230-year letter by George Washington returns to Paterson

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BY KAPAMA SHRESTHA
STAFF WRITER

PATERSON - A 230-year-old letter written by George Washington at his headquarters near the Great Falls returned Monday - on his birthday - and will be displayed through said March at the Paterson Museum, just yards from where it was written.

The return of the letter - in which Washington became the state of his underfed, poorly clothed and provisioned army at a critical time in the Revolutionary War - comes as the Great Falls is prepared to become a national historical park.

The event was attended by dozens of city school students, Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr., D-11th, Leonidas Katz, head of the Hamilton Partnership for Paterson, and Seth Kaller, whose archive company has leased the artifact to the museum until March 12.

Katz, a Paterson native whose Hamilton Partnership was established to help create private-sector business opportunities in the city associated with the national park, called Paterson “the most historic place in America that virtually no one in America has heard of.” He urged people to take advantage of historic learning activities to build an appreciation for Paterson’s rich past.

Kaller read the letter, written on Oct. 21, 1980, after Washington’s armies had suffered two serious military defeats, only a year before the general’s 1781 victory over British forces at Yorktown. Washington tells his friend, the wealthy statesman and Virginia planter George Mason, that a change in leadership in Congress is essential if America is to defeat the British; that Congress, as head of the “federal union,” must have sufficient power to order a well-equipped, permanent army to pursue the war.

Washington wrote the letter that fall at the house he occupied near the Great Falls, then called the Passaic Falls. President Obama last year signed legislation that will turn much of the Great Falls district into a national historical park.

Conceding that Paterson’s people often take its history for granted, Pascrell said, “Today we are here to recognize our history, not to put purple rope around it so nobody touches it... if we know where we have been, we have a better idea of where we are going.”

On hand for the letter’s return were 50 students from Sussex Morgan Academy High School and the Pre-Collegiate Teaching Academy in Paterson.

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