

Paul M. Bray

The Riverspark Story

Partnerships Making a Real Place into a Living Park

Riverspark is a locally-created and state-designated urban cultural park encompassing seven neighboring cities, towns, and villages.

The park has been called a “live-in, learn-in park” and a “partnership park.” Situated at the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers, Riverspark’s natural and cultural features are associated with the story of industrialization and the American worker, including the conflicts which spawned the American labor movement in the 19th century. It also speaks of the de-industrialization of America. As the park notion has broadened to encompass inhabited special places—including the concept of partnership parks—partnerships have become integral to all aspects of park development and management.

Riverspark had its origins in the early 1970s, when a local preservation organization, the

Hudson-Mohawk Industrial Gateway, made studies and sponsored lectures and tours to bring to light the rich 19th-century industrial history of the area. The Gateway recognized that protection of the natural and cultural resources of the multi-community area depended upon enlisting the support of the local governments.

In 1977, the mayor of the city of Cohoes forged a partnership with three other mayors, one town supervisor, and a city manager to establish the inter-municipal Hudson-Mohawk Urban Cultural Park (HMUCP) Commission and designated the overall grouping of communities to be an urban cultural park—a new idea of park. A seventh municipality, the town of Colonie, was added later.

Former Mayor Canestrari, today a state assemblyman, set in motion a process to recognize, celebrate, and capitalize on a unique American cultural treasure. He began the institutionalization of a living or inhabited park and the building of a widening circle of partnerships that continues to grow.

Riverspark represents almost two decades of park- and partnership- making. A milestone for Riverspark, the popular name for the Hudson-Mohawk Urban Cultural Park Commission, came in 1982 when the statewide Heritage Area System was established. Riverspark was the model for the System which today has 15 units. In New York State, the names heritage area and urban cultural park are used interchangeably.

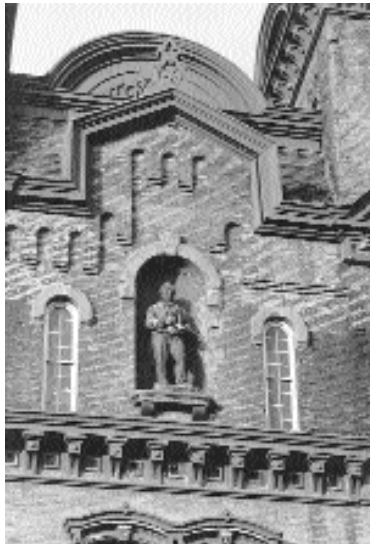
The New York State Heritage Area System is a partnership between the state and locally-created state-designated heritage areas. For Riverspark, the partnership brings state recognition, technical assistance, linkage with other state-designated heritage areas, and eligibility for both capital projects and program grants. A feature of the System is a mechanism to foster coordination and consistency between a wide range of state programs including transportation, tourism, and education, and the goals and activities of heritage areas like Riverspark.

Riverspark is guided by an extensive state approved management plan which includes a nat-



Harmony Manufacturing Co. Mill No.3, central block, west face; quoins are cast iron. Photo by Jack E. Boucher.

Detail of life-size bronze statue of Harmony's principal developer, Thomas Garner. Photo by Jack E. Boucher.



ural and cultural resource inventory, designation of a 26-mile heritage trail linking most of its resources, theme attractions like the Watervliet Arsenal Museum and the Erie Canal Lock #2 Park, interpretive and recreational elements, and a preservation

strategy. Significant historic sites and districts are protected by local preservation ordinances. Two visitor centers have been opened, one each in Troy and Cohoes. The original Commission, now a public benefit corporation, is the planning and programming entity while the member communities and private entities are responsible for individual Riverspark facilities.

The development and operation of Riverspark is an ongoing tale of partnerships. For example, the Riverspark Visitor Center in Troy was the result of a partnership of many property owners doing facade restoration projects on Troy's main street with the city making streetscape improvements. Riverspark was able to package this project in a manner that got a 10% matching grant from the State Heritage Area Program. This grant was for \$800,000, the total cost of developing the Riverspark Visitor Center in Troy.

