Parks and History


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Abstract: For more than four decades, historians, historic preservationists, journalists, and public officials have debated the purpose and appropriateness of a national park in Lowell, Massachusetts. This article, written by the first NPS historian in Lowell, builds on existing literature and interprets the founding and early development of Lowell National Historical Park in the context of changing national politics. It locates the concept for the park in the Great Society, documents the contested debate over the park’s founding in the 1970s, and argues that the park developed very differently than planned during the radically changed political environment of the 1980s.

Key words: Lowell, National Park Service, Paul Tsongas, Patrick Mogan, 1980s politics

Birth of a National Park

More than three decades have now passed since Jimmy Carter signed the legislation that established a national park in Lowell, Massachusetts, and since
then, lots of people—including me—have written quite a lot about Lowell and its park. With so many writings, one might ask why we need another article about Lowell. Why now? And the answer is simply that our perspectives may have changed now that the park—and many of us—have survived for more than a decade into the twenty-first century.

I count myself as a survivor, of course. It’s now been a long time since I lived and worked in Lowell—and in many ways, I feel as if I never left. I did, after all, make some lifelong friends there. Some were “blow-ins” like me who came to town with the Park Service (and have since left), and others were native Lowellians (they’re still there). My wife and I built a family in Lowell. Our kids were born there, and for one honor they share with James McNeil Whistler, Bette Davis, and Jack Kerouac. And I’m reminded of Lowell whenever I look at the pictures on our living room walls. There’s just no denying it. Lowell is a part of me: a real and special place, always in my thoughts—even when I’m not aware of it.

All in all, it’s fair to say that I learned as much about history by living it in Lowell as I did studying it in university classrooms or researching it in libraries and archives. I’ve since lived and learned elsewhere, of course, and it’s pretty clear that we’re now all citizens in a very different country than the one we knew in the late 1970s. Like it or not, the nation’s politics shifted radically to the right during the years I spent in Massachusetts. And for me at least, now seems like a good time to begin looking at Lowell a little differently, removing myself in time and space from the Lowell I remember, and considering it in the context of changing national politics.

Certainly, few people could have anticipated any of this back in 1979, when I first walked into the storefront office that was then the park’s headquarters. It was full of boxes, both unpacked and recently opened, and a few desks for the small staff. It’s likely that neither I nor any of the people I met that day would ever have guessed that the country would change so drastically or that the park would someday become the subject of so much attention. I do recall a conversation or two, months later and probably over a few drinks, in which some of us considered the possibility that we were involved with something that might be more important than we realized. But at the start, we had a lot of catching up to do. Much had happened before we got there.

Although only a few people in 1978 really appreciated the park and its potential, Superintendent of Schools Patrick J. Mogan was certainly one of them. He was—and is still—the man most often recognized as the “father of the national park” in Lowell and the one most often credited with first envision-

2. I was hired in March of 1979, about nine months after the park’s authorization, to fill a not-to-exceed-a-year position as assistant historian. Larry Gall technically became the park’s first historian a few months later, although he quickly took on the title of interpretive planner. Eventually, I moved into the official historian position and kept it through the late winter of 1989.
ing it. Mogan’s ideas grew from his background as an educator—but like a number of Lowellians, he became interested in historic preservation when Lowell’s city fathers approved the demolition of what many considered Lowell’s most historic buildings. This took place in 1966, ironically a year in which historic preservation was coming into its own elsewhere in the country. The nation’s most important historic preservation law was passed that year, and preservationists in communities from New York to San Francisco were enjoying some early successes in reversing once-popular urban renewal policies.

Lowell, however, was a working-class immigrant town, and according to the conventional wisdom there, the city needed to shed its industrial and ethnic image if it were ever to overcome years of depression. In spite of that, Mogan maintained that Lowell’s cultural heritage was the key to its future. Unlike architecturally oriented preservationists, Mogan claimed that heritage was better preserved in the people themselves than in their buildings. To him, buildings were “props” to help to tell “human stories” rather than resources that needed to be preserved for their intrinsic value. According to Mogan, the city itself was a living museum, an “urban laboratory,” and a unique educational resource. This was heavy stuff for working-class Lowell, and many in the city had a difficult time understanding him. It was also hard to imagine that the city could ever find the money to realize Mogan’s grand vision. But he was determined, to say the least, and he worked tirelessly to secure the support he needed in and around Boston and, more significantly, in Washington, D.C. Lyndon Johnson’s New Deal–inspired Great Society was peaking at the time, and the Historic Preservation Act of 1966 was only one of its initiatives. Another was Model Cities, a program that invited citizens to address an urban crisis caused, in part, by urban renewal. Mogan, of course, recognized the possibilities it raised, and in 1971, after years of trying, he succeeded in securing Model Cities funds to overhaul the city’s troubled education system by developing Lowell’s urban environment as a teaching tool.

Mogan also sought support from the National Park Service. And again,


7. The concept was not unique to Lowell. See, for example, David R. Goldfield, “Living History: The Physical City as Artifact and Teaching Tool,” The History Teacher, 8, no. 4 (August 1975);
his timing was good. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, who had served both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, had long criticized NPS for its “stiff-necked attitude” and was determined to make the agency serve a more activist social and political agenda. Among other things, he took NPS into areas—like urban park development—that were unfamiliar to old-line and often recalcitrant Park Service staff. The pro-conservation agenda continued temporarily (and perhaps with less vision and enthusiasm) in the Nixon administration. In fact, it was Interior Secretary Walter Hickel’s 1970 initiative to study urban recreational areas that energized Mogan and his Model Cities colleagues.\(^8\) With funding from the New England Regional Commission (another Great Society creation), they formed the Human Services Corporation and began promoting the idea of a national cultural park as part of a theoretical and progressive agenda that even included a plan to reverse the city’s economic slide. Lowell, they said, was a living city in which the retail and commercial sectors reflected the local culture and were as integral to their thinking as were schools and historical societies. Furthermore, by emphasizing the city’s multicultural heritage, cultural park supporters claimed that they could build pride in the city’s working-class ethnic culture and make Lowell a mecca for the nation’s many cultural groups. With such a park as a “catalyst for public and private development and revitalization,” they could, in other words, develop a lively tourism industry.\(^9\)

This was a critical moment for Lowell. Local leaders, including City Councilman Paul E. Tsongas, may not have subscribed to—or, in some cases, even understood—ethereal educational goals,\(^10\) but they began to pay attention when Mogan started talking about economic development. At the time, Lowell’s long struggling economy was in recession, and there were few other...
proposals on the table offering even a hint of hope. Tsongas himself was a gifted leader with a brilliant political mind, and he would eventually become an even more effective spokesman for the cultural park than Mogan—as suggested in a 1978 speech before Congress:

I grew up in Lowell. In school I learned about the purple mountains majesty. About truthfulness and cherry trees. And about many wars. I do not regret that education. What I do regret is that I never learned about Lowell. All that time I did not know why canals ran throughout the city. I did not know why there was a mile of red brick mills along the Merrimack. I did not know why my father had come here from Greece, nor why every neighborhood seemed to have such different customs. . . . Lowell, like our Nation, had little interest in this history or in these cultures. In Lowell High School the Industrial Revolution was something that took place in England. The country had been willed by Washington, administered by the Adamses, framed by Franklin, and built by Daniel Boone. . . . Twelve years ago Lowell decided that its identity was important. Important to its people and to the Nation. . . . There are hundreds of people who should be credited for discovering this America. Many were the descendants of immigrant workers who wanted the good and the bad preserved, rather than flattened or denied. . . . Lowell is offering to share its identity with the Nation. We can help many Americans rediscover a much neglected past.

