

THE GREAT FALLS PROJECT

PATERSON, NEW JERSEY

Francis J. Blesso

August 1993

PREAMBLE

This project narrative was prepared by Francis J. Blesso in August 1993 in response to a letter from the Chrysler Award for Innovation in Design. The Chrysler Corporation nominated Mary Ellen Kramer and Francis J. Blesso of the Great Falls Committee to apply for one of six national awards under that company's inaugural competition. Francis J. Blesso added John Young to the team and prepared the narrative and assembled the supporting exhibits. The entry was one of over 100 submitted. Although the project was not selected, the narrative provides a first-hand history of the events surrounding the first twenty-five years of the Great Falls Historic District.

On November 5, 1993 the Paterson Historic Preservation Commission presented Mary Ellen Kramer (posthumously), John Young and Francis J. Blesso with its Heritage Citizenship Award for their role in the planning and creation of the Great Falls Historic District.

Francis J. Blesso
September 2005

SUMMARY STATEMENT

Mary Ellen Kramer, John Young, Francis J. Blesso, along with the Great Falls Committee, originated and implemented a plan for the preservation and reuse of 50 historic industrial buildings and a related water-power system at the Great Falls of the Passaic River in Paterson, New Jersey. Their success forestalled destruction by a planned highway of the earliest industrial complex in the United States and thereby provided a publicly supported and sustainable alternative to urban renewal by fiat.

THE GREAT FALLS PROJECT PATERSON, NEW JERSEY

NARRATIVE

EARLY HISTORY

When Alexander Hamilton first visited the Great Falls of the Passaic River, he not only viewed 77 feet of natural beauty, he recognized a tremendous energy source. Hamilton envisioned building the new nation's first manufacturing center as a step towards true independence. In 1791, he encouraged the creation of the Society for the Establishment of Useful Manufactures (SUM), with major help from New Jersey's Governor, William Paterson. Hamilton conceived harnessing the massive power of the falls, using it to move the water wheels of future mills. Pierre L'Enfant was hired to plan and engineer the town. The plan required substantial modification by others, but evolved over three decades into a three-tiered mile-long network of open stone-walled channels called raceways. These were used to funnel water in and out of the mills and eventually back to the river.

Paterson was incorporated on July 4, 1792, establishing itself as the Cradle of American Industry. The original cotton-based industries developed over two centuries to include the whole spectrum of manufacturing, from revolvers to locomotives and aircraft engines. But it was through textiles that the world came to know Paterson as the Silk City.

ROUTE 20 PERIPHERAL HIGHWAY

In 1966 when Lawrence "Pat" Kramer, Jr. took office as Paterson's youngest mayor, Paterson had only a few silk mills left. Its industrial base, although diversified, had declined. Downtown, which was once a thriving regional commercial center, was also in decline and suffering from the competition of highway shopping centers. Kramer began assembling a team of government professionals in finance, building inspection, public safety and urban renewal. He moved forward on his campaign promise to get control of the downtown urban renewal program and to "turn the City around."

By 1968 his team was in place and on September 20, in what was generally hailed as a major accomplishment, Kramer signed off on the 200-scale planning map for the new peripheral highway. Route 20 would intersect with Interstate 80, then under construction through Paterson. The alignment was to skirt the western and northern side of the central business district (CBD), parallel the Passaic River on its south side and connect to the existing McLean Boulevard in the City's Riverside section. City business leaders had been clamoring for improved access to the downtown since the late 1930s, when they felt they were bypassed by the plans for the Garden State Parkway. The highway design was coordinated to tie in with the proposed five-lane loop road to be constructed around the CBD under the City's urban renewal program. The New Jersey

Department of Transportation (DOT) began aggressively carrying out its land-acquisition program while the highway moved into the final design stage.

ENTER COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Shortly afterward, a group of architectural students from Columbia University came to Paterson to study its industrial architecture. The group met with Mary Ellen Kramer, the Mayor's wife, and began to explore, photograph and document the industrial area near the Great Falls. Mrs. Kramer introduced the group, headed by graduate student John Young, to City officials including Francis J. (Frank) Blesso in the City's Redevelopment Office. Base maps and other surveys and documents were provided to the group.