Riverspark partners have included the corporations who help underwrite the cost of Riverspark festivals like the annual Canalfest and non-profit museums and preservation organizations for which Riverspark has been able to obtain state grants. The aforementioned Gateway was designated to be Riverspark's tour organizer. A shared vision and thoughtful planning connect many diverse partners with Riverspark's intersecting goals of preservation, education, recreation, and economic development. In recent years, the Commission, in partnership with entities like the New York State AFL-CIO, has undertaken a long-term effort to commemorate, celebrate, and encourage the story of

working life within the seven communities of Riverspark.

The history of Riverspark is in many ways a reflection of the agricultural and industrial heritage of America and the changing relationships between employers and workers. On the west shore of the Hudson River, the city of Troy was a breeding ground of union activity. The Troy union of iron molders was the largest local in America at one time and the Trojan laundry workers organized the first female union in the nation. "Troy is the banner city of Americans upon the trade union sentiment..." declared William Sylvis, National Labor Union President in 1866.

A short distance to the north on the east shore of the Hudson River, the Harmony Mills Complex, America's largest complete cotton mill, made the city of Cohoes into a company town. In his book on Troy and Cohoes, *Worker City, Company Town*, historian Daniel Walkowitz points out that "Harmony Mills paternalism was distinguished by its thoroughness, pervading almost every aspect of working-class life." The company employed all 4,808 cotton workers in Cohoes in 1880, and owned 800 tenements available for mill workers at reduced rents, boarding houses, and a company store. Its managers frequently doubled as bank directors and even as mayor of Cohoes. However, its control over its workers unraveled in the decades preceding a major strike in 1880 after Irish and French Canadian workers had time to develop associations on the job and in the community that were necessary to sustain an extended strike. The story of workers in Riverspark was one of first decline and then rebirth after 1900.

De-industrialization occurred because of labor problems, the Depression, changing sources of raw materials and consumer patterns, and decline in the water and rail transportation network that once had made Riverspark a strategic location at the head of navigation on the Hudson

View of both turbine units at Harmony Manufacturing Company Mill No. 3. Photo by Jack E. Boucher.



River. The Harmony Mills as a textile mill and many of the Troy collar shops ceased operation during the 1930s, and the Burden Iron Works—which made the horse shoes for the Union Army during the Civil War and developed the machinery for making spikes for railroad ties—was in receivership in 1934.

Yet, other industries and institutions whose origins were in the 19th century continued to contribute to the economy of the Riverspark communities. The Watervliet Arsenal begun in 1813 has continuously produced ordinance, cannon, and weapons for the U.S. Army in every national conflict except for the Revolutionary War. A cast iron building at the working Arsenal is used as a museum. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute was founded in 1824 “for teaching the physical sciences with their application to the arts of life.” The first engineering school in the nation continues its long tradition of providing leadership and technical expertise for industries at the local and national level.

Much of the 19th-century physical fabric of Riverspark has survived in a remarkably well-preserved condition. The Harmony Mills Complex stands intact with a variety of economic uses taking place in the mill structures and the worker

housing continues to be used as residences. Sites where workers congregated and formulated strike plans like Druids Hall in Troy are in excellent condition. The Iron Molders International Union met there beginning in 1865. The Kate Mullaney residence in Troy was the home of the leader of the nation’s first women’s labor organization. This house is in a neighborhood that retains the working class character of the 1860s and 1870s.

The Commission undertook a feasibility study in 1989, *Champions of Labor*, which identified the resources chronicling worker life in Riverspark and recommending National Park Service designation of worker landmarks. It also called for creation of a Labor Study Center to be located in Riverspark. The New York State AFL-CIO then passed a resolution recognizing that Riverspark was “uniquely rich in the history of organized labor and working-class culture” and endorsed the recommendation of a Labor Study Center.

Another outgrowth of the feasibility study was the enactment of Public Law 102-101 calling for the Department of the Interior to do a labor theme study identifying nationally-significant places in American labor history. This law was sponsored by Congressman Michael McNulty, the

Urban Parks such as Riverspark carry a vast educational potential to interpret and bring before the American people the subject of labor history. Riverspark reminds us that while previous generations of American workers accepted the Industrial Revolution, they did not necessarily accept the harsh conditions and lack of human dignity brought on by employment in the mills and factories of America. The men and women who worked in the textile mills of Troy and Cohoes, New York were deeply committed to their vision of an industrial America in which technology was harnessed for human needs and the American ideals of democracy and freedom were guaranteed for all to enjoy. Riverspark commemorates not only a chapter in the American labor history but also illustrates the continuing American struggle for human rights.