Tsongas and Mogan, however, had always promoted somewhat different visions. Tsongas saw Lowell more as an economically revitalized middle-class city than a classroom in which working-class ethnic culture was actually preserved. In effect, he was a Lowellian who loved his city like a mill worker who sends his daughter to college to keep her from a lifetime of factory work. As long as he was in position to influence events, Paul Tsongas would keep shifty, self-absorbed politicians; entitled, obstructive bureaucrats; and rapacious, self-interested businessmen all focused on that vision.

With local consensus on the Human Services proposal, Tsongas, Mogan, and other city leaders persuaded Congressman Bradford Morse to sponsor 1972 legislation that would have created Lowell’s national park. By then, however, the Nixon administration had begun moving away from the Great Society’s ambitious social agenda. Among other things, it gutted the Model Cities program and backed off plans to transform the Park Service into an agent of social change. Political appointees considered lightweights by NPS staff took charge following the 1972 firing of Johnson’s activist Park Service director, George Hartzog.

11. Dennis Frenchman and Jonathan S. Lane, “Discussion White Paper: Assessment of Preservation and Development in Lowell National Historical Park at Its 30-Year Anniversary, 2008,” available at http://nps.gov/lowe/index.htm, describes the local environment. One economic development alternative, as late as 1974, was an oil refinery. Paul Tsongas, “The Role of Local Leadership in Community Revitalization,” in Paths to Revitalization, 16. Educators at the time were likewise threatened by the recession and more receptive to an economic development orientation than they might otherwise have been. Ryan, “The Remaking of Lowell,” 384.
and agency bureaucrats gained the freedom to judge the proposed Lowell park simply according to dogmatic internal guidelines. Thus, because there was simply no such thing as a cultural park in the National Park Service, NPS tried to force the Lowell proposal to fit the narrow specifications of a historical park. Like many historians, they recognized that Lowell was once an important place, perhaps the most prominent industrial city in early nineteenth-century America. It was founded in 1821 by the Boston Associates, wealthy merchants who realized that they could meet the young nation's demand for manufactured cloth, not just by importing it, but by making it themselves. They capitalized corporations at rates no one else could match (thanks to a windfall from the federal government), made good use of the latest technology, and recruited and provided paternalistic care in stately boardinghouses for a capable and affordable labor force of young Yankee women (Lowell's famous “mill girls”). The Associates soon made lots of money and began using some of it to manipulate public opinion. They succeeded, too. The Associates won political support—and generated new investments—by portraying Lowell as the symbol of a more humane factory system than the one associated with wretched English factory cities. Lowell's story thus became a pos-


itive message about Lowell’s place in American history—the kind of story that appealed to Park Service officials as “nationally significant.” The problem for preservation-minded professionals in the Park Service, however, was that the structures that they considered most relevant to this narrative (antebellum factories, boardinghouses, and industrial sites) all seemed to have been demolished or altered beyond recognition. Agency historians believed that without the present “integrity” or “intactness” of the proper physical resources, there could be no national park.

Human Services supporters, of course, recognized that the “mill girl era” was just a fleeting moment in Lowell’s history. They knew that the city’s founders, having sold the viability of their system to other investors, had within just two-and-a-half decades of Lowell’s founding turned their attention to development projects in other New England cities. These new developments led to increased production, falling prices, and declining profits. Mill managers responded by abandoning the founders’ pretenses of paternalism. They cut labor costs and increased productivity demands. They sold the company-owned boardinghouses. And they recruited potato famine Irish to take the place of the increasingly disgruntled “mill girls.” Afterwards, they brought in a host of other immigrant workers: French Canadians, Greeks, Poles, Portuguese, and many, many others. The mills themselves grew in size as competition and the demand for increased productivity continued, and by the 1890s, they were becoming not only unsightly but obsolete. Rather than replace their factories with new facilities on land that had become expensive and subject to higher taxation, mill owners chose to invest in newer, more cost-effective factories in the South. In the 1920s, market conditions caused many Lowell mills to close, and the city fell into a depression that was only exacerbated by the country’s economic woes in the 1930s. A temporary recovery fueled by government contracts during World War II helped, but in 1958, Lowell’s biggest and most historic textile corporation, the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, closed its doors for the final time. This was the Lowell in which Mogan and his supporters lived: the one that shaped their reality and caused them to understand the consequences of the Industrial Revolution far better than its promises. Mogan and his people were, in fact, radical thinkers for their time who appreciated the connection between past, present, and future and the importance of portraying history as an ongoing process, not simply as a collection of disconnected events. Not surprisingly, their ideas found little

support among the architecturally minded traditionalists who managed NPS preservation programs. Park Service professionals were, in fact, predictably appalled by the assertion that physical structures were just “props” and confused by Mogan’s otherworldly (to them) contention that Lowell’s working class-ethnic culture was an actual artifact of the Industrial Revolution.17

Locals found a more appreciative audience in Congress, which convened hearings in 1974 to investigate the viability of the proposed park. NPS officials, on the defensive and convinced that the local plan was just a cynical economic development scheme, tried to limit agency involvement to the provision of technical assistance and the preservation of architecturally distinguished buildings dispersed throughout the city. Lowellians, on the other hand, made the case that buildings, once restored or preserved, became timeless monuments to the past rather than educational tools. Even worse, they described the NPS approach to historic preservation as elitist (this was in keeping with the message of national leaders such as Ada Louise Huxtable, who argued for the adaptive reuse of historic buildings rather than their “sterile isolation”).18 Locals called for substantial Park Service involvement and a plan that concentrated development in downtown commercial districts. This, they claimed, would better demonstrate the historical relationships among the city’s mills, canals, and workers’ housing. Still, NPS staffers remained convinced of their own preservation purity, and they continued to bewail the absence of the resources they considered most significant. They were undone by their own logic, however, when Brown University’s Patrick Malone identified important physical remains from Lowell’s “golden age.” Malone had studied the city’s historic canal system for the Historical American Engineering Record (itself a unit of the Park Service) and testified authoritatively that the canals—which survived practically intact from the mid-nineteenth century—had played a highly significant role in the history of American technology.19 Other scholars, most notably historian Thomas Dublin, provided a credible alternative to the private-investors-working-as-bold-risk-takers-in-the-public-interest version of historical significance that had won over NPS historians.20 Dublin’s work, like that of other “new social historians,” emphasized cultural

