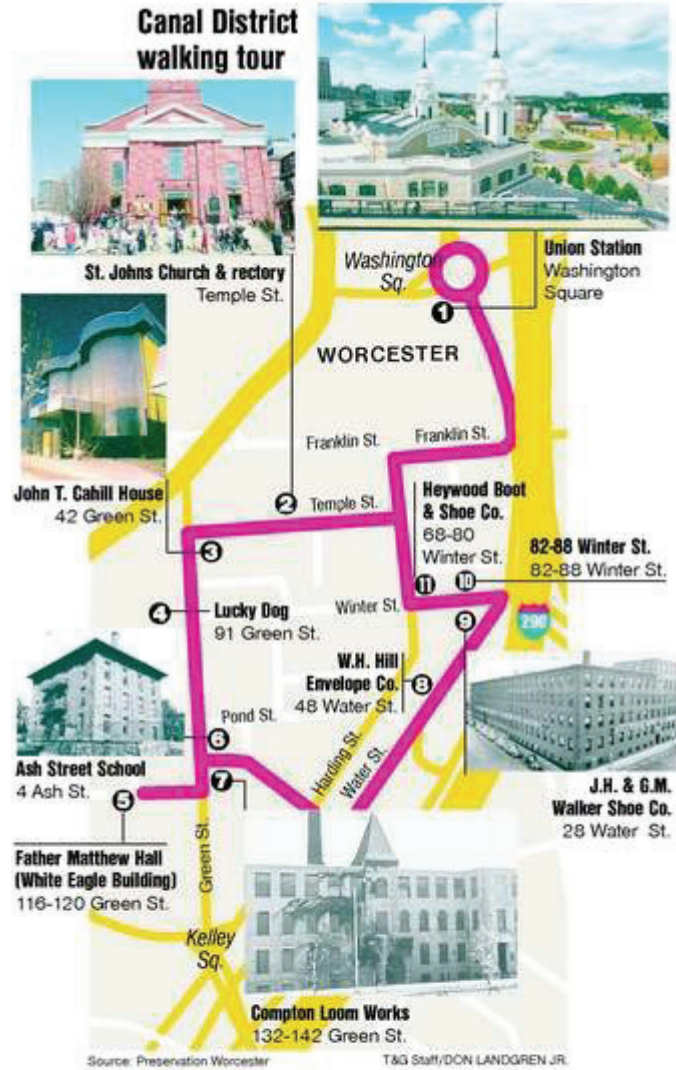


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History in the telling
Canal walking tour spotlights Worcester's past

By Linda Bock TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF





Erika Dunn, who is known as “Miss Worcester” and has the Worcester emblem tattooed on her chest, said she was very excited about Preservation Worcester’s new self-guided walking tour, “By The Canal,” launched at Union Station yesterday. (T&G Staff/DAN GOULD)

WORCESTER — All of Erika Dunn’s friends call her “Miss Worcester.”

She even has her love for Worcester tattooed across her chest, “My heart, my home.”

“I’m just a 29-year-old obsessed with Worcester history,” Ms. Dunn said when asked why she attended yesterday’s launch at Union Station of Preservation Worcester’s new self-guided walking tour, “By The Canal,” in the city’s Canal District. She is the mother of two, and has taken them on other tours offered in the area. Ms. Dunn said she was excited about the newest offering. “How can you not be excited about this? You’re walking with a canal under your feet! I think this will get a lot of younger people interested in the history here.”

The rich history of the Canal District also captured the interest and imagination of Jo Ann Mills, a docent for Preservation Worcester since 2006. Ms. Mills lives in Webster and her children attend school in the city.

“I’ve always been interested in history,” Ms. Mills said. “But I knew nothing about Worcester.”

Ms. Mills, who is the project coordinator, researcher and author of the “By the Canal” tour, said she got the idea by volunteering at Canalfest a few summers ago. The core of the Canal District is bounded on the north by Union Station, on the south by Brosnihan Square, on the east by Interstate 290, and on the west by Quinsigamond Avenue. The tour focuses on the northern section of the Canal District.