John Young's Master's thesis "A Proposal for Paterson" helped raise the awareness of Mary Ellen Kramer, Frank Blesso and others to the rich treasure present in the industrial architectural fabric of Paterson. Young's research provided the documentation for a nomination form to place the Great Falls/SUM area on the U. S. Department of Interior's National Register of Historic Places as an 89-acre historic district. The nomination was reviewed by Mary Ellen, Frank and others, and submitted as prepared by: Leo Fichtelberg, Paterson Library; Francis J. Blesso, Paterson Redevelopment Agency; John Young, Urban Deadline; and Dr. D. Stanton Hammond, Passaic County Historical Society. The nomination was approved and entered on the National Register on April 17, 1970.

GREAT FALLS COMMITTEE

Meanwhile, Mary Ellen had helped organize a citizens group which began to question whether the planned highway was good for Paterson. The three-tiered mile-long raceway system which once energized the mills would be purchased and obliterated. Many of the major buildings which contained active and productive industries had already been acquired and others were shutting down in anticipation of purchase. The loss of ratables and jobs would be significant. John Young and his associates became Urban Deadline, a group of advocate architects, who sought out low- or no-budget projects overlooked or rejected by professional architects. Urban Deadline prepared a proposal to the Great Falls project committee including sketches and drawings showing how, with community involvement and input, the buildings could continue to function as factories, community centers, restaurants or industrial museums.

The citizens group began to explore modifications to the highway such as reduction from a six-lane elevated expressway to a four-lane at-grade boulevard. Ramp simplifications or eliminations were studied. Specific modification plans were prepared by John Young and his Urban Deadline organization, Cahn Engineers for the Paterson Redevelopment Agency and the Regional Plan Association. Although DOT officials listened politely to Mary Ellen Kramer, Frank Blesso and other citizens, the

modifications were never officially endorsed by the Mayor; and, therefore, were not taken seriously by the State. Everything changed, however, when the realization of the significance of the listing of the Great Falls Historic District on the National Register hit home. DOT officials, many of the City business leaders and a few highway right-of-way property owners not yet acquired were devastated. Since the peripheral highway was to be constructed with 50% to 80% federal funding, it now fell upon the DOT to evaluate all possible alternatives to minimize impact on the District. All acquisition ceased. The citizens group had never intended to stop the highway. They merely wanted to reduce its visual and economic consequences and to integrate it into the City rather than having it divide the City.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROPOSAL

During 1970, the Freeholders of Passaic County had decided to create a community college. They set their hearts on a large open site in suburban Wayne. Mary Ellen and a group of citizens, using slides and sketches prepared by Urban Deadline, mounted a strong campaign to place the community college in mill buildings in the District. Calls and trips were made to Washington and several million dollars of Housing and Urban Development historic preservation funds were unofficially earmarked. While the Freeholders could not be convinced, the effort was not in vain. Soon, after much lobbying, a downtown Paterson redevelopment site was selected which included the adaptive reuse of a former New Jersey Bell Telephone operations building.

GREAT FALLS PARK

Mary Ellen and the citizens group began capitalizing on the renewed interest around the Great Falls. An unused and ignored area at the top of the Falls was turned into Great Falls Park, largely through Mary Ellen's ability to solicit donations of labor and materials. A deck was placed over a bridge supporting a water pipe, thus opening access for pedestrians to what became Great Falls Park and providing a spectacular view close enough to feel the spray of the Falls.

GREAT FALLS DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

In 1971, the citizens group was incorporated into the Great Falls Development Corporation, a nonprofit public membership organization designed advise the City on how to plan and execute development of the area. It consisted of a 26-member Board of Directors made up of private citizens and representatives of 10 public agencies. Mary Ellen Kramer and Frank Blesso were charter members.

GREAT FALLS FESTIVAL

On Labor Day weekend of the same year, Mrs. Kramer spearheaded the first Great Falls Festival, a four-day cultural and entertainment celebration of Paterson, including the return of a daredevil aerial act over the Falls. The Festival was a tremendous success and brought tens of thousands of citizens to the area.