The history of the textile mills of Riverspark, and of the men and women who worked in the mills, is an important story that should generate self-esteem in these communities and pride for the nation. Textile mills were central to the development of the industrial might of the United States. The struggle of the mill workers for union recognition, decent wages, and safe working conditions was reflective of the desire of the American worker for social justice, equality, and economic opportunity. The men and women who came to the mills of Troy and Cohoes, New York were seeking a part of the American dream. They wanted high-paying jobs and the opportunity to work and support their families. The mills gave them this opportunity. In the struggle to unionize they changed the industry and re-defined the American dream.

Through the implementation of the *Labor History National Historic Landmark Theme Study*, Congress intended that concerned groups working with the National Park Service should begin discussions with leaders from local communities to develop strategies to assist these communities in the preservation and interpretation of their locally-based but nationally-significant labor history resources. It is the intention of the National Park Service to see that this is done in a manner that will acknowledge the national significance of the labor history inherent in these sites and respect other issues involving local pride, and the nature of our federal and state form of government. The resources associated with the textile mills in New York offer an insight as to what is possible. The challenges are great but rewards resulting from the preservation and interpretation of these sites are worth the effort.

—Harry A. Butowsky

former mayor of the village of Green Island and Riverspark commissioner, and Senator Patrick Moynihan.

This study has led to National Historic Landmark nominations for the Harmony Mills Complex and the Kate Mullaney House. The Commission is considering the creation of three interpretive districts: the Harmony Mills areas to focus on the company town experience; the area around the Mullaney House to focus on the story of the only “bona fide female union in the country” and the related movement to create a cooperative laundry; and South Troy to focus on the iron molders. Much of the physical fabric from the 19th century has survived in these areas where people continue to live and work.

The Commission is looking forward to broadening its circle of partners to include the National Park Service in its efforts to preserve and interpret the resources associated with worker history. Models for partnership approaches like the National Heritage Corridor as well as Riverspark’s

own unique experiences with partnerships can be used in providing a partnership approach for national recognition for the nationally-significant resources in Riverspark.

Riverspark’s experience with partnerships reveals the park as a focal point for an ongoing process where everyone with a stake in its resources can benefit by participating and thereby advance the common good. This experience shows no precise formula for partnership parks other than the value of applying a lot of thought, planning, and commitment to the resources that make a special place special.

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Cheryl Brown Henderson

Landmark Decision Remembering the Struggle for Equal Education

In December 1993, the Trust for Public Land transferred Monroe Elementary School in Topeka, Kansas, to the National Park Service for the new Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site. This first unit of the national park system to be named after a famous court case will commemorate the landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision that outlawed racial school segregation in the United States. The Monroe School, which was closed in 1975 as a result of declining enrollment, will be refurbished with plans to reopen the building to the public in 1998 with exhibits that interpret its significance in the struggle for civil rights. In the following article Cheryl Brown Henderson reflects on the history and meaning of the new park — both to the nation and, more personally, to her family, for whom the court case is named. Henderson is president of the Brown Foundation for Educational Equity, Excellence, and Research, established as a living tribute to the attorneys and plaintiffs of the Brown case. The foundation provides scholarships to future teachers, programs on multicultural understanding, and support for research in educational equity.

Nearly three quarters of a century after it was built, a two-story red-brick school building in Topeka, Kansas, has come to symbolize the triumph of the human spirit. The work that brought this site from obscurity into the consciousness of the American people has been a labor of love for the family of the Reverend Oliver L. Brown and other longtime Topeka residents. My mother began school at

Monroe as a first-grader in 1927. My sisters, Linda and Terry, attended Monroe, as did their children after them. Finally, in 1972, I began my own teaching career there, a few years before the school closed due to declining enrollment.

Each member of our family has his or her own memories of Monroe. Mother remembers days begun with a pledge of allegiance and a morning prayer. Linda and Terry recall an atmosphere in which no less than your best was