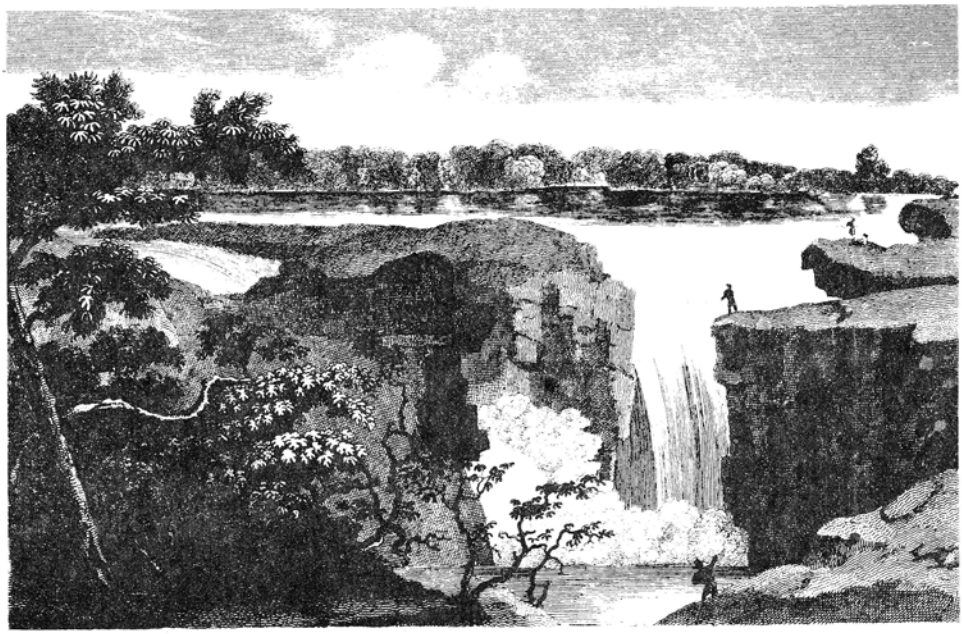
*REMEMBRANCES OF PASSAIC COUNTY*

# PASSAIC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Museum and Headquarters
LAMBERT CASTLE
Garret Mountain Reservation
Paterson, N. J.

Vol. 1. 1973 - No. 3



## TOUR TO PASSAICK FALLS

*by Dr. S. L. Mitchill*

You are to cross the Hudson from Courtlandt-street ferry, and pass over to Powleshook. You may carry horses and carriages over with you, or you may take seats in one of the ordinary lines of stages as far as Newark. Then you may make such further arrangement as you please, in a village where there is no difficulty in procuring the means of conveyance. But a better method than either, if several are going together, is, to make an agreement with one of the stage offices in New-York, a day or two before-hand, for a carriage to meet you from Newark, with a single or double team as you may wish it, and to be on the ground at Powleshook, at the precise day and hour you may name; and for the stipulated price you may agree upon. The proprietors or some of their connexions will do this. By this plan, you are sure to have a carriage and horses immediately at your disposal. Your party may be exactly accommodated as to their persons and baggage, if they take any, and you proceed on your expedition without loss of time. Some persons who are fond of active exercise, go to Newark on foot, a distance of only eight miles.

Powles-hook is a peninsula, beset with creeks and salt meadows. It was one of the British out-posts during the revolutionary war, when New-York was a garrison. Yet, strong as the works were at that time, and difficult of access, by reason of the mud and marsh, the American troops took it by surprise, and made the guards prisoners. This brave party was commanded by colonel Lee, of the Virginia line.

This place has been much improved within a few years, under the auspices of a company, who have began a settlement, which they call the city of Jersey. Formerly the passage from Powles-hook to Bergen, was through a slough; but it is now a fine smooth road. The rivers Hackinsack and Passaick were, until about fifteen years ago, passed in flats at ferries; but since that time, travellers cross them on bridges, for the payment of a toll prescribed by law. Bergen is a Dutch settlement, being part of new Netherlands. The inhabitants have retained to this day, much of the language, manners and customs of their forefathers.