19. Foresta, America’s National Parks, 152; Ryan, “Lowell in Transition,” chapters 3 and 4; and Larry Lankton and Patrick M. Malone, “Water Power in Lowell, Mass.,” appended to testimony in support of HR 14689, 1974. Technically, the question of Lowell’s national historical significance would be settled when NPS designated the Locks and Canals Historic District a National Historic Landmark in 1977. Malone was also the director of Slater Mill Historic Site in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.
20. The best example of the way in which Boston Associates wrote history to promote their business interests is Nathan Appleton, Introduction of the Power Loom and Origins of Lowell (Lowell: Nabu Press, 1858). See also Rev. Henry A. Miles, Lowell: As It Was, and As It Is (Lowell: 1846). For more, see Robert Weible “East Chelmsford: “More of a place than represented to have been,” in The Continuing Revolution, 1–37. NPS had long been inclined to preserve symbolic, nationalistic myths while ignoring more critical interpretations of American history. See
issues such as gender and ethnicity and subscribed to the cultural park notion that women and immigrant workers were themselves history-makers, not just victims of big business, servants of organized labor, or pawns in some national historical drama.21

It was local and state government officials and not scholars, though, who impressed congressional committee members most with their commitments to the park. In 1973, a year after it got behind the Human Services proposal, the City of Lowell created a Historical Commission and two historic districts that, with the support of area banks, demonstrated that city government was actively encouraging private redevelopment of historic structures. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts could be counted upon for support, too. With both candidates for governor competing to outdo the other with commitments to the park concept, Lowell Heritage State Park was officially created in 1974, bringing with it over nine million dollars for the preservation and interpretation of Lowell’s canals. The City of Lowell, now even more enthusiastic than ever about its proposed cultural park, invested nearly two million dollars in historically sensitive downtown and commercial improvements. It also provided free technical assistance to owners of historic structures, supported preservation-sensitive housing projects, and successfully nominated two districts to the National Register of Historic Places. Even local businessmen got behind the park. Historic preservation—once their bête noire—became a cause célèbre. In 1975, a consortium of local banks, encouraged by newly elected Congressman Tsongas, formed the Lowell Development and Financial Corporation to make low-interest loans available to property owners who agreed to work toward park-related ends. Support among local historians would also blossom. The Lowell Historical Society would publish a popular and credible 1976 history, and its members would work with the Human Services Corporation and others to present cutting-edge historical interpretations in a 1976 exhibition at the newly formed Lowell Museum (funded by yet another Great Society program, the National Endowment for the Humanities).22


22. The historical society book was Arthur L. Eno, Jr., Cotton Was King. Thomas Dublin was the first director of the Lowell Museum. The local campaign in support of the park is best documented in Ryan, “The Remaking of Lowell,” 384–86.
So with the Park Service mired in the inflexibility of its own way of doing things and everyone in Lowell seemingly behind the plan, Congress created the Lowell Historic Canal District Commission in 1975 to prepare a plan for the “preservation, interpretation, development, and use” of Lowell’s “historic, cultural, and architectural resources.” Paul Tsongas, elected to Congress in 1974, arrived in Washington just in time to work with the Canal District Commission—which issued its groundbreaking 1977 report, commonly known as the “Brown Book,” and recommended authorization of Lowell National Cultural Park.  

It was now up to Congressman Tsongas to craft the legislation that would create Lowell’s park. In the early 1970s, more and more people were coming to the conclusion that NPS had “fallen prey to bureaucratic hardening of the arteries,” and Tsongas knew well the institutional limitations of the agency with which he had to work. Things improved substantially in 1976 when Jimmy Carter assumed the presidency and appointed William Whalen director of the National Park Service. Whalen, a career professional and an advocate for urban parks, considered NPS hopelessly bureaucratic, having once described it as “one of the last vestiges of the old order, totally out of step with the times.” He and his new staff agreed with Tsongas that labor, industrial, and ethnic history were all worthy of NPS attention and bought into the controversial notion that economic development could be compatible with historic preservation. Tsongas, meanwhile, conceded that the park should conform to the agency’s existing organizational structure. His legislation named the park “Lowell National Historical Park” (hereafter referred to as the “Park”) and limited the NPS role in Lowell to the usual agency responsibilities of acquiring, developing, managing, and maintaining a handful of interpretive sites; establishing interpretive themes; and providing visitor services and technical assistance. But that was only half the story. Tsongas followed “Brown Book” recommendations and created the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission (hereafter the “Commission”), an independent Interior Department agency with a ten-year lifespan and a mandate to work with NPS to develop what would clearly be a new kind of park. The Park would only occupy an “intensive use zone” in the immediate downtown area and along the canals, and the Commission would support appropriate development in a surrounding preservation district. Both Park and Commission would be authorized to acquire a few properties, while the Commission would be empowered to provide grants, loans, and technical assistance to historic property owners; establish


preservation and new construction standards; and create a grants program to support the telling of Lowell’s ongoing “human story.” The genius of Tsongas’s Lowell legislation was that it would secure historical legitimacy and federal resources through NPS, keep the local vision alive through the Commission, and—by splitting forty million dollars in development funds between Park and Commission—require everyone to work hand-in-hand to ensure success. On June 5, 1978, President Carter signed the legislation into law.26

**The Tsongas Years**

In my own experience, Lowell’s golden age began in 1978 and ended in 1984. The city and its national park were generating a lot of favorable attention in those years, and those of us who lived and worked in the city felt as if we were breaking new ground both literally and intellectually. We also had all the money we needed—and more. I recall a moment in the summer of 1979 when the Park’s superintendent came to the professional staff and asked us to draft a budget. We listed everything we could imagine, but it wasn’t enough. So we kept trying. We ended up buying all the fancy new equipment that the Park’s architects needed, creating a library and hiring a librarian, and selling an idea for an annual conference intended to make Lowell a national center for the study of industrial history.27 And that was just the beginning.