Ms. Mills went to Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, with her idea for a walking tour, and the pair teamed up with Susan Ceccacci, director of education for Preservation Worcester, to spearhead the new event. The project took about two years.

Ms. Packard began the brief tour-launching ceremony in Union Station by asking, “What do a famous poet, a Broadway playwright and one of the world’s greatest rock bands have in common?”

“They all have a connection to the Blackstone Canal district and their stories are contained in our ‘By the Canal Tour,’ ” Ms. Packard said.

Mayor Joseph O’Brien, other local dignitaries, sponsors, representatives from the Canal District Alliance and the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, were on hand yesterday morning for the unveiling of the new tour.

“US poet laureate Stanley Kunitz was raised in a tenement building on Green Street and attended the Ash Street School. Kunitz, who died in 2006, refers to Green Street in his poem “Halley’s Comet,” Ms. Packard said. “Playwright S.N. Behrman was born on Water Street in 1893. His family’s Providence Street three-decker provided much of the setting both for his book and Broadway play ‘The Cold Wind and the Warm.’ ”

In 1981, the Rolling Stones held an unforgettable concert at Sir Morgan’s Cove at 91 Green St. and 350 people crammed into the club and hundreds stood outside in the rain to hear what they could, Ms. Packard reminisced. The group opened with “Under My Thumb,” and played “Satisfaction,” “Honky Tonk Woman” and some of its other songs.

“I wish I was there,” Ms. Packard said.

She went on to say the Blackstone Canal played a key role in the history and development of Worcester, so Preservation Worcester chose to highlight the area on its newest walking tour.

The attendees were pleased to hear that the self-guided walking tour is also available for smartphones.

“None of us even owned a smartphone,” Ms. Packard said of the original trio who spearheaded the effort a couple of years ago. “So we took a leap of faith.”

In the Blackstone Canal District’s streets and buildings, Ms. Packard said, the canal tour uncovers surprising stories about the people, the events and the economy that make Worcester the city it is today. The tour highlights 11 buildings that reflect the history of the Canal District, and its neighborhoods. Nine of the buildings were built before the Blackstone Canal was covered in the late 1800s. All structures on the tour retain much of their original architectural design.

The tour starts at Union Station in Washington Square; and includes St. John’s Church and rectory, Temple Street; the John T. Cahill House, 42 Green St.; a four-story brick building at 91 Green St.; Father Mathew Hall, also known as the White Eagle Building, 116-120 Green St.; Ash Street School, 4 Ash St.; Crompton Loom Works, 132-142 Green St.; the W.H. Hill Envelope Co., 48 Water St.; J.H. & G.M. Walker Shoe Co., 28 Water St.; three-story brick building at 82-88 Winter St.; and the Heywood Boot & Shoe Co., 68-80 Winter St..

Mr. O’Brien congratulated Preservation Worcester.

“We are so grateful for this tour that really celebrates this history,” he said. “There is such

incredible history in this area.”

John G. Giangregorio, president of the Canal District Alliance Inc. and board member of Preservation Worcester, said he hopes the walking tour will bring the public’s attention to some of the great buildings in the Canal District, “That we often pass without being aware of the role they have played in Worcester’s industrial, social, political, and cultural growth and history.”

Mr. Giangregorio said Congress is reviewing the idea of a new Blackstone River Valley National Park, and the walking tour will bring added well-deserved attention to the area.

Ms. Ceccacci, who grew up in Worcester and lives in Holden, said the tour takes about an hour to complete, depending on how fast people walk. Each audio runs about two minutes.

The walking tour is accessible in an audio version on smartphones and able to download to iPods. It is also available in a printable version on Preservation Worcester’s website: www.preservationworchester.org. Historical markers with Quick Response tags were affixed to buildings along the way to provide immediate smartphone access to the tour.