The causeways from Bergen to Newark have shared in a full proportion, the improvements of the present time. They are elevated more above the rise of spring tides; they are smoother and better than they used to be, and undergo more seasonable repairs. The meadows on each side abound in plants, with which the florist and botanist will be delighted. And this swampy region, which the plough and hoe never disturb, will long be the soil in which our indigenous plants will vegetate. In the latter part of summer or beginning of autumn, the andromeda and hibiscus on each side of the road, are sometimes very frequent and beautiful. To the northward, is a solitary mountain, called *Snake-hill*; and to the southward, *Newark-bay* which is a shallow body of water, formed by the junction of the Hackinsack and Passaick, at their entrance into Staten-island Sound, a little to the northward of *Elizabethtown*.

Newark is one of the most beautiful and thriving villages in the United States – It is famous for its quarries of reddish sandstone; great quantities are exported to New-York; and for its fine cider, which is known all over the nation. It is also remarkable for its manufacture of leather and riding carriages. A number of beautiful villas are seen in its vicinity. An academy, a bank, a presbyterian and an episcopal church, are among its public edifices.

Proceeding from Newark to the northward, you have a delightful ride along the west side of the Passaick. Scarcely any thing can exceed this for rural beauty and variety. Travelling in this direction about 18 miles, you arrive at the village (of *Totoway*, as it used to be called) of Patterson, where the operations of the great national manufacturing society were carried on in 1790, '91, and '92. The company spent a large sum of money in blowing rocks, digging canals, erecting buildings, and carrying on cotton works at this place; and finally wound up their concerns, and dissolved themselves with almost a total loss of their stock. Many remains of their works are yet to be seen; and they form no small or in different part of the objects of the traveller's attention.

Not far above the village is the highly picturesque cataract which the Passaick forms in descending from the top to the bottom of the precipice formed by a chasm between the rocks. There is a great deal of rare and sublime scenery hereabout. Rainbows often appear amidst the spray, when the sun shines. The peculiar appearance of this great work of nature, has been delineated by several artists; but by none so well as Mr. Archibald Robertson, of New-York. His representation of it is admirable – on an album at the inn, you may write your name and your reflections.

On your return you may pass the bridge at Acquackanonck, and visit *Schuyler's copper mine*, which was profitably worked before the revolution. But although attempts have been made to re-establish the works since the war, the adventurers have not been very successful. The shafts, the engine, a parcel of refuse ore, and several pieces of machinery and apparatus, are still to be seen.

After surveying these works, you may return on a cross-road, which leads you by a pleasant ride to the main causeway, about one-third of the distance from the bridge over the Passaick to that over the Hackinsack. And to diversify your excursion, you may return to the city by *Hoboken*, the beautiful residence of John Stevens, esq. Between Jersey and Hoboken, you will observe the village and race-ground of *Harsimus*. This shore was formerly the duelling ground of the New-Yorkers.

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The charming piece introduced here was written in 1807 by Dr. Samuel Latham Mitchill and was included in the first guidebook ever published about New York City. The complete title of Mitchill's little book is "The Picture of New York" or "Traveller's Guide through the Commercial Metropolis of the United States". To have called New York a metropolis in 1807 was something of an overstatement. The population of the city was around 80,000 and the physical limits of the city extended just a little beyond the present City Hall. There were four hospitals, five banks, six public markets, nineteen newspapers and one theatre in New York at the time. People sought relief from the "hustle and bustle" of metropolitan life at the few public gardens on the outskirts of the city, but when they became truly weary of the "fast pace" of New York life, they crossed one of the rivers surrounding the island of Manhattan and ventured into the hinterlands. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a trip to Passaic Falls was a popular excursion for the residents and visitors of New York.