Within months of the Park’s official opening in the summer of 1978, Paul Tsongas was elected to the United States Senate. His influence in Lowell, already substantial, became practically irresistible. He would keep federal money flowing into the city by securing Interior Department appropriations, Urban Development Action Grants (UDAGs),28 and support from various other agencies. He would also coordinate private support through the Lowell Plan, a nonprofit development corporation that he and City Manager Joseph Tully would create in 1979.29 Public-private partnerships; partnerships among local, state, and federal governments; and “cooperation, cooperation, cooperation” would become the orders of the day. And Senator Tsongas would be the one who most often dictated the terms of that “cooperation.” He would personally counsel more than a few reluctant property owners about the need to rehabilitate their buildings, and he sometimes would even help outside


27. Serendipitously, the Preservation Commission’s consultants came up with a similar idea for a national conference at about the same time.

28. Urban Development Action Grants promoted local economic development initiatives between 1978 and 1989 and were often used for urban renewal as well as historic preservation or cultural projects. See Wallace, “Preserving the Past,” 191.

29. Tsongas called the Lowell Plan “the best example anywhere in the country of the private sector contributing to the betterment of the city.” Tsongas, “The Role of Local Leadership,” 17.
investors with their decision-making. For example, Arthur Robbins, a Rhode Island developer, would find his interest in building a hotel outside the central business district faced with a boycott by the city’s business community. He would subsequently build the Lowell Hilton where the senator wanted it: next to a canal lock in the heart of the city’s historic district, part of a five-year, fifty-five-million-dollar public-private project that included not only the hotel and its parking garage, but canal restorations, walkways, building rehabilitations, and a new fifteen-million-dollar corporate training facility.\(^\text{30}\)

That training facility belonged to Wang Laboratories. Wang had come to Lowell in 1979, just as it was revolutionizing the office machinery industry with the introduction of its dedicated word processor. The company’s founder, Dr. An Wang, was reported to have been so impressed with the Park and the “spirit of the people” (not to mention a five-million-dollar federal loan arranged by Tsongas) that he decided to make Lowell his company’s international headquarters. The impact of that decision would be enormous. Company earnings would climb to three billion dollars a year by the mid-1980s. The factories that Wang built in and around Lowell during the coming decade would be hard pressed to keep up with the growing demand for company products. And Wang’s presence would attract other firms to the area and cause the local labor market to double between 1972 and 1989.\(^\text{31}\)

Senator Tsongas always kept close to federal, state, and local governments and maintained a predictably strong interest in the development of the Park. He saw to it, for example, that the Commission remained especially supportive of his vision by structuring and staffing it to his liking.\(^\text{32}\) Tsongas also worked through Director Whalen to ensure that NPS staffed Lowell’s park with people likely to be cooperative. Whalen thus appointed his friend Lewis Albert as the Park’s first superintendent. Albert, a lawyer who preferred wearing a business suit rather than a ranger uniform, shared Whalen’s reservations about the bureaucratic NPS culture. He and his assistant, John Debo, worked quickly to strengthen community relations, acquire land, arrange cooperative agreements, and design tour programs for the summer of 1979.\(^\text{33}\) Beginning in its

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32. There were more state and local than federal representatives on the Commission. Morgan was a member. University of Lowell president John Duff was the chairman. Fred Faust, a member of Tsongas’s staff, was appointed executive director.

33. Relations with the community were in need of repair, given the initial NPS opposition to the cultural park proposal, and there was pressure on the agency to develop public programs
first year of operation, too, the Park worked with area schools and created a popular and effective offsite educational program. And a year later, the Park, together with the Commission and the University of Lowell, launched the annual Lowell Conference on Industrial History, a program that, over the coming decade, would build support and visibility among history professionals and public officials around the country. The Commission, meanwhile, sponsored locally produced cultural projects, including the publication of a guide to sites related to native son Jack Kerouac and a play that treated audiences to a home-grown, culturally sensitive theatrical version of Lowell's history. At the same time, the Commission worked with the city to establish and enforce architectural standards. This was, in a sense, the “stick” to preserve the city’s built environment; the “carrot” came in the form of grant and technical assistance programs. With old-styled elitist preservation out and a more modern adaptive reuse philosophy very much in play, Lowellians responded by thinking of old buildings not as liabilities but as assets, and the city’s much anticipated revitalization soon got underway.

While both the Park and Commission established their public presence in Lowell early, their real challenge between 1978 and 1981 was a long-range-planning process complicated by the need for two very different agencies to produce separate but complementary management plans. The Commission was structured to support local priorities and was fully committed to cultural park concepts laid out in the “Brown Book.” The Park, on the other hand, had to honor agency policies and procedures designed for parks unlike Lowell. Still, Park management and staff were more sympathetic to the local point of

34. The University of Lowell became the University of Massachusetts Lowell in 1991.
view than agency professionals had ever been, and in the end, the process moved fairly quickly.

One of the first things Park staff needed to do was to get Lowell’s many stakeholders to develop a strategy to make sense of a history that everyone seemed to understand differently. Was Lowell significant because of its special role in the early Industrial Revolution, for example, or because of an ethnic-working class culture that represented the experiences of so many other places around the country? Was the city’s place in the history of technology more important than its business or labor history? What about the history that took place in neighborhoods outside Park or Commission boundaries? There were no easy answers to these and other questions, but the Park’s 1981 General Management Plan would suggest the creation of a new way to understand Lowell’s history: one that combined aspects of both the NPS and cultural park points of view. The plan directed the Park to interpret the city’s industrialization from beginning to end and even suggested that Lowell’s redevelopment could become a model for the revitalization of other aging industrial cities. Lowell, it proclaimed, would “once again be a pioneer and symbol of a new revolution in America.” These were radical goals for a conservative bureaucracy like NPS, given the implication that, by serving as a catalyst for economic redevelopment, the agency could help make history as well as preserve it. Equally radical—especially to historic preservationists—was the agency’s recognition that “Lowell’s rich cultural heritage,” as “reflected in the ethnic diversity of its citizens,” was just as important as the city’s physical resources.37

The selection of the site for the Park’s principal interpretive facility, on the other hand, was not so easily resolved. Commission staff—and Senator Tsongas—endorsed the “Brown Book” notion of focusing development around the Boott Mills in the central business district,38 but Park planners argued for the acquisition and substantial development of another mill, the Wannalancit, outside the downtown core. Relations between Commission Director Fred Faust and Park Superintendent Albert deteriorated badly over the issue, and NPS replaced Albert with John Burchill in the spring of 1981. Burchill was a politically skilled attorney capable of restoring relations with the Commission and strengthening partnerships around the city and state. He would end the Boott-Wannalancit controversy a few months after his arrival by signing off on the Senator’s preferred alternative.39


