

even want to do a study," Zax said. "It didn't want any more national parks, especially not urban ones." Paterson, despite having the largest waterfall in the northeastern United States after Niagara, would be about as urban a park as anyone could imagine, since its purpose was to preserve the remains of the industrial city that was founded there by Alexander Hamilton, in 1792. Hamilton, who wanted the economy of the United States to be built around manufacturing and banking, figured that the seventy-seven-foot-high waterfall could power the nation's prototype factory town. He made Paterson the country's first big infrastructure project. Pierre Charles L'Enfant, who laid out Washington, designed a system of waterways to bring water from the falls to the factory sites. During the nineteenth century, Paterson was among the largest producers of silk in the world, not to mention cotton, guns, paper, and locomotives.

By the nineteen-fifties, Paterson's prosperity had ended and the city, which now has a large Dominican population, and a Muslim community that is said to be one of the biggest in the country, is among the poorest in the state. The Great Falls and the abandoned factories around it were turned into a historic district years ago, and the area was slated to become a state park, but Zax felt that it needed the recognition that only national-park status could bring.

"What better place than here?" Zax said the other day. "In a city where everyone disagrees, everyone wanted to have the park. Muslims wanted it, Hispanics wanted it, politicians wanted it, preservationists wanted it. You had a founding father, a natural resource, and industrial history."

Bruce Babbitt, the Secretary of the Interior under Clinton, told Zax, "Behind every new national park is one committed, passionate, pain-in-the-ass person who perseveres." Zax went on, "So I started looking for that person. And then I visited Lowell—the national park in the old mill city of Lowell, Massachusetts—and I had a kind of revelation, and I realized that I had to do it myself."

He stepped down from his law firm and became president of the Hamilton Partnership for Paterson, an organization that he created to promote the city and push the park idea. "Everyone

thought I was crazy," he said. Before he left his firm, Zax had decided that the National Park Service was unlikely to support the idea during the Bush Administration. "It struck me, why don't we just go ahead and introduce legislation?" he said. "It's Congress that decides about national parks anyway." So Zax drafted a bill to turn much of the historic district into a national park, and the New Jersey congressional delegation agreed to sponsor it. The bill passed the House of Representatives in the fall of 2007, and President Obama signed it on March 30th of this year, after it finally cleared the Senate.

Zax was in Paterson recently, to take a final walk around the falls in the days before the National Park Service took over. He stood at the corner of Spruce and Market Streets. "This is one of the first buildings to be renovated, back in the early eighties," he said, pointing to a four-story brick factory with an engraved stone plaque reading "Union Works 1827-1890." The building now contains an ecumenical school. "And that one was the Rogers Locomotive plant office," he said, pointing across the street. "Then it became a silk-machine factory, and now it is transitional housing for kids leaving foster care."

He waited for a break in the traffic and crossed the street. "In the old pictures, you see workers filling the street, on foot, and maybe an occasional carriage, but now there are all these cars," he said. "Paterson has more people than ever. It just has no economy."

He stopped at an overgrown lot, studied with the ruins of several factories. "We commissioned a master plan from the landscape architect James Corner, of Field Operations, and he thinks we can preserve this as ruins," he said. "It will be a kind of archeological walk through remnants of industrial architecture from the seventeen-nineties through the twentieth century."

Zax continued up the hill to the falls, which cascade into a huge crevice, beyond which the river makes several sharp turns. "Paterson is one of the only places where you have a waterfall and then the river makes a turn and then another turn," he said. "It's confusing to a lot of people. But it doesn't bother me. I've always loved the letter 'Z.'"

—Paul Goldberger

FACE-LIFT THE FALLS



In early 2007, Leonard A. Zax, a real-estate lawyer and city planner in Washington, D.C., who had been trying to help create a national park around the Great Falls of the Passaic River, in his home town of Paterson, New Jersey, realized that the idea wasn't going anywhere. "The Bush Administration didn't