

29 January 2007

Ms Mary Bomar
Director, National Park Service
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Ms Bomar:

As a biographical and historical scholar and educator, veteran of a three-decade career of keeping Paterson on Ramapo College's urban-centered educational agenda, and author, co-author and editor of a number of studies in Paterson cultural history, I write in strong opposition to the recently-published Special Resource Study denying Park Service support to the idea of a Great Falls/SUM National Park.

Although all the publications I've had a hand in are pertinent to the present NPS study, the most recent is especially so: an historical monograph on Hinchliffe Stadium, Paterson's Negro Leagues ballfield for twelve "Jim Crow" baseball seasons. This study resulted in the inclusion of the stadium on the National Register in 2004, and indeed on a Register webpage as the featured national site for February 2005. Along with the Friends' recently-launched website (joint effort of the Friends of Hinchliffe Stadium and Paterson's Preservation Commission), it has re-inscribed Hinchliffe on the cultural landscape of the Great Falls area and supplied the rationale for its inclusion in the National Park proposed by Congress.

Ironically, Congress's bold inclusion has become the Study's adroit exclusion. And while some of us feel the special sting of this omission, we share common cause with many other critics of the Park Service's methodology and conclusions in agreeing that their underlying problem is not some single factual omission but a failure of imagination, a failure that arises from a refusal to admit the dynamic character of historiography, and by extension, of public culture.

This deficiency is most obvious in the study's central and most egregious claim: that the National Park at Lowell, which nearly forty years ago took on the task of placing America's complex industrial past on the cultural landscape, can still tell, if it ever could, the whole truth about our industrial origins and development; that, even leaving apart Alexander Hamilton's critical contribution to industrial capitalism (a contribution that by your own admission remains embarrassingly under-inscribed in the Park system), we the people can quite well answer from the Lowell catechism all our questions about what really happened in the long story of the checkered making and re-making of American industrial might.

This tendentious assumption results in several absurdities; it takes the study wandering off into distracting waterfalls and hydropowered mills in tiny New England towns, into contingency plans for the intercontinental spike, into inconsequential byways about Colt not getting rich till the Mexican war, to Hamilton's birthplace in the Indies, to an array of places apparently better suited than Paterson to celebrate our multicultural immigrant rainbow—especially if we keep such themes pristinely distinct from the notion of coming here to *work*. Everywhere the study wilfully sidesteps the reality staring out from its own amazing gallery of accompanying Paterson photographs—that even if every American (let alone every foreign visitor or tourist) went to every one of the places named in this study, they would *never* have the grasp of this nation's industrial history, or plumb its meaning to an incredibly varied immigrant workforce, or catch its entrepreneurial élan, or connect it to the competitive national spirit, or come to the level of insight into the essential, intricate integration of all these disparate, scattered parts of industrial development, including—yes—failure as well as success—success beyond failure, that

would be made possible, made visible, made *intelligible*, by a single visit to a Great Falls National Park.

Of course I include the stadium in this missed interpretive potential. It offered an obvious opportunity to step outside the box with the authors of the proposed Congressional legislation. Any educated reader might have expected the Park Service, redoubt of regulation, to point out, ultimately, that this structure (though dreamed of for decades and partially financed in the 20s) was laid out, constructed, and finished between 1930-34, and thus falls technically beyond both the physical boundaries and “period of significance” of the existing Districts. Yet this is absolutely *all* the study says, not just ultimately but beginning to end, an utterly indefensible and categorical dodge into technical/regulatory issues that leaves all else, including insight into what forces might possibly adapt these to new scholarship or new interpretive frameworks, beyond the pale of discussion.

This omission only highlights a similar resistance to exploring the link the proposed legislation makes (in accord with a key project of contemporary scholarship) between Hamilton’s abhorrence of slavery and Paterson’s fairly resolute repudiation, from its founding moment, of an economy dependent on it. The message of the scholarship is that this is a story no other National Park, least of all Lowell, will ever be able to tell. The message of the study is...what?...that it doesn’t need, or warrant, telling? Even leaving aside the opportunity represented by the stadium to elaborate this story via the sports achievements of Black Americans at Hinchliffe in the 30s, was there not a moral and educational imperative for the study to address this theme, not just on behalf of Congress but on behalf of the potential audiences of a National Park still woefully underreflected within the system?

