Welcome to the Essex National Heritage Area

For more than four centuries, Essex County has had a profound influence on our understanding of American history. These stories in particular are preserved here:

The Early Settlement Story:

The European settlement of New England.

The Maritime Story:

The rise of the international maritime trade, which helped make America an independent nation.

The Industrial Story:

The industrial revolution in textile and shoe manufacturing. The rocky ocean shoreline of Essex County, its sandy beaches and natural harbors, its large salt marshes and forests help us understand the appeal of the area in the 16th and 17th centuries and why it developed as it did. Our coastal and deep-water towns still preserve their original colonial patterns of roads, open spaces, and commons, as well as numerous First Period homes.

Our waterfronts still show how the settlers developed the fishing and maritime trades and transformed our harbors with warehouses and wharves, ships and boatyards. Our town centers, filled with elegant homes, show how the merchants and sea captains gained wealth by privatizing the Revolution and then by opening the farthest parts of the world to their tall ships. The same maritime wealth helped finance the industrial revolution, building the huge textile mills and shoe factories, the machine shops and tanning planks, the workers’ homes and industrialist mansions that dominate some of our communities today.

The Essex National Heritage Area links these resources together through these theme trails. This brochure will help you follow one of them.

All thirty-four communities of Essex County are part of this exciting project created in cooperation with the National Park Service.

Textile mills of Lawrence, c.1890

Essex National Heritage Area Visitor Centers

Look for the (symbolizing these centers on the map inside this brochure. You can find detailed information on the Essex Heritage Trail at the National Park Service Visitor Center in Salem. Be sure to ask the digital multimedia presentation on 400 years of Essex County settlers. Pick up the three Essex Heritage Trail brochures, which will help guide you throughout the county. The Park Service ranger will provide you with expert visitor assistance. You can call 508-740-1000.

In addition, all of the Satellite Visitor Center staffs and volunteers will provide information on the Essex Heritage Trail. They will help you to direct you toward your specific interests.

Regional Visitor Centers

New Liberty and Essex Sts., Salem 508-740-1050

Satellite Visitor Centers

Custom House Maritime Museum
25 Water St., Newburyport
Gloucester Visitor Welcoming Center/Stage Fort Park
Rte 133 and 127, Gloucester
Haverhill Historical Society & Butterwoods Museum
240 Water St., Haverhill
Ipswich Visitor Center/Hall Haskell House
32 South St., Ipswich
Lawrence Heritage State Park
One Jackson St., Lawrence
Lynn Heritage State Park
Union and Washington Sts., Lynn
George Peabody House Civic Center
283 Washington St., Peabody
Saugus Iron Works National Historical Site
244 Central Ave., Saugus

Sponsors

The National Park Service
The Essex Heritage Ad Commission
Salem Five Cent Savings Bank, Salem, MA
The Yankee Shoe, Gloucester, MA
Massachusetts Cultural Council
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Essex National Heritage Area

A regional project in cooperation with the National Park Service

Essex County, Massachusetts
The Leather Story

WITH AN INDEPENDENT SPIRIT, THE SHOE MAKERS AND TANNERS OF ESSEX COUNTY CAME TO DOMINATE THE NATIONAL SHOE INDUSTRY BY THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY.

Shoemaking and tanning were traditional handicrafts during the 18th century. Using hand tools, men made shoes in their homes. Women sewed together shoe uppers in addition to performing their household chores. The tanning industry grew to supply the increasing leather demand.

In the late 18th century, separate shoe workshops were created, called "10 footers" because of their size. Although pay was poor and hours long, shoemakers and tanners were free to set the work pace and conditions. Between 1820 and 1830, large "central shops" were built by businessmen where more control could be exerted over quality and design.