The author of the piece, Dr. Mitchill, was not only a leading citizen of New York, but he was in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin. An Edinburgh-educated physician, he taught medical science for many years at Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons. He was an early pioneer in cancer research and in the study of contagious diseases. In addition to his medical background, he became the foremost natural scientist in America of his day. His great forte was in the painstaking study of the natural history of the Eastern seaboard and he wrote extensively on the botany, geology, zoology, ichthyology and American Indian lore of the entire region. He was a correspondent and contributor to practically all of the learned societies of the nations of the civilized world. Not only was he a prolific essayist but he was something of a poet, too. Dr. Mitchill had a political side and served as a member of the New York State Assembly, the United States House of Representatives and the Senate. An ardent Jeffersonian Democrat, he became an early abolitionist. His list of accomplishments is staggering and gives him the right to be called, along with Dr. Franklin, "the compleat man" in the Renaissance sense. It was once said of him: "Tap the Doctor at any time and he will flow."

It was only natural that he included a description of the Passaic Falls in his guidebook for New Yorkers, since he had visited the falls and considered the area one of the wonders of the Eastern seaboard. Visitors from miles around braved the rigors of the public transportation of the day to spend a day or two admiring the beauty of the falls and the scenic splendors of the Passaic Valley. Whenever strangers from abroad visited New York, their hosts would suggest a trip to the falls as part of the itinerary of their guests. Artists and writers were moved to describe the falls through their sketches and verbal accounts. The poems of Washington Irving and William Carlos Williams have made the literature of the Passaic Falls part of the national literature of America.

Because of the popularity of the falls and its surroundings, an inn, the Godwin House,(later, the Passaic Hotel) was established near the falls to accommodate the many visitors to the area. In the eighteen twenties, Timothy Crane turned all of the land (which he owned) surrounding the falls into a park, the Forest Gardens, during the summer months, which further enhanced the attractiveness of the area as a resort. He also was responsible for building the first bridge across the chasm above the falls. Since the road on the western bank of the Passaic River leading to the falls cut through the lush farmland (of the Passaic Valley), dotted with its handsome country mansions, it was an especially pleasant trip from Newark, as Dr. Mitchill described in his short essay.

The fame of the Passaic Falls was eventually eclipsed by the great falls of Niagara. Until the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 and the development of the railroad a few years later, the Niagara Falls was virtually inaccessible to everyone except the residents of the surrounding area. Once the Niagara Falls was opened to tourists, the Passaic Falls was abandoned as a mecca for visitors. Industry encroached upon the wilderness surrounding the falls and red brick factories sprouted along the river below its heights. As the nineteenth century wore on, the Passaic Falls began to pass into obscurity as a scenic wonder and the area was no longer sought out as a refuge from the tensions of the workaday city life.

Despite the vast improvements made in transportation and the accessibility of the falls to everyone today, the Passaic Falls, described so vividly in Dr. Mitchill's account, has been allowed to remain a lost wonder to the residents of northern New Jersey and, yes, even to New Yorkers. Pity.

DR. MARY C. HENDERSON

Dr. Henderson has recently completed her Ph.D. in Drama and Theatre at NYU. She is currently preparing her dissertation for a Fall publication, The City and the Theatre to be published by James T. White & Co. The Society is indeed grateful to Dr. Henderson for bringing to our attention the little known Washington Irving poem as well as the Mitchill article.

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*THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY*

## "ON PASSAIC FALLS"

*by Washington Irving*
*Written in the Year 1806*

In a wild, tranquil vale, fringed with forests of green,
Where nature had fashion'd a soft sylvan scene,
The retreat of the ring-dove, the haunt of the deer,
PASSAIC in silence roll'd gentle and clear.

No grandeur of prospect astonish'd the sight,
No abruptness sublime mingled awe with delight;
There the wild flowret blossom'd, the elm proudly waved,
And pure was the current the green bank that laved.

But the spirit that ruled o'er the thick-tangled wood,
And had fixed in its gloomy recess his abode,
Loved best the rude scene that the whirlwinds deform,
And gloried in thunder, and lightning and storm.

All flush'd from the tumult of battle he came,
Where the red-men encounter'd the children of flame,
While the noise of the warhoop still rung in his ears,
And the fresh, bleeding scalp as a trophy he wears.

Oh! deep was the horror, and fierce was the fight,
When the eyes of the red-men were shrouded in night;
When by strangers invaded, by strangers destroy'd,
They ensanguined the fields which their fathers enjoy'd.

