

Rebirth of the downtown industrial district — key to revitalization

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PATERSON, N.J. — Residents were there by the hundreds to welcome home one of their noteworthy products of a previous era. "Old 299" had just returned from the Panama Canal Zone to its final resting place in the New Paterson Museum, a fitting climax for the 2-6-0 "Mogul" type steam locomotive that was born here in 1906. And June 6, 1979 marked the gala return of one of the few remaining American-made locomotives that were so instrumental in the construction of the Panama Canal by this nation in the period from 1904 to 1914, after earlier unsuccessful attempts by the French.

In the great age of railroad steam, Paterson was the leader in the construction of the steam locomotive: one of every three such locomotives built in this country had their origins in this old industrial city located on the Passaic River, just 12 miles west of New York City. And the return of one of these locomotives had a very special significance to the people of Paterson.

Bringing back "Old 299" involved more than just a simple boat trip from Panama to Paterson; rather, it created an international concern that required State Department action to resolve. It appears that the Panamanian government was not happy to lose this lovingly restored locomotive that had been on display at the Balboa Heights Railroad Station for 24 years. Negotiations between the Panama Canal Company and Paterson Mayor Lawrence Kramer were complicated by the treaty negotiations taking place between this country and Panama over the Canal. But the Mayor was on hand when "Old 299" was loaded on to a freighter (some say it was done at night!) for its final trip through the Canal. The triumphal return of this locomotive, by flatcar, into the city was led by Mayor Kramer, and signs in

the crowd hailed "The Great Train Robber."

Speakers for the day of festivities extolled the industrial past of this city, a past in which residents can justifiably take pride. It was Alexander Hamilton who first recognized the need for industrial development in the nation, and so he established the "Society for the Establishment of Useful Manufactures" (SUM) whose purpose was to sponsor and operate a planned industrial complex. The site of the development was to be at the Great Falls on the Passaic River, second highest waterfall in the East after Niagara Falls. Dropping 77 feet over a 280-foot-wide precipice, this power source was ultimately channeled into a series of raceways that powered the mills that were subsequently built here.

In its time, Paterson, "The Cradle of Industry," became the birthplace of the second city in the nation in the spinning of cotton (Pawtucket was first), maker of cotton duck sails for all American Navy ships, leading locomotive producer, leading producer of linen thread, the greatest silk manufacturing center in the world (300 silk mills were located in the city by the early 1900's), center for steel manufacturing, site of the first submarine and revolver (Samuel Colt had his own factory here), and the producer of airplane engines, among them that for the "Spirit of St. Louis."

These were the glory days of Paterson, major manufacturing city and 15th largest in this country in 1900, but time takes its toll, change takes place, and economic factors favor different locations and other types of goods. The postwar years have altered city patterns; suburban development drained off middle class whites, migration of minorities into the city brought the Spanish-speaking and black population to approximately one-half of the 153,000 total, and industry moved out, leaving behind old and abandoned mills. Much like other old industrial cities of the Northeast, including Providence, Paterson has had to seek other avenues of development and to capitalize on its strengths, and this included its own mills.

The old mills, located in an area slated for demolition because of construction for a new highway, were saved through the efforts of a concerned citizens group which recognized this area for its historic value. In 1971 a non-profit Great Falls Development Corporation was formed to guide development and historic preservation. And on June 6, 1976 then President Gerald Ford came to Paterson to officially designate the 119 acre "Great Falls of the Passaic/SUM Historic District" a national historic landmark, the only such district so honored in this country.

Although just now under way with some small developments, the district is not slated to be a museum piece. Instead, there will be housing, shops, restaurants, arts and crafts activities, schools and light industry located here, a place where more than 1,200 permanent jobs will be created. This rejuvenated district will also have a major impact on the downtown, situated just a few blocks away.

The \$4.2 million Urban Development Action Grant awarded the city is being used for industrial expansion in this land-short city of only eight square miles, less than one-half that of Providence. Seven of eight industrial firms have decided to remain in the city as a result of this help, and now manufacturing jobs are holding steady. The reduced city tax rate in each of the last four years is an indication of the continuing strength of this industrial city which continues to increase in population, today to record levels.

The return of "Old 299" is more than a return of a locomotive to Paterson; rather, it symbolizes the rebirth of a city which now prides itself on being the first planned industrial city in this nation. The area of old factories, long considered a liability, has been given a rebirth with its historic district designation and is now largely responsible for the growing vitality of Paterson. There are lessons to be learned here that Providence might also consider as it seeks to make use of its own old and abandoned mills.

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