With Jimmy Carter’s presidency facing a host of difficulties, meanwhile, Ronald Reagan won the presidential election of 1980. This set the nation on a different course than the one it had been on since the 1930s, and it would dramatically change the national context in which the Park would develop. Even so, Tsongas would prove a skilled enough leader to maintain the momentum of the Park’s development. He would later claim that there was “a window of opportunity that we got through just before it closed” and that the Park would not likely have been created in a Reagan administration. He was probably correct, but the fact is that the Park, once authorized, would never become a significant target for Reagan or his anti-historic preservation Secretary of the Interior, James Watt. Tsongas himself was a social progressive, but in keeping with the growing conservatism within the Democratic Party, he was also much friendlier to private economic interests than New Deal or Great Society liberals had ever been. As reflected in his legislation, Tsongas’s experience with the often unresponsive and inflexible NPS bureaucracy only strengthened his view that government alone was not always an efficient means of effecting change. When he created the Lowell Plan—a year before Reagan took office—he also demonstrated his awareness that he would have to depend on and also reward private supporters for their help in revitalizing Lowell’s economy and creating a better quality of life for its citizens.

If the park philosophy, as interpreted by Senator Tsongas, proved adaptable to changes that would come during the Reagan years, then so did the field of historic preservation itself. Preservation became “big business” in the 80s, and preservationists everywhere allied themselves with anyone interested in promoting the economic benefits of adapting old buildings for modern usage. The timing was certainly good for Lowell, because with a philosophy so serviceable to developers and a much-ballyhooed promotion of public–private part-


42. Watt initially proposed the “zerobudgeting” of the federal government’s historic preservation program. Wallace, “Preserving the Past,” 204. His decision to keep Russell Dickinson as NPS director seemed a mixed blessing for Lowell. On the one hand, Dickinson was no anti-government ideologue. On the other, as an agency veteran, he favored more traditional parks over newer ones like Lowell. In the end, Dickinson played no significant role in Park development. Harpers Ferry Center, The National Parks: Shaping the System, 86. See also Foresta, America’s National Parks, 93.

43. Traditional Democratic liberals were discredited following the 1972 presidential election, and in 1976 the party united behind moderate Carter. The pressure to move further right continued in 1978, when five incumbent Democratic senators lost to Republicans. New-styled Democrat Tsongas was the only member of his party to unseat a Republican that year (he defeated Edward Brooke). Wilentz, The Age of Reagan, 83–85, and Thomas J. McIntyre, with John C. Obert, The Fear Brokers (New York: Beacon Press, 1979).
nering, the city would catch national media attention and find itself at the forefront of a movement to revitalize local economies through a marketplace strategy that even James Watt could love. Despite their free-enterprise ideology, archconservatives such as Watt were more than willing to provide tax breaks and other government incentives to private businessmen. 44

Public spending, of course, was by no means limited to Commission grants, loans, and technical assistance. In 1980, the Park and Commission began their first major development at the former Lowell Manufacturing Company complex, a site that included over 280,000 square feet in two derelict mill buildings. The project was made possible by Tsongas, who used his influence to arrange a Commission partnership with a private development firm (partially underwritten with UDAG money to help fund the fourteen-million dollar cost). When completed in 1982, the complex, renamed Market Mills, became a model for adaptive reuse. It housed 230 mixed-use apartment units, an artists’ gallery, ethnic restaurants, retail outlets, a public courtyard, and the national and state park visitor center. 45

The visitor center featured modest exhibits and a state-of-the-art slide show that, despite a relentlessly promotional ending, established a precedent for interpreting history as a rational, continuing process with clear relevance to the present. Once finished, the visitor center also provided uniformed rangers with a base from which to operate a tour program that, in 1982, remained the heart and soul of the Park’s public offerings—particularly along a historic canal system enhanced by NPS technical services and state dollars (available at the time because of a booming economy referred to by many as “the Massachusetts Miracle”). 46 The Commonwealth worked with NPS to deliver an interpretive program heavily focused on technology-related themes, not only on canal tours, but at the state park’s interpretive center (1983) and at an NPS turbine exhibit (1985). 47 Plans to develop social history themes important to the Commission and some members of the Park staff got underway elsewhere:


45. Peskin, “Preservation Key to Revitalization,” 5–6. This was one of few NPS-related developments during a time of shrinking agency budgets.


at the Park’s principal museum facility, the Boott Mill, and an adjacent boardinghouse in dire need of restoration.\textsuperscript{48}

\textbf{The Vision Fades}

When I first came to Lowell, I doubt that anyone there had ever heard the term “public history.” I know that I hadn’t. By 1984, though, public history had grown from its California roots into a national movement. I became personally aware of the National Council on Public History in late 1980 and was especially struck by a 1981 article that Ronald Grele had written in the organization’s promising new journal. Grele criticized the narrow definition of public history as simply an alternative to university employment and called for a more socially responsible and activist profession. Thank you, Ron Grele! He described for me what some of us were doing in Lowell, and I’ve always considered his article to have been written well ahead of its time. But while the public history profession seems to have since taken strides in the direction that Grele had suggested, trends in Lowell did not. Ironically, The Public Historian published an article I wrote suggesting that Lowell might become a national model for other public history projects in the same year in which things in the city started to take a turn for the worse.\textsuperscript{49}

Lowell’s future appeared very bright indeed in the early 1980s, but its fortunes would change dramatically in 1984. Paul Tsongas announced that he had been diagnosed with cancer and would not be seeking reelection to the Senate. His successor, John Kerry, would certainly be an advocate for the Park, but he would not give it the personal attention that Tsongas had always provided. Likewise, the state’s congressional delegation, led by House Speaker Tip O’Neill, had forever been supportive of the Park’s development needs and would remain so—despite the loss of not only Tsongas but of Congressman James M. Shannon. Shannon gave up a promising House career when he ran unsuccessfully against Kerry in the 1984 Senate primary and was succeeded in the House by influential state senator Chester Atkins. Like Kerry, Atkins may not have been a Lowellian (he lived in affluent Concord), but he was a skilled legislator who understood constituent service and the need to keep federal money flowing into Lowell, the biggest city in his district.