Lo! the sons of the forest in terror retire,
Pale savages chase them with thunder and fire;
In vain whirls the war-club, in vain twangs the bow,
By thunder and fire are the warriors laid low.

From defeat and from carnage the fierce spirit came,
His breast was a tumult, his passions were flame,
Despair swells his heart, fury maddens his ire,
And black scowls his brow o'er his eye-balls of fire.

With a glance of disgust he the landscape survey'd,
With its fragrant wild flowrets, its wide-waving shade,
Its river meand'ring through margins of green,
Transparent its waters – its surface serene.

He rived the green hills – the wild woods he laid low,
He turn'd the still stream in rough channels to flow,
He rent the rude rock, the steep precipice gave,
And hurl'd down the chasm the thundering wave.

A scene of strange ruin he scatter'd around,
Where cliffs piled on cliffs in wild majesty frown'd –
Where shadows of horror embrown the dark wood,
And the rain-bow and mist mark the turbulent flood.

Countless moons have since roll'd – in this long lapse of time,
Cultivation has soften'd those features sublime,
The axe of the white man enliven'd the shade,
And dispell'd the deep gloom of the thicketed glade.

Yet the stranger still gazes, with wondering eye,
On rocks rudely torn and groves mounted on high –
Still loves on the cliff's dizzy border to roam,
Where the torrent leaps headlong embosom'd in foam.

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## THE GREAT FALLS OF THE PASSAIC

*by John Piekema*

Some one who had lived in the Falls area for more than seven years once asked, "Just where is the Falls in Paterson?" During all this time she had not known where, nor had she seen the Great Falls!

The Great Falls of the Passaic is a natural wonder. It is unique in its form and physical characteristics, falling into a chasm of pure rock formation. The Passaic Falls is one of the highest east of the Mississippi River (the higher being in Tennessee but that without the volume), and, of course, the Niagara. It is the only significant Falls that even approaches Niagara in form, for it is almost a horseshoe, although we see it as a buttonhook.

But it is more than that. The Passaic Falls is not the simple result of a river coming to the edge of a land-fall. It comes to the huge chasm, a cleft in the face of a stone mountain, and the river spills between two facing cliffs, one as high as the other.

It is as though some huge giant had taken a great wedge and driven it into the face of the mountain, forced the solid rock apart to form the wide split, and thus

created the chasm. The outer edge of the opening is about 100 feet wide, and the split narrows as it goes deeper into the rock mountain. This tapers back to a farther depth of more than 300 feet, where it turns slightly into a hook, where the width is perhaps 20 feet.

The cliff itself has a sheer drop of 70 feet, with both sides of the chasm displaying rugged rock walls in opposing jagged faces. The whole is solid basaltic stone.

As the river, flowing from the west, approaches the cliff, it passes under a modern bridge, and then drops over a not too-high man made dam. The dam was created to divert water into a hydro-electric plant (now inoperable), which is situated against an outer face of the cliff, below the upper river level.

As the water passes over the dam it becomes rapid, forming a basin just before the cliff, then drops over and down the sheer rock chasm into the basin below with a roar that in flood season is heard before it is seen.

The water leaps between the opposing faces of the cleft rock and rushing south for a few hundred feet, strikes the face of the lower gorge and turns almost in a northerly direction.

As the river leaves the lower basin in its swiftly changing course, it flows between two rock walls for a distance of perhaps three-quarters of a mile. The browning northwest wall of basalt rises more than 100 feet above the river; the south wall of similar rock rises to not so great a height, and tapers sharply to near-river level within the length of the gorge. This southerly wall has been man-altered over the years, but was originally almost as high as the opposite cliff.

The gorge can be seen advantageously from lower McBride Avenue where one can stand directly behind the course of the river. After this point, the river circles the City of Paterson and goes south to Newark Bay, some 20 miles away.

How did the Great Falls come into existence?

The rock cleft might have been there for thousands of years as a dry, broken split in the mountain face. For in the beginning, no river was there.

Where does the Passaic River come from? The Passaic, one of twin rivers in Northern New Jersey, rises in the upper reaches of middle western Jersey, nearby the same source that spawns the great Raritan River. Curiously, each goes its own way, running off a common watershed in divergent directions, and giving the effect of a miniature continental divide.