Mechanization began in the 1830s. Sewing machines changed forever how shoes were made. Machine-sized factories replaced cottage shops, and machinery was developed which replaced the arduous handwork in the shoemaking process. The factory system greatly increased productivity but severely limited the control individual workers had over their working conditions. In a few short years, the shoe industry was transformed from a de-centralized system of production to a highly regimented industry. Waves of immigrants supplied the workers who were essential to the growth of the shoe and tanning industries. Earlier skills of skill, independence, and creativity fell victim to maximizing profits.

The most poignant story is the history of the immigration and labor unrest that accompanied this industrial growth. Textile manufacturers squeezed every minute of labor from their workers. Relying on an immigrant workforce divided by language and ethnic culture, they rigorously structured their workers' lives to the demands of the mills. These conditions gave rise to a burgeoning labor movement. The successful 1912 "Bread and Roses" strike was one of the 20th century's most intense labor conflicts and a milestone in American labor history.

By 1950, the fortunes of the textile industry had spun downward. Obsolete buildings and antiquated machinery, together with competition from cheaper labor and weaker unions in the South, precipitated the textile industry's decline in New England.

Today, the legacy of Essex County's textile industry can be experienced in Lawrence, Methuen, North Andover, and Andover through their mill buildings, boarding houses, canals, and ethnic diversity.

The Textile Story

THE STREAMS AND RIVERS OF ESSEX COUNTY, WITH THEIR ABUNDANT SUPPLY OF WATER POWER, PLAYED A LEADING ROLE IN THE REGION'S EMERGENCE AS A CENTER FOR TEXTILE MANUFACTURE.

Essex County's textile story has roots in 17th- and 18th-century sawmills, gristmills, and fulling mills, which operated on waterpower. Early textile production remained in the hands of the shops of town weavers until the beginning of the 19th century, when small one-process mills were developed.

Nearly all innovations in textile technology originated in England before 1860. In 1802, British entrepreneurs developed the first water mills on Cochichewick Brook and Shawsheen River in Andover. Soon textile mills for cotton, woolen and worsted manufacturing sprang up all around Essex County. Multi-process factories were built in which raw cotton bales were transformed into bolts of cloth. Mills located on larger rivers with greater waterpower began to overshadow the smaller mills, thus ushering in the period of the mega-mills.

Nowhere was mill construction pursued more diligently than in the planned industrial city of Lawrence. By 1890, fifty years after its founding, Lawrence was the leading worsted cloth manufacturing center in the world, with a mile of mills lining the banks of the Merrimack River.
Communities and Highlights to Visit on the Textile Trail

Lawrence

Known as the "City of Workshops," it is the most significant mill city in Essex County and was one of the nation's first planned textile towns. Lawrence is home all of the characters of a 19th-century mill city.
Andover and Towskbury Sts.

A bequest was made to the Shermear River. This 17th-century village became world-renowned for its fine and renowned shops.

Haverhill and York Sts.

This area of the district was planned and created in 1845 by a model community of manufacturing, residential, commercial, and recreational facilities.

Mathuen

The small and open spaces of Mathuen attracted many of the early industrialists to build large estates in the area, which contribute to the present community character. Mathuen is an eclectic mix of architectural, with intact mill complexes, new development, and intriguing public buildings and estates that reflect the wealth generated from the textile industry.

Spicket Falls Historic District

Railroad, Hampshire, Osgood, Broadway Sts.

In this district of 26 industrial, residential, and commercial properties is the Mathuen Mill Complex and Spicket River Dam, an example of an early 19th-century multi-process factory. It has been described as one of the best preserved textile mill sites in the Lower Merrimack River Valley.

Other sites to visit on the Textile Trail

Amesbury

13 Amesbury and Salisbury Mills Village Historic District

Market, Bedford Sts.


Newburyport

14 Newburyport Historic District

High St., Merrimack St.

Textile mills and worker housing.

Community Highlights and Visits on the Leather Trail

Lynn

Lynn is a city of diverse character. You will discover expansive ornamental views and a dense bustling downtown with numerous architectural remnants of the days when Lynn was the world center for the manufacture of women’s shoes. There are rich ethnic neighborhoods, historic districts, and a two thousand acres of wooded parkland.

