



File photo

Public funds will soon be used to make repairs to the foundations and exteriors of the Old Slater Mill and the Wilkinson Mill in Pawtucket.

Federal money on the horizon for Slater Mill

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PAWTUCKET – Over \$8 million of deferred maintenance and repair needs could soon be addressed at Old Slater Mill with a new infusion of federal funding.

The scope of work includes repairs to the foundations and exteriors of the Old Slater Mill and the Wilkinson Mill, repointing the river retaining walls and raceways and making accessibility improvements throughout the site, espe-

cially at Wilkinson Mill. Repairs to the Wilkinson bell tower roof and the Slater Mill windows will also help protect the historic components inside the two buildings, according to federal project documentation.

Slater Mill, often hailed as the “birthplace of the American industrial revolution,” was the first successful water-power textile mill built in the U.S. in 1793. The Wilkinson Mill building housed a textile mill on the upper two floors and a machine shop on the lower

floor where the machine parts for Slater Mill and other textile mills in the area were designed and manufactured.

“We all talk about Slater Mill, everyone knows it, but the Wilkinson Mill is the one that holds lots of patents for the machine improvements that fired up the industrial revolution back in the day,” said Bob Billington, president of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council.

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Mill

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The museum inside Wilkinson Mill has been closed since 2020. The property used to be owned and operated by a private entity called the Old Slater Mill Association, which finalized the donation to the National Park Service in 2021 during the pandemic. OSMA had allowed visitors to tour the Sylvanus Brown House and the Wilkinson Mill, using a temporary ramp for accessibility, said OSMA Executive Director Lori Urso, but the National Park Service chose not to reopen those two sites since they weren't fully accessible.

The improvements to

the Wilkinson Mill would allow the park to reopen the building and let visitors see the 16,000-pound waterwheel that powered the machinery in action.

"This critical [Great American Outdoors Act] funding would allow the National Park Service to restore a key interpretive feature of the Old Slater Mill historic site, re-open an immersive museum for all – including our mobility challenges visitors – to experience in person and help reserve the Old Slater Mill Historic Landmark District for current and future generations of visitors," said Park Superintendent Eric Breitkreutz in a statement.

Urso said the waterwheel stopped working around the fall of 2019,

and getting major projects like restoring the wheel done with federal funding was a large part of the motivation for the OSMA donating the property.

"If the waterwheel is operating, it's a big draw," she said. "It's always been a big draw. It's definitely an asset."

Funding for the project comes from the National Parks Service's Legacy Restoration Fund, which was established by the bipartisan Great American Outdoors Act of 2020. Every fiscal year since 2021, Congress has appropriated up to \$1.9 billion to the fund for projects that address deferred maintenance in national parks, supported by revenue from energy development on federal lands. In the

last three years, nearly 300 projects nationwide have been funded through the Legacy Restoration Fund.

Though the funding is mandatory, Congress approves the list of projects that benefit from the fund each year, and Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI), who sits on the Senate Appropriations Committee, has been working to get Rhode Island projects approved.

"These upgrades will enhance the experience for visitors, giving them a better sense of the sights, sounds, and unique characteristics of these historic mills that helped power the American Industrial Revolution and change the course of U.S. history," Reed said in a statement.

The Slater Mill project has already received about

\$1 million this fiscal year for planning and design work, and the National Park Service is planning to add an additional \$9 million the following year to begin construction, according to public NPS documents. The project is scheduled to finish in the fall of 2027.

"Senator Reed has been our advocate and a very, very strong advocate,"

Billington said. "His efforts follow the leadership of Senator [Clairborne] Pell and Senator [Lincoln] Chafee, and he's kept us on his mind and prominent."

The Blackstone River Valley was established as a National Historical Park in 2015 after Reed, who then chaired the Subcommittee on Interior & Envi-

ronment, wrote a law to do so that was passed as part of the National Defense Authorization Act of fiscal year 2015.

Before that, it was preserved for about 100 years by a group of citizens who formed the OSMA, which still maintains the Slater Industrial Archives and focuses now on aiding and facilitating research.

"Any of us that have been alive and working in and around Slater Mill for years – the fun and greatness of seeing it transition from private to National Park standards has been very cool," Billington said. "We really have the epicenter of America's industrial story."

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