The Passaic, winding its way through Morris, and part of Essex Counties, enters Passaic County at Little Falls, where there is a small falls, but a very interesting gorge. This is about four miles west of Paterson, and the falls at Little Falls, as well as its gorge are worth seeing. The Passaic river is unique in that it flows into all directions of the compass in its course to the sea.

The river formerly pursued a more direct course to the ocean, through the Watchung Mountains by way of what is known as the Summit Gap, in the nearby hills of Scotch Plains and Plainfield, and almost directly east of its source. As the famous glacier which once covered all of Northern New Jersey came south, the course of the river was blocked by morainal material and the waters of the river backed up and formed what geologists call "Lake Passaic". It was a very large lake in the middle of Morris County and was reputed to be over 200 feet deep, and thirty-five miles long. This event is placed in time as between 10 and 20 thousand years ago.

After a long period, the water, having reached a spill-over level, had to find a new natural outlet and thus a new course – the present course of the Passaic. In so doing, it drained the lake. Silt and vegetation over the many years had made the area increasingly shallow, and it became what is now known as the "Great Swamp" in Morris County, an area about 6,000 acres east of Basking Ridge near the towns of Green Village, New Vernon, Passaic Township, and Chatham. Had it not been for the glacier and the altered course of the river, the Great Falls would never have come into existence.

The Falls became important to Passaic County and to Paterson when Alexander Hamilton saw it in his travels in the late 18th century. He had been looking for a site to create an industrial complex as competition to England's manufactures and was impressed by the potential for water power at the Falls.

In 1791, the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures, (S.U.M.) was chartered by the New Jersey legislature and plans were revealed for the development of industry

*The Passaic River - Above and Below the Passaic Falls*

around the Falls area. The location, which was intended to be a company town, became Paterson, named after the then governor of New Jersey.

Pierre L'Enfant, architect and designer of our nation's capital, was hired to layout and plan the new city; he was to build a system of raceways to conduct water from the river above the falls through channels to industrial locations along the raceways. Today with some diligence on a walking tour, one can still find the raceways in Paterson, although some are covered over, and others hidden from normal traffic patterns.

Early records disclose that a dam of wood was built across the river about 300 yards up the channel from the present Wayne Avenue bridge. This was to divert river water at that point into a holding reservoir, which was the beginning of the race system. The dam, and a later-constructed lower down-stream dam caused the river above, to rise by about 25 feet, and created a flooding condition for land-owners upstream. The original small reservoir would have been where McBride Avenue now approaches the Wayne Avenue bridge. River water still is diverted just above the bridge and into the original race, which flows around a rock ledge, to form the upper, and subsequently the middle race.

When L'Enfant's plan was abandoned because it was too grandiose in scope, Peter Colt came to Paterson to engineer the S.U.M. job. From Connecticut, he managed and controlled the operation in the few succeeding years. The plan, as originally conceived, never came to fruition, although the S.U.M. continued to control the real estate it had acquired at the beginning.

In the passing years, a cliff, called Deer Leap, gradually disappeared under man-made changes, reducing the size of the lower falls basin considerably, and making room for what is now the extension of McBride Avenue to Mill Street.

The extent of these works in early Paterson, and the subsequent changes, can only be visualized by taking a walking tour of the entire historic district, including the Falls, the raceways, the mills of early Paterson, and the return of the water to the lower Passaic river.

The Great Falls are just that, and are particularly spectacular in periods of flood water. Nevertheless, the Falls can be viewed with pleasure in every season. With improvements that have recently been made (and more are projected), opportunities for sightseeing are much improved. More steps can and will be taken to restore the Great Falls to some of its old, natural beauty. Elimination of the man-made features would make the old cliff faces visible once more. With the utilitarian needs removed, the full beauty of the falls would remain for centuries.

*(Mr. Piekema is a Certified Life Underwriter with the Prudential Ins. Co. and has written the history of the Wyckoff Library. He is preparing another article on the Locomotive Industry in Paterson.*