Washington and Union Sts. Open year round.

State-of-the-art exhibits, tours, and films celebrate the history of the community with a broad view of Lynn’s past as “Shoe City,” including “a ten footer” shoe shop. The historic-fort park features mosaic murals depicting Lynn’s history. Visit the boardwalk, and participate in outdoor programs.

16 Lynn Historical Society

125 Green St., Open year round.

Discover Lynn’s past and present through permanent and changing exhibits, including the early Morichelli’s weaving machine and the largest collection of hand tools in the country related to the shoe industry. An extensive library of books, photos, and maps is also available.

17 Central Square Historic District


You will find many turn-of-the-century commercial and manufacturing buildings integral to the shoe industry, including the Vanity Building, which was the largest shoe factory in the world. A self-guided walking tour is available at Lynn Historical Society.

18 Diamond District

Between Ocean St. and Lynn Shore Drive

This district, adjacent to Lynn Beach, contains many Victorian and Edwardian era homes. Many of these were owned by Lynn shoe manufacturers. A guided walking tour is available at Lynn Historical Society.

Haverhill

Located along the western shores of the Merrimack River, this city began as a frontier village and rose to world prominence as a major shoe manufacturing center. Today Haverhill is a residential community that is truly diverse. Its character is a blend of ethnicity, historic shoe districts, and Victorian-style neighborhoods, including homes of the city’s notable shoe manufacturers.

19 Haverhill Historical Society & Buttonwoods Museum

280 Water St., Open year round.

The museum contains a large collection of shoes and shoemaking tools that represent Haverhill’s role as a world leader in the quality and design of shoes. On the grounds you will also find the restored Daniel Heiskel Shoe Shop.

20 Washington St. Shoe District

Washington and Winthrop Sts.

This was the heart of Haverhill’s 19th-century shoe industry. The district includes numerous Queen Anne-style factories made of brick and stone.

21 Washington St. Shoe District Extension

North of Washington St. to Shoe District

This district continues the story of Haverhill’s shoe industry by including larger companies characteristic of the early 20th century.

22 Highlands Neighborhood

Mill and Main Sts., Keene Ave., 516th St.

This 19th-century residential district contains some of Haverhill’s outstanding examples of Queen Anne, Tudor and Railroad architecture, including ten homes built by some of the city’s notable shoe manufacturers.

23 Bradford Common Historic District

Redwood and South Main Sts.

This district contains numerous structures associated with the early period of the shoe industry.

24 George Peabody House Civic Center

205 Washington St., Open year round.

This center has excellent exhibits on tanneries and the tanning process, including video of people who worked in the tanneries. The house itself is a large example of Victorian-era shoemaking as a cottage industry in the early phase. The small scale replica of a Beam Shop includes numerous leather-making artifacts.

Other sites to visit on the Leather Trail

Danvers

25 Salem Village Historic District

Centre, Hobart, Ingleson, Hall, and Forest Sts.

There are numerous examples of home shoe shops and shoemakers’ homes from the mid-19th century, including a shoe shop at the Rebecca Nurse Homestead.

Salem

26 Peabody Essex Museum

Plummer Hall, Essex St., Open year round.

This museum has one of the largest shoe collections in North America, as well as hundreds of tools from the early 19th and 20th centuries. The Lyce-Epley “10 footer” Shoe Shop contains tools from the pre-industrial era.

Rowley

27 Plaza Brattle Street House

Main St., Tours by appointment.

This house, site of the Rowley Historical Society, has an early “10 footer” shoe shop moved from a nearby Rowley farm about 1840.

Wenham

28 Wenham Historical Museum

132 Main St., Open year round.

This interesting museum, with interesting exhibits for children as well as adults, has two “10 footer” shoe shops, tools and exhibits.