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION REPORT

After the District was entered on the National Register, Mary Ellen Kramer called upon the National Park Service and the Smithsonian Institution to evaluate the area in terms of national significance. Field visits were made by both agencies in 1972. Robert Vogel, an industrial expert from the Smithsonian Institution wrote: "No other American city has the prospect for the imaginative development of a historically important industrial area than is now Paterson's." The field visits and reports provided additional national credibility to the area and helped set the stage for the involvement of the National Park Service. The project began to receive national attention. Publications about the District have appeared in *American Home*, *Architectural Forum*, *Constructioneer*, *H.U.D. Challenge*, *New York Times*, *Preservation News*, *Civil Engineering* and *Suburban Life*.

HYDROELECTRIC PLANT

The local utility company, Public Service Electric and Gas (PSE&G), had operated a hydroelectric plant at the Falls until it was closed in 1969 after some flood damage. The plant, built by SUM in 1914, did not fit in with PSE&G's future plans which were geared to nuclear power. Mary Ellen persuaded PSE&G to return the facility to the City which had inherited it from the SUM. In 1974, Mary Ellen, Frank Blesso and John Young, on behalf of the Great Falls Development Corporation, prepared and submitted an application to the National Endowment of the Arts under its City Options competition, to explore the feasibility of reactivating the plant. The application was funded; and after several years of effort and design, the plant is now restored and operating.

Flow in the Passaic River, however, has been reduced due to a controversial upstream-diversion project, called the Two Bridges Diversion, which was unsuccessfully opposed by the Great Falls Committee. Currently, there exists the dilemma of weighing scenic value of flow over the Falls and through the raceways versus the economic value of flow dropping through the penstocks of the hydroelectric plant and generating power and revenue.

THE ROGERS BUILDING

DOT, in order to acquire the right-of-way for the Route 80 storm drain, purchased the rear yard and boiler room of the Rogers Erecting Shop on Spruce and Market Streets. Mary Ellen, again using her persuasive powers, convinced the owner to donate the remaining structure to the Great Falls Development Corporation.

ARCHAEOLOGY

The design and construction of Interstate 80 required a storm drain through the District to the Passaic River. This intrusion gave the Great Falls Committee the ability to negotiate an agreement with DOT to install the drain by jacking or tunneling it under most of the District, and to fund a salvage archaeology project related to its work. The project team uncovered hundreds of artifacts and photographed and documented numerous features of the early raceway and building construction. Perhaps its most interesting find was the accidental discovery, as a result of the DOT's storm-drain excavation, of a completely intact covered section of the lower raceway extending along the north side of Market Street from Spruce Street to Mill Street.

HAER TEAM

The National Park Service's Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), at Mary Ellen's request, spent two summers measuring and preparing detailed drawings of many of the structures and features in the District. This work, which included over 40 quality maps and research into the history of the buildings, provided further documentation of the significance of the area. A local share of the cost was required which Mary Ellen helped raise through the Great Falls Development Corporation.

NATIONAL LANDMARK

During the early '70s, the team of Mary Ellen Kramer, John Young and Frank Blesso, accompanied by other citizens, made trips to Trenton and Washington to seek consideration of the establishment of a State and/or National Park. Unfortunately, the efforts were not successful. At the federal level, the administration was trying to close, not open, national parks, and was especially cool to the Urban Cultural Park idea.

A former member of the HAER team was hired by the City Redevelopment office and prepared a voluminous nomination to designate the Great Falls as a National Landmark. President Gerald Ford visited Paterson on June 6, 1976, and made the landmark presentation at a ceremony attended by 60,000 residents.

DISTRICT EVENTS

The Falls area had always attracted tourists. The new publicity brought groups and individuals from all over the world to visit and participate in tours. The Great Falls Development Corporation, on February 15, 1976, sponsored a "Winter Walk of Paterson and the Great Falls" that drew 1,300 people on a cold and dreary Sunday. On May 15, 1977, a 12-mile bike tour featuring the District and the Paterson area attracted hundreds from the region. Many groups, such as the Northeast Victorian Studies Association, the Victorian Society of America, the American Society of Civil Engineers and the Association of American Geographers, organized tours around the District.

