

LOWELL NATIONAL CULTURAL PARK BILL

HON. PAUL E. TSONGAS  
of Massachusetts

In the House of Representatives  
Wednesday, April 6, 1977

In Lowell, Massachusetts, an old idea promises a new future.

The idea is over 150 years old. The idea was to plan and build a new city centered around the manufacture of textiles. They were not talking of one factory. They were not talking about standard methods which took days or weeks to produce a finished article. They did not wonder about how these factories would be financed or powered. They had determined the answers to these questions and were determined to build a different kind of American city. And America would be different because of a city that later became known as Lowell.

The men who stood above the 30-foot falls in the Merrimack River, 30 miles north of Boston, saw far beyond the farmlands. They too were different. There is no doubt that they were free enterprise capitalists. There is also no doubt that they practiced corporate benevolence and had a renaissance type vision. They saw, in that 30-foot drop, enough power to run 60 mills and produce more cotton textiles than any other city in the United States. They saw the world's most sophisticated hydropower canal system. They saw a city which bore no resemblance to the industrial horrors of England and France. They saw and eventually built the great brick mills, the 5-miles of canals, a business district, boarding houses, schools, churches, trolleys, railroads, and parks. They built a city that thousands of people came to see. A city of mills which even Britain's harshest social critic, Charles Dickens, called "clean and comfortable." Renowned French civil engineer Michael Chevalier described Lowell as "new and fresh, like a setting at an opera." Scientists, educators, and tourists traveled to see this planned city, this birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution. President Jackson chose to visit Lowell to mark the nation's 50th anniversary.

At first, Yankee mill girls from New England farms worked in the textile mills. The conditions were good, the pay and the hours were reasonable. The girls went to school and even published their own newspaper.

In the latter part of the 1800's the immigrants began to come to Lowell. They worked longer hours and for lower wages than would the mill girls. Some immigrants walked as much as 30 miles a day to work in the city. Most settled in Lowell. They settled and sent for their families. They built their own neighborhoods reflecting both old world customs and new world lifestyles. Over twenty different ethnic groups were represented in Lowell. At the peak of immigration, in the early 1900's, only 10% of Lowell's resident were native born Americans.

Eventually, mill conditions began to deteriorate. Labor unions began to form. Women led protests over long working hours, low wages and dangerous factory conditions. The original owners and corporate benevolence were gone. There were strikes and there was violence.

The conflicts and tension continued periodically until the great depression. The depression closed Lowell's mills. A one industry city, Lowell's mills were empty, its workers unemployed, and its tradesmen without buyers.

Eventually, perseverance and diversification helped to bring Lowell back, though the city still struggles economically. Ironically, the only memories of the past were the economic scars. Children knew nothing of the significance of their hometown. There was little to be proud of in Lowell.

Yet, the famous past continued to physically engulf the city. The mills remained forming Lowell's skyline. The streets ran along and criss-crossed the canals. The 19th century commercial district remained with original buildings hidden by plastic and paint. The ethnic neighborhoods, restaurants, holidays, and institutions were merely confusing. In fact, the city was confusing. It seemed to have no reason for being or for having been built.

Twelve years ago, a man named Patrick J. Mogan helped to rediscover Lowell's 150 year old idea. His own parents had come to America from Ireland. Mogan, an educator, became involved with the local Model Cities Program. He argued against tearing down the physical links to the past. He saw those links as important and exciting. He saw the mills, canals, and the people. He was not ashamed of Lowell. Pat Mogan spoke of the reasons behind the findings of Lowell. Of the farmland, the founders, their system, the mill girls, the immigrants, the way of life. These roots made people see themselves and their city differently. Suddenly, Lowell made sense. The city had rediscovered its identity from its history and culture. The significant role it had played in America's modern day development became important. Lowell had rediscovered an old idea.

Many persons played a role in this process, in Lowell and outside of the city. My predecessors F. Bradford Morse and Paul W. Cronin; Senators Kennedy and Brooke. Many members of Congress kept the Lowell story alive, former Congressman Roy Taylor, Congressmen Sidney Yates, Morris Udall, and Kieth Sebelius. House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr. provided two important contributions: guidance and Thomas P. O'Neill, III, the Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts and Chairman of the Lowell Historic Canal District Commission. This federal-state-local commission, created by Public Law 93-645, has provided a plan for the preservation of Lowell and the Lowell story. I have today officially presented this report to the Congress on behalf of the Commission. Massachusetts Governor Dukakis has lent his strong support and committed \$9 million to Lowell's restoration. Scores of city officials also deserve credit. And the people of Lowell cannot again be forgotten. A city searching for and finding its past is a magnificent experience. Even those who cannot trace their roots to Lowell have become involved in this process. This has produced remarkable unanimity in the city.

Lowell's idea is the old Lowell. So it is this idea that I speak of today. Too many of us have ignored these kind of ideas and this American story. Consequently, we are left with questions that we have trouble answering: What does America mean? How did we get here? Who are we? We are left with personal questions about our families and their heritage of working and living in America. Lowell provides an extraordinary opportunity for all of us to find answers to these questions.

#### A LOWELL NATIONAL CULTURAL PARK

Today I am introducing legislation to establish a Lowell National Cultural Park. I consider this among the greatest honors that I have had as a member of the Congress.

The Lowell National Cultural Park plan is based upon the recommendations of the Lowell Historic Canal District Commission, charged by the Congress to prepare a "plan for the preservation, interpretation, development, and use of the historic, cultural, and architectural resources... of Lowell, Massachusetts."

The national park that would be established by this legislation tells the story of working and living in America as it entered the industrial revolution and the modern era. And Lowell tells the story of free enterprise, science and technology, and of immigration. Lowell tells the **story** of an often forgotten American revolution which significantly affected the way we live.

This bill calls attention to a story not told in books alone, but in the mills, on the canals, in the boarding houses, the court yards, the markets, and in the neighborhoods by the people themselves. It is a living story. But it is a story in danger of being lost, physically lost, for all time. The physical structures and artifacts that symbolize the American Industrial Revolution cannot be preserved without a commitment from the Congress and Federal government. Despite state and local contributions, federal recognition, resources and know how are essential.

The goal of this bill is cooperative preservation and interpretation of Lowell and America's story.

So I speak for 12 years of planning. I speak for hundreds of people who kept this vision alive. I speak for one-half million people in the Fifth District of Massachusetts. And I believe I speak for a majority of more than 200 million people represented in this House chamber who believe that the past is important.

This story, this past, this national heritage must be saved. The Lowell National Cultural Park bill can accomplish this objective in a creative and fiscally responsible manner.

I seek your support for an old idea.

I seek your support for the past.

For only the knowledge and the value of the past can give meaning to the future.