The Park Service did not wait long to make changes after hearing the news. Even before Tsongas had left office, agency officials—then under pressure

\textsuperscript{48} The Park’s professional staff, particularly Lawrence Gall and the author, tended to advocate for more progressive social history interpretation, while growing numbers of uniformed rangers favored a more traditional approach. Plans were laid out in <i>Lowell National Historical Park General Management Plan</i>. 13–15; Lowell Historic Preservation Commission, <i>Preservation Plan</i>. 44–45; and O’Neill, <i>Report of the Lowell Historic Canal District Commission</i>, 40–41.

to redevelop Boston’s Charlestown Navy Yard and less concerned than ever before about political pressure from Lowell—transferred the Park’s uniquely qualified superintendent, John Burchill, to Boston and replaced him with Chrysandra Walter. For Walter, then serving at Gateway National Recreation Area in New York, the Lowell superintendency would be an opportunity to prove her mettle. Agency insiders looking to advance their careers valued postings in such places, not because of their perceived historical significance, but because of the “administrative challenges” they presented. And in 1984, there were few parks in the country with more apparent challenges—and real opportunities—than Lowell. The Park’s yearly visitation figures were approaching 600,000, and the city’s economy was growing by leaps and bounds: unemployment had dropped to 2.8 percent (lowest in the state and fifth lowest in the nation), real estate prices were skyrocketing, and private investors were pumping nearly two-hundred million dollars into downtown developments. Press coverage was consistently good, and Lowell was firming up its reputation as a model for the revitalization of depressed industrial places worldwide. Even Prince Charles would come to Lowell to see for himself what the excitement was all about.

Although Superintendent Walter had been trained as a museum educator, she understood politics and sensed from the publicity that she could best serve the Park’s interests (and her own) by promoting economic development opportunities over the educational ideals that had been so critical to the original park vision. The idea of a cultural park, of course, had never inspired much support within NPS—ironically because agency insiders were convinced that it was more about economics than preservation—but in the 1980s, all of that began to change. Even as federal support for historic preservation was elsewhere in decline, political appointees in the Reagan administration remained comfortable with the use federal money to promote private development.

In 1988, the same year in which the Interior Department would stand by the Commission’s seven-year reauthorization, newly installed NPS director William Penn Mott would mark the Park’s tenth anniversary by congratulating “the risk-takers” who had made the Park “one of the jewels in the National Park Service crown.” Mott toured the Wannalancit Mill and applauded its renovation, not as a museum, but as a high technology center. And he noted how

50. Foresta, America’s National Parks, 165–66, suggested that Lowell was judged by many insiders to lack even a “patina of great significance.” Still, he found that young managers could more often establish a reputation “by successfully handling a difficult management task in a park with little historical significance than by” succeeding in a park with “only minimal problems and straightforward management demands.”


52. In 1986, rehabilitation tax credits, “the mainstay of the preservationist-developer alliance,” were reduced in the face of mounting federal deficits. Wallace, “Preservation Revisited,” 224–27.

53. Fred Faust resigned from the Commission shortly after Tsongas left office. He was succeeded by former assistant Armand Mercier and eventually by one-time Tsongas staffer Peter Ancella.
impressed he was with “cooperation and coordination between the national park, the state park, private enterprise and private citizens.”

Superintendent Walter may have shown little appreciation for either history or cultural park ideas, but she enthusiastically supported the creation of the Tsongas Center for Industrial History in 1987. The Center expanded significantly the Park’s existing outreach programs and forged a new school-museum partnership offering training opportunities for teachers and interactive learning experiences for students. Creation of the Tsongas Center, however, was driven less by grassroots movements and more by a strategy to upgrade the school system and attract well-heeled newcomers to the city. Likewise, Walter celebrated Lowell’s ethnic culture in grand (but arguably superficial) style. Instead of hosting national or international meetings of educators and thinkers as Mogan had once envisioned, Walter joined with city leaders in bringing the popular—and, for some local businesses, lucrative—National Folk Festival to Lowell for what turned out to be a very successful three-year run. Sponsored annually in changing locations across the country by the National Council for the Traditional Arts, the festival attracted hundreds of thousands of free-spending music lovers to the city. After it moved on in 1990, the Park worked with city leaders to sponsor even more successful festivals well into the future.

The fact is that—with Tsongas out of office and no one to keep the Park and the city’s business community focused on anything like the original vision—more and more people became preoccupied with “surface, styles, and the historic as stage setting.” History, in effect, became a tool for unprincipled economic development. The commercially driven Lowell Plan, for example, described Lowell as a “visually exciting city” that offered a “glimpse of what early industrial America was all about” [emphasis added]. How ironic. Unlike NPS planners, city business leaders were not at all concerned about national historical significance, and contrary to the cultural park vision, they ignored

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56. Mogan had earlier made the connection between an improved education system and a more attractive quality of life, and while still a senator, Tsongas promoted a “unique partnership” between the Lowell Plan and city government to improve the Lowell schools and convince young professionals to move to the city and make “Lowell an even better place for business.” “The Lowell Model for Educational Excellence: Executive Summary Report,” unpublished report in possession of the author (Lowell, January 1984). Tsongas himself reemerged following a 1986 bone marrow transplant and emboldened himself in a very public and sometimes messy debate surrounding the city’s schools.


ethnic-working class culture and more recent history. As far as they were concerned, tourists had money in their pockets and were much more likely to spend it in a unique place with a “positive” message than in all those other undistinguished and all-too-real industrial cities. With a wink and a nod, too, Lowell Plan promoters assured real estate investors that the city was not just “a caretaker of historical monuments.” To make matters worse, businessmen and their hired guns gave new meaning to the term “culture.” Was it something that was ingrained in the lives of Lowell’s residents, as Pat Mogan had long argued? Or did it have more to do with a more finely attuned appreciation for the arts, as the Lowell Plan’s 1987 cultural plan suggested? Mogan may have argued that “there’s culture here already,” but Cambridge-based consultants maintained that culture needed to be enhanced, not preserved. The national park, in their minds, was only one of many “cultural” attractions in the city. Lowell’s new visionaries emphasized their expectation that along with art galleries and public sculptures, museums, a local repertory theater, and folk festivals, the Park would help “bring culture into the city” and attract “skilled employees and footloose businesses.” The state tourism office, meanwhile, did not even pretend to share the educational mission of the cultural park when it produced a poster headlined “History for the Taking.” The poster invited visitors to “discover the mills and the mill girls, the strikes, the struggle, the ruin and the rebirth” and promoted the city not for its indigenous culture, but as “a gateway to fun, history, and the dramatic story of America’s Industrial Revolution.”