The District served as the backdrop for a Paterson director's first feature-length film. It was written and produced by two other Eastside neighborhood residents. Mary Ellen Kramer and Frank Blesso literally opened the doors of the City. The Ryle House provided the primary set. The film contained many shots of the District including a grizzly murder scene from the interior of the un-restored Rogers Building. "Communion" premiered in Paterson on November 13, 1976, at the downtown Fabian Theater. Proceeds from this gala world opening were donated to the Great Falls Development Corporation. The murder-mystery, ultimately released as "Alice Sweet Alice," is perhaps most notable for containing the debut of a New Jersey 12-year old, Brooke Shields.

NATIONAL CIVIL AND MECHANICAL ENGINEERING LANDMARK

Frank Blesso prepared the successful nomination of the Great Falls power and raceway system as a National Civil and Mechanical Engineering Landmark. A dedication ceremony was held May 20, 1977, the 50th anniversary of Lindbergh's crossing the Atlantic powered by a Wright Aeronautics engine made in Paterson.

EDA TITLE IX FUNDING

In the late '70s, Paterson received substantial funding from the federal Economic Development Administration, under its Title IX program. This enabled the City to make substantial progress in implementing the Great Falls District multi-use concept. The preliminary survey and planning work undertaken by John Young and the Redevelopment staff, in the early 1970s, was updated and expanded. An official redevelopment area was designated for a large portion of the Great Falls District. This enabled the City to have both control and flexibility when dealing with developers. The Title IX funding enabled the complete restoration of the Rogers Erecting Shop, transforming it into a modern office building with the relocated Paterson Museum on the first floor. This high-quality work serves as a standard for private developers.

Properties acquired by DOT intended for demolition were re-acquired by the City to be resold to private developers under the redevelopment plan.

The Essex and Phoenix mill complexes were converted into 144 units of attractive loft apartments for artists and families. The City's Department of Community Development succeeded in obtaining a special waiver from HUD to permit single artists to receive Section 8 rent subsidies which are normally only granted to families, the elderly or the handicapped.

The Franklin Mill was purchased and converted into a modern four-story office building retaining all its exterior features.

Federici Park, with its gleaming fountain and attractive gazebo, was created to ease the transition from the Historic District to the downtown area.

The upper-raceway area was transformed into a park with a walkway, lighting and benches.

The Ivanhoe Wheelhouse and adjacent spillway were restored.

New parking areas were created along with roadway and street-scape improvements.

The City amended its Zoning Ordinance to encourage loft apartments and to provide for a local Historic Preservation Commission with the responsibility for reviewing all construction in the District.

FIND A LOCOMOTIVE

From 1837 to 1923, Paterson was the home of six steam locomotive manufacturers which built approximately 23% of all 19th century American steam engines. They included the Rogers "General" and the Danforth-Cooke "Texas" Civil War engines, and the Rogers "119" Golden Spike Ceremony engine. Yet, there was not a single example remaining in Paterson. Mary Ellen Kramer and the City's Department of Community Development staff set out to remedy that situation. They searched the world and located an Alco-Cooke tender engine rusting away in Pennsylvania. The Great Falls Development Corporation mounted a fund-raising effort and brought the engine back to Paterson. The real prize example, however, a Cooke 2-6-0 "Mogul" engine "299" and tender were sitting on display since 1955 at the Balboa Heights railroad station in the Panama Canal Zone. Only a few days before the Canal Zone was turned over to Panama, Mayor Pat Kramer, after a lengthy negotiation, stood on the docks at dawn in the Canal Zone when Engine "299" was placed on a giant tender for its final passage through the locks of the Panama Canal. At the end of its canal journey, it was hoisted onto a freighter for its final trip home, arriving on June 6, 1979. Both locomotives are now on display in the yard of the Rogers Building and Paterson Museum.

MODIFIED HIGHWAY CONNECTOR

DOT officials and engineers, after being forced to abandon the original peripheral highway concept, worked with City officials and citizen groups to redesign the highway to a connector road, whose sole purpose is to serve the downtown and Great Falls area. The highway engineers adopted the City's design elements which were developed for the Historic District and incorporated them into the connector road. The connector, now known as Route 19, was opened in October 1992. The early reviews and renewed interest by developers, in both the Historic District and downtown, appear to support the notion that the City at long last has a transportation link that serves rather than severs.

