives, 1935.

The Great Falls Discovery Center celebrates the natural, cultural, and industrial heritage of the Connecticut River Watershed. It is part of the MA Department of Conservation and Recreation's Connecticut River Greenway State Park. Learn more here.

The Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) oversees over 475,000 acres of state parks, forests, beaches, bike trails, parkways, watershed lands, and dams across the Commonwealth. DCR's mission is to: *Protect, promote and enhance our common wealth of natural, cultural and recreational resources for the well-being of all.*

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