Of course, economic development had always been an important part of the cultural park plan. Mogan envisioned a place “that would create a oneness among all the ethnic groups and a great sense of pride among all Lowell’s residents”—while serving as a “monument to the Industrial Revolution and all of the ethnic groups in America who made it happen.” In other words, everyday Lowellians were to have preserved and celebrated their very authentic culture and been joined by working-class ethnics from other places. These were the tourists who were to have brought new dollars to a city in which commercial institutions reflected the local culture. As with many dreamers, however, Mogan had always spoken in abstractions and left details open to interpretation. Very few people really appreciated what he meant when he spoke about the idealized working-class ethnic purity that had transformed Lowell’s culture into such an iconic—and tangible—industrial relic. This was due, at least in part, to the fact that neither Pat Mogan nor anyone else had ever produced “a working definition of immigrant working class’ culture.” Such lack

of clarity may not have been an issue in the 1970s, but it became a problem in the 80s. It was one thing, after all, to have vaguely described Lowell’s culture as a living artifact of the country’s Industrial Revolution in the waning years of the New Deal and Great Society, but it was quite another to do so as the Reagan Revolution was picking up momentum. Without Paul Tsongas to moderate growing private sector influence, Lowell’s business elites had little trouble ignoring 60s rhetoric and following national trends that they found more enticing. And so, not surprisingly, gentrification became more and more of a problem in city neighborhoods, and trendy boutiques replaced discount stores on downtown streets. Lowell was still a culturally diverse place, but ethnic pride without an economic edge—what Gunnar Myrdal termed “romantic ethnicity”—was, for better or worse, finding a more appreciative audience among Chamber of Commerce members, real estate developers, and the complicit middle-class professionals and intellectuals who joined them than among more common folk.63

There were still people in Lowell who remained true to Mogan’s original vision, of course, and the crass marketing of the mid-80s was setting their teeth on edge. University of Lowell historian Mary Blewett wrote in 1986 that “former mill workers were wondering in amazement what would sell next.” And the Commission’s director of cultural affairs, Paul Marion, argued publicly that cultural expression was a democratic and inclusive force not intended to be employed “at the service of tourism.” He advocated such things as language institutes and a regional journal focused on Merrimack Valley life. He also made his case about growing commercialism in a poem entitled “Monument”:

child labor
peasant pay
deadly air
slave hours
sweatshop

that’s what mills
will always mean
to some of us
no matter how many
postcards sell64

Still, interest in both history and culture was by no means dead, and the debate over their meaning continued to generate healthy contentiousness, most notably during the planning of the former boardinghouse that opened in 1989


64. Blewett, “Machines, Workers, and Capitalists,” 280; and Paul Marion, “Culture and Community,” unpublished presentation to the Lowell Art Association, June 12, 1985, manuscript in
as the Patrick J. Mogan Cultural Center. Its centerpiece was to be an exhibit entitled *The Working People*. Park historians who developed the exhibit’s first half emphasized national and scholarly approaches to history in their presentation on “mill girls,” while Commission staff privileged local, memory-driven interpretations to tell the immigration story. This would prove a bit disconcerting to reviewer Bruce Laurie, who found that the two presentations shared space “but not much else.” Laurie wrote that the Park’s tightly focused “mill girl” interpretation was reasonably well-grounded in professional literature and generally accessible, but that the Commission’s interpretation of immigrant workers lacked context and was “busy and sometimes trite.” Park visitors with little personal connection to Lowell tended to share his feelings, but Lowellians themselves ignored the “mill girls” and related emotionally and appreciatively to the Commission’s immigrant exhibit.\(^{65}\)

For their part, Commission staff—particularly Paul Marion and his successor Martha Norkunas—remained consistently as true to the ideals of the cultural park as they could, not just in developing the Mogan Center, but in sponsoring community events and projects at both the Center and an adjacent acre of land it created as a park and outdoor stage. Commission grants backed more traditional history projects, too, including the Lowell Historical Society’s 1991 publication of *The Continuing Revolution: A History of Lowell, Massachusetts*, and an assortment of community-based projects, from art works, to plays, to children’s programs, to concerts, to books. At the same time, grants promoted cultural expression by Lowell’s traditional ethnic groups (Greeks, French Canadians, and other “white ethnics”), but true to the original vision, they also supported newly arrived peoples, particularly Southeast Asians attracted by an economy that grew consistently through the mid-1980s.\(^{66}\)

Park staff, meanwhile, operated their expanding tour operations (for which, in keeping with changing political philosophies in Washington, the Park eventually began charging admission) while planning their museum facility at the Boott Mill. In many ways, the Boott’s 1992 opening signaled the end

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66. Thanks to Martha Norkunas for her insights into the Commission’s work after 1989. Between that year and 1994, the Commission awarded more than three million dollars to local cultural groups to create and disseminate programs related to labor and ethnicity. Commission grants supported, among other things, publication of James Higgins and Joan Ross, *Southeast Asians: a New Beginning in Lowell* (Lowell: Mill Town Graphics, 1986), a Cambodian television station, and a Khmer dance troupe. Southeast Asian immigration was significant in the 80s: roughly 15,000 people to a city of 100,000. Thanks also to Lewis Karabatsos for giving me the chance to edit *The Continuing Revolution*.\(^{88}\)
of the Park’s development phase. This five-story mill building was redeveloped to include the offices of the Tsongas Center for Industrial History and various other park-related operations—but its most visible offering was the Boott Mills Museum, with its 20,000-square-foot exhibition space that occupied two full mill floors. Exhibits included a restored weave room with eighty-eight operating power looms and a full floor of galleries that together provided visitors with an overview of the American Industrial Revolution as it was played out in Lowell. Seven-hundred invited guests attended the exhibit’s opening, many of them dressed—ironically for working-class Lowell—in formal attire. And many were favorably impressed with what they saw. So were the New York Times and the Society for the History of Technology (which honored the exhibit with the Dibner Award for Excellence in Museum Exhibits). Reviewer Thomas W. Leavitt, however, declared that the Boott was not “the exhibition-of-record the subject deserves.” He was especially critical of the closing gallery, which he thought contrasted inexplicably with the exhibit’s otherwise “warts-and-all” approach to interpretation by inappropriately celebrating the business community’s role in the city’s economic revitalization. Leavitt was indeed perceptive. Superintendent Walter herself had decided to revise the exhibit’s original ending—which had, as the Park’s General Management Plan directed, drawn critical connections between the historic textile industry and modern high-technology businesses—and replace it with one obviously intended to court favor with local businessmen. The result was painfully embarrassing. By the time the Boott opened, Lowell’s economy was in shambles. Wang, having bet its future on the dedicated word processor, lost its gamble when IBM and others introduced the personal computer. Wang reported losses of almost a billion dollars in 1989 and 1990. This, in turn, caused a ripple effect among businesses throughout the city, driving Lowell’s unemployment into double figures by 1991. A year later—and just two months after the grand opening of the Boott Mills Museum—Wang filed for bankruptcy protection.

67. Technically, development continued through 1995, when Commission authorization expired.
70. Walter’s boosterism had its detractors within NPS. Larry Gall, the interpretive planner and deputy superintendent who had written the original script, later said publicly that he regretted the decision to change the original ending of the Boott script. Lawrence Gall, “Breaking the Mold: The Origins and Development of Lowell National Historical Park,” unpublished paper presented at the 1999 National Council on Public History Conference, in possession of the author. Both Gall and the author had left the Park in the late-80s. In 1999, Park staff would begin the process of giving their exhibit a more credible ending. Stanton, The Lowell Experiment, 144–48, describes the process.
71. Lowell was not the only place in trouble during the early 1990s. The national economy was in recession, and in New England, post–Cold War defense cutbacks, a banking crisis, insta-
The Continuing Revolution?