PROJECT UPDATE

The concepts and ideas developed in the late '60s and early '70s are still only partially realized. There were severe setbacks due to disastrous fires and a depressed real estate market. The National Park Service, largely as a result of Senator Lautenberg's efforts, in 1992 allocated \$4.2 Million for the Great Falls Historic District and is currently working with City officials on further improvements, focusing on the fire-damaged vacant and under-utilized structures in the District. Frank Blesso is the coordinator for the City's end of this partnership, and meets with a core advisory group of citizens and officials who are working with the National Park Service staff.

Former Congressman Robert A. Roe pursued the establishment of a National Park under the auspices of the Park Service. Mary Ellen Kramer and others, however, had reservations about the possibility of losing local and community control of the area. Concerns vanished after seeing the impact of federal dollars successfully applied to another early industrial community, Lowell, Massachusetts. Roe's successor, freshman Congressman Herb Klein, has recently introduced new National Park legislation for the District.

The Great Falls Committee, which became the Great Falls Development Corporation, has recently changed its name to the Great Falls Preservation and Development Corporation. It continues its community function of sponsoring events and fund-raising activities. In 1991, the Corporation commissioned Ellen Denuto, a resident of the Essex Mill and a member of the City's Historic Preservation Commission, to prepare a photographic poster to highlight the District and to be used to raise funds. The Corporation also funded a visual preference and planning study of the District and is active in efforts to prevent the demolition and removal of the remnants of structures severely damaged by fires.

The Falls Festival, which started in 1971, ran continuously until 1982, attracting many thousands. Each year the Festival featured an aerial act, including appearances by perhaps the two most famous practitioners in the world, Philippe Petit and Carl Walenda. After a change in administration, the Festival was cancelled citing the strain on the City's

financial resources. In 1992, as part of the Bicentennial celebration of the City's founding, Mayor William J. Pascrell, Jr., one of the members of the original Great Falls Committee and active in its Passaic County Community College effort, brought back the Falls Festival to cheering crowds. The Festival enjoyed continued success in 1993.

There has been renewed activity related to the physical development of the District. The largest vacant structure, the four-story Cooke mill, is undergoing complete restoration in a \$9 Million mixed-use project, involving St. Joseph Hospital's Family Care Center on the first two floors and 34 units of affordable rental housing on the two upper floors.

The City recently foreclosed and regained possession of 13 parcels of land and buildings from a developer who was unable to obtain financing to complete the rehabilitation. One structure, the former School 2 at Mill and Passaic Streets, vacant and deteriorating since its purchase by DOT in 1970, has been transferred to the school district. Plans are being prepared and funding is in place to restore the building to its original school purpose as a modern early-childhood learning center. The Department of Community Development is currently negotiating with several developers for the sale and redevelopment of the remaining parcels, including a seven-acre tract along the river, which contains the historic but fire-damaged Colt, Todd and Waverly mills.

The activity in the District has had its intended spillover effect into the downtown area. The new highway connector, Route 19, provides excellent access to both the District and downtown. The City is currently negotiating with a developer to construct a major office/retail complex called Center City at the terminus of Route 19 at Ward and Main Streets. City officials gained substantial financial assistance from the State of New Jersey for the project in the form of low-interest financing and a commitment to lease 60,000-square feet of space in the first phase of development.

The development process, inspired by John Young and implemented by Mary Ellen Kramer, Frank Blesso and dozens of others, continues. The vision was never to create a District with a defined boundary containing Williamsburg-type buildings, as Mary Ellen used to say, "with purple ropes around them." Rather, the vision centered around the use of the gift of nature, the Great Falls, as an inspiration to enhance the surrounding area, to build industry and jobs, attract visitors and new users to the area and buildings, and to build pride and vitality throughout Paterson and its neighborhoods.

THE GREAT FALLS PROJECT SUPPORTING EXHIBITS

Over the 25-year span of the project, there have been hundreds of maps, reports, pamphlets, newspaper and magazine articles, archaeological artifacts and thousands of slides and photographs about the Great Falls area. The following exhibits have been selected as representative of some of the key elements of the project process.

Exhibit A. Video. Part 1: *Historic Paterson, New Jersey*, by B. Cannon Moore, 1988 (13 minutes). (Presents background history on the Great Falls, the founding of Paterson, and the design of the raceway system which served the industrial buildings. It also shows many of the project accomplishments including the restoration of the Ivanhoe Wheelhouse, the Rogers Erecting Shop, the Union Works, the Ryle/Thompson/Argus complex, the Franklin Mill, the Phoenix and Essex Mills and the new Federici Park.)