There is of course, relative to the stadium, a substantive interpretive issue: how to enfold such a recreational structure into the narrative of industry, which is, in the final analysis, how to narrate the relationship between *work* and *play*. Scholarship on this theme is not wanting: Steven A. Reiss’s *City Games: The Evolution of American Society and the Rise of Sports* (1989) and *Sport in Industrial America 1850-1920* (1995), and are studies in social history that link sports directly to technological innovation, work, and social movements. Others do too. My writing on this relationship in the Paterson context sees it as a critical piece for understanding the spirit of worker culture here—the same worker culture whose slogan for the eight-hour-day movement focussed less on work than on the part of life that work was *not*: “Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep, and eight hours *for what we will!*”

Hinchliffe “City” Stadium represents that claim by planting “*what we will!*” large on the landscape. Justly called “The House that Silk Built,” and paid for by the donations and self-sacrifice of Paterson workers, it was constructed by and for the people of this dominant industry; dye workers held union meetings here in the hard times of the Depression. In the context of the larger natural scene that includes the Great Falls and the Valley of the Rocks, we are reminded that it was laid out with instinctive respect for its unique surround (long associated with worker recreation) by Olmsted Brothers, direct descendants of the designers of New York’s Central Park and originators of some of America’s most visionary and people-centered environmental planning.

Hinchliffe Stadium reminds us how work, recreation, and decency are intertwined uniquely on the American scene, how the essential hopefulness, the egalitarian, aspirational character of both our industrial culture and our cultural diversity are represented, literally and symbolically, by the “level playing field.” This people’s park made no invidious distinctions of national origin or class or color or religion or gender. Eleanor Egg, one of America’s earliest great female runners, was the first athlete to be honored here in 1932; the arena eagerly welcomed professional Black and Hispanic baseball players in its first year, and then, once the New York Black Yankees chose to make it their home, throughout

the period when they were denied access to the major leagues. Larry Doby, the legendary ballplayer who went on to break the color barrier in American League baseball, never forgot his start here as an Eastside High School athlete.

Of course there is nothing in either the letter or spirit of the present study to suggest a willingness to take on such an interpretive challenge, or even to define it as a challenge worth taking on. It becomes almost inconceivable within its blinkered limits, despite the casual observation that a proper reading of Paterson's "path of decline" must take us into the Great Depression (p. 41). Where workers are concerned, the study is locked into a pre-Herbert Gutman, pre-social history time-capsule, and simply cannot address Paterson's long adventure, and investment, in the egalitarian thrust of American capitalism. How can it, when the Botto House is seen as representing, without reference to Paterson, our full obligation to interpreting the struggle for worker justice? when workers' contributions to the history of industrialization are embedded in the single repeated phrase: "labor unrest," as if labor contributed nothing more to the success of an industrial economy than a failed effort to undermine it; as if working people never devised any more creative expression of the struggle to be human than to strike; as if the history of industry was not also the history of workers individually "making it," or collectively claiming full rights to their humanity, even the right to play.

It is a failure of knowledge no less than imagination, when we know so much more: that here in Paterson Irish immigrant editor Joe McDonnell hacked out the longest-lived independent Labor journal in American history every week from 1878 till 1905; that he probably pioneered more protective worker legislation in Trenton than can be claimed by any other state legislature at the time; that Labor Day originated here before it was captured for the ages; that libel laws were tested and a nationally resonant blow struck for freedom of speech in a struggle that eventually went to the Supreme Court—right here, in a strike at the Adams Mill on the Mill Street frontage of the Great Falls Historic District.

Apart from the issue of feasibility (to which the study gives no depth in any case), every one of the counter-arguments to a National Park in Paterson is really a fallacy of part-whole relations, a failure to acknowledge, even in the face of some of the evidence it assembles, the one thing this city owns that the sum total of all the Park Service's separate theme-representing places lacks: a *synergy* that tells the whole story of industrial capitalism, that tells it in all its sometimes beautiful, sometimes irritating, sometimes unsettling and difficult complexity and interrelatedness, but tells it in one astonishing little educational universe. A *synergy* that makes it so much more than merely the sum of its miraculously serendipitous, if far from accidental, assemblage of proximate parts.

It is a huge story, a story only a Paterson National Park can tell, can tell well, and tell long into the future.

Yours sincerely,
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