I recall an after-hours conversation from the early 1980s, in which one of us—I won’t say who—threw a little cold water on our growing optimism about the Park’s future. While a few of us were making grand statements about Lowell’s potentially revolutionary impact, not simply on the National Park Service, but on historic sites and history museums everywhere—maybe even on the country itself—our friend, I think more realistically than cynically, cautioned us not to get too carried away with ourselves. He imagined that, yes, Lowell would one day be a better place to live than it had been, with a few attractively restored buildings and some good public programs, but that the Park would eventually gain acceptance within the system and the city would lose its mystique among all those preservationists, planners, and opinion makers.

The Park was in fact a success—at least as far as NPS was concerned. Shortly after the Boott Mill gala, Chrysandra Walter left Lowell with a promotion and a new job in Washington. Park Service officials were apparently more forgiving than exhibit reviewers, and the NPS establishment had, like Director Mott, come to accept Lowell National Historical Park as one of its crown jewels. Indeed, from an agency point of view, NPS profited by its Lowell experience. It suited the conservative tenor of the times. Visitation was good. The press remained supportive. The agency could take credit for interpreting industrial history. And even those insiders who still regarded Lowell’s history as only marginally significant recognized that the Park’s management structure was viable and could be replicated elsewhere. New parks, such as Martin Luther King National Historic Site in Georgia and Women’s Rights National Historical Park in New York, addressed socially relevant themes while promoting economic development—as did a growing number of politically popular heritage parks. Heritage parks were “affiliated units” in which NPS avoided land acquisition and management responsibilities but served preservation and interpretation goals with grants and aid to the private sector and state and local governments.
By the turn of the century, though, economic development trumped education. It had proven more demanding than anyone had realized to maintain the momentum of a complex process that was more subject to changing national and local politics than all the Park’s publicity had ever suggested. As Pat Mogan himself conceded, the Park was “not what we initially envisioned.” He claimed that Lowellians just gave up and “accepted (the NPS) agenda.” This was not, in his view, the Park Service’s fault. NPS only came in and “did what it does best” by establishing the Park’s physical structure. Mogan blamed local officials who he said “never tapped on the potential of average people to enhance the Park.”75 Without that local leadership—and pressure—Park managers lost whatever motivation they might have had to break out of their institutional straitjackets and work with the community to develop a more synthetic and meaningful public understanding of the past.76

Paul Tsongas, meanwhile, was pleased with the new Lowell. “The park is what I hoped it would be,” he said in 1988.77 There is a temptation, of course, to say that nothing had really changed: a program promoted as “grass roots” turned out to be nothing but the same old “top down” politics that had always benefited one elite or another and left working Lowellians with little to show for their efforts.78 Such an excessively ideological interpretation, though, would miss the point. The cultural park was envisioned during a time when Americans still believed that they could better themselves by working through

“White paper,” 12–13, credit the Park as the model for other heritage development areas. The National Center for Heritage Development recognized the heritage movement’s debt to Lowell when it eulogized Tsongas, correctly or not, as the movement’s “patron saint.” “Paul E. Tsongas: An Appreciation,” Heritage Links 4, no. 1 (February 1997): 7. For a critical view of the heritage movement, see David Lowenthal, Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History (New York: Free Press, 1996). The growing popularity of “heritage” raised serious concerns in Lowenthal’s mind about the ways in which the public understood and used the past. Unlike historians who employed scientific methodologies to uncover objective and timeless truths, heritage crusaders uncritically accepted and celebrated the collective memories of local, regional, and even national groups—and were, according to Lowenthal, subject to the manipulations of political demagogues, shameless tourism promoters, and various others. See also Steven Conn, “Heritage can mean celebrating history for the wrong reasons,” Philadelphia Inquirer, June 1, 1999; and Weible, “The Blind Man and His Dog,” 14.
75. Mogan quoted in Tuttle, “Founding father,” 2.
76. The Park has grown in many ways, but in addition to missing opportunities to develop new interpretations in partnership with local collaborators, it retains traditional NPS biases, such as a preoccupation with technology-related themes and an emphasis on early history. Nor have interpretive programs capitalized on recent scholarship to address relevant political topics: the government’s role in Lowell’s founding, for example, and corporate opposition to public education. See Prince and Taylor, “Daniel Webster, the Boston Associates, and the U.S. Government’s Role in the Industrializing Process,” and Mitchell, The Paddy Camps. For an overview of the Park after 1992, see O’Connell and Fitzsimons, “The Presentation of Lowell’s stories,” 2.
public institutions rather than by surrendering their fates to an unregulated marketplace. Lowell’s park would be developed during a time of strong conservative reaction, however, so it was perhaps fortunate that Tsongas was there, at least for a time, to oversee development, maintain educational and cultural integrity, and make something happen. His departure from office in 1984 did indeed leave a leadership void and a situation ripe for commercial exploitation. Still, most would agree that Lowell was a better place when he died in 1997 than it was when he first joined the city council in 1969. As a result of the changes it underwent during those years, Lowell became considerably more attractive to newcomers and investors than other older industrial cities in the region. In 1994, even after its high-tech crash, Lowell’s employment level was seventy-five percent higher than in 1972. Historic buildings and sites were preserved in ways that were conceivable to only a few in the late 60s. And while it may not have served the political and economic interests of working-class Lowelians as well as some had hoped, the energy that brought a national park to Lowell and drove its development built self-esteem and a sense among Lowelians that they could indeed shape a better future for themselves. As it turned out, too, that hope never died. Mogan disciple Paul Marion continued to argue in 2009 that “people have to care about a place. That’s where you begin, by getting them to care, by talking about heritage and shared purpose.”

The question I ask myself today is whether or not Marion’s vision might ever be realized. Some would say “no,” of course, but it’s possible, I think, that the reactionary politics that took hold in 1980 and so changed the environment for Park development may one day run its course. And if that happens, Marion and people like him might still be alive and kicking. Good new ideas are emerging in the meantime, not only to revisit the vision behind the park, but to move beyond it into the twenty-first century. Things may work out yet.

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79. Even when he was out of office, Tsongas was saying, as he did in 1987, that the city had to address problems associated with minority group conditions and poverty, make education a priority, and “think beyond just bricks and mortar and emphasize cultural development.” Tsongas, “The Role of Local Leadership,” 18.
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