Part 2: *Paterson Prime Time*, by Ming, 1993 (6 minutes). (Although this is primarily an economic development promotional piece, it demonstrates the importance local officials place on the modified highway connector and shows its opening ceremony attended by Governor Florio and other dignitaries. It also shows current downtown projects, the Federici Park fountain and the rendering and start of conversion of the Cooke Mill.)

Exhibit B. Map. Alignment of Route 20 Peripheral Highway through Paterson, scale 1" = 200', signed by Mayor Lawrence F. Kramer, Jr., September 20, 1968, N. J. Department of Transportation.

Exhibit C. Nomination Form. National Register of Historic Places, dated October 14, 1969, entered April 17, 1970.

Exhibit D. Magazine article. "Proposal for Paterson," by Adele Chatfield-Taylor, *Architectural Forum*, Jan. - Feb., 1970, 72-76.

Exhibit E. Project Proposal. Great Falls/SUM, by the Great Falls Project Committee and Urban Deadline, dated January 25, 1971.

Exhibit F. Commemorative Newspaper Supplement. Great Falls Festival of Paterson, September 1st-5th 1971, *The Paterson News*. (Note article on Page 11, "First Lady Finding Mission: Possible.")

Exhibit G. Report. The Great Falls/S.U.M. Historic District, by Mary Ellen Kramer, January, 1973.

Exhibit H. Magazine article. "The 'Pat' Kramers of Paterson, New Jersey, by Dean Brown, *American Home*, January, 1973.

- Exhibit I. Report. Great Falls - SUM Survey, by the Historic American Engineering Record, Summer 1973.
- Exhibit J. Letter. New Jersey Department of Transportation to Great Falls Development Corporation, September 30, 1974. (The letter forwarded an agreement in which the State agreed to new studies incorporating a multi-disciplinary approach and public participation to examine six alternative concepts for the highway and to work with a steering committee appointed by the Mayor of Paterson.)
- Exhibit K. Newspaper article. "Mayor's Wife Directs Preservation of District; Paterson presents its industrial past," *The Star Ledger*, March 23, 1975.
- Exhibit L. Pamphlet. The Great Falls; S.U.M. Historic District, by Great Falls Development Corporation, circa 1977. (Includes early history, recent history, photo of President Ford dedicating the Great Falls Historic District as a National Landmark on June 6, 1976, and outline of walking tour with photos and narrative descriptions of mills and district features.)
- Exhibit M. Dedication Program. The Great Falls Raceway and Power System, National Historic Mechanical and Civil Engineering Landmark, by Francis J. Blesso and Jack R. Stokvis, dated May 20, 1977. (Outlines the evolution of the raceway and power system, and highlights the many engineers, businessmen and workers who produced products in Paterson.)
- Exhibit N. Pamphlet. Welcome Home "299," June 1979.
- Exhibit O. Pamphlet. Map and description, Route 20 Connector from 1-80 to Main Street, New Jersey Department of Transportation. (From public information pamphlet issued prior to construction. Shows modified alignment with minimal impact to the Great Falls Historic District.)
- Exhibit P. Photo. Aftermath of several fires at Waverly Mill, by Tom Groenfeldt, 1993. (Shows sample of challenges to be faced in reuse and development of the District.)
- Exhibit Q. Newspaper article. "Paterson activist Mary Ellen Kramer dies," *The Record*, July 20, 1993.
- Exhibit R. Newspaper guest editorial. "'She did wonderful things' for Paterson," *The Record*, July 28, 1993.
- Exhibit S. Newspaper article. "A Mixed-Use Plan for Growth in Paterson," *The New York Times*, August 1, 1993. (Shows current status of development activity in the downtown.)

Exhibit T. Newspaper article. "Developer buys downtown Paterson land for housing and retail center," *The Star Ledger*, dated August 5, 1993. (Shows current status of development activity.)

In Separate Tube

Exhibit U. Poster. Historic Paterson, by Ellen Denuto, Great Falls Preservation & Development Corporation, 1991.