

Interpreting American Industrial History: The Lowell National Historical Park's General Management Plan—An Overview

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In August, 1981 Lowell National Historical Park officials released the General Management Plan (GMP) which will govern "interpretation and visitor use, cultural resources management, and general development" within the Park. Significantly, the Plan also depicts cooperative agreements and technical assistance available to meet Park goals. The Plan's implementation will take place in a phased development over the next ten years with the GMP also serving as the long-range guide for Park interpretation and management.

Congress created the Lowell National Historical Park (LNHP) by providing for an historical/cultural park at Lowell, Massachusetts, an industrial city of 92,000 approximately thirty miles northwest of Boston. The concept of Lowell's urban park emerged in the early 1960s when a Model Cities community group suggested Lowell's rehabilitation through a rediscovery of its impressive history. By 1972, the Lowell City Council had approved an "historical park" theme for all future rehabilitation and city and state officials forged a unique partnership to promote the park/revitalization concept. In 1975, Congress established the "Lowell Historic Canal District Commission" to devise a proposal which ultimately became the LNHP. In the 1978 "Lowell Park" bill, Congress created a new park managed by the National Park Service but it also established a broader "Preservation District" supervised by a new federal agency within the Department of the Interior, the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission (LHPC).

The LHPC oversees the "human story of the Industrial Revolution in a nineteenth-century setting by encouraging cultural expression" in Lowell but it also offers financial incentives to preserve nationally-significant structures in a manner complementary to park development. The new Park sits in the heart of the Preservation District in an extremely small geographical area stretching from the Lowell Manufacturing Company, down Shattuck to Merrimack Street, down Kirk

to French Street before terminating at the Boott Mills. The principal exhibits will be located at the Lowell Manufacturing Company, Mack Building, Old City Hall, Merrimack Gatehouse, the Kirk Street Agent's (Linus Child) House, H & H Paper Company and a proposed boardinghouse park adjacent to it, Wannalancit (Suffolk) Mills, Tremont Yard, and a large portion of the canal system. Some sites are also situated in the \$10 million Lowell Heritage State Park whose officials, under a cooperative agreement with the National Park Service, are developing a separate but integrated system emphasizing waterpower and recreational use.

This developing partnership between local, state, and federal officials is a notable achievement in itself. The impact upon Lowell is already enormous, and impressive development schemes such as the "Lowell Plan" which projects a \$106 million investment organized by American Cities Corporation, a subsidiary of the Rouse Company, will add further to Lowell's diversified economic base. This complex government interaction and rapid economic development reflect only two of the problems faced by park officials when drafting the GMP. When viewed as an overall management guide, the GMP emerges as an important document—one which successfully incorporates the goals and proper function of a national park dedicated to the Industrial Revolution. It symbolizes the positive effect of federal involvement at the community level and, assuming that a budget-minded Washington sees the proposal for what it represents—a community-based government partnership which works—the GMP deserves full implementation at all levels.

Its success as a general management guide, however, does not preclude some serious interpretive deficiencies. Undoubtedly, many of these deficiencies will be corrected when park officials expand the GMP beyond its schematic interpretive outline. One assumes that a forthcoming interpretive prospectus will demonstrate both specific methods of interpretive treatment and important transitions which a static "issues" outline largely neglects. It is vital that this interpretation avoid discussing distinct "periods" in Lowell's history ascribing specific dates to particular trends in which the transition occurs much more generally over an extended time.

At present, interpretation treats five major themes: power, capital, labor, machines, and the industrial city. Park officials suggest that "these are the chapters in the story of Lowell's unique and representative role in the Industrial Revolution." With the exceptions of "labor" and "the industrial city," they have successfully defined the broad interpretive concepts which characterize Lowell's impact upon the Industrial Revolution; however, the Plan does not provide sufficiently for the raging historical debate in early nineteenth century America over industrialization nor does it identify how Lowell's development as antebellum America's premier planned textile city affects other industries or the tremendous post-Civil War industrialization occurring largely in other fields whose relationship to textiles is less obvious. The Plan also assumes that American industrialization began with the Waltham experiment, failing to account either for the Slater (Rhode Island) system or the industrialization in cities like Paterson and Troy.

The treatment of "labor" and "the industrial city" must be drastically reorganized to correct what historian Mary Blewett correctly determines as a "tyranny of structures." The GMP interprets "labor" by examining mill girls, including the transition from farm to factory, and immigrants. Ethnic history is further divided into "living" and "working" and both are concentrated at the Boott Mills. While it is logical to place immigrant work experiences within the mill, park officials make a serious mistake by interpreting living experiences there. While it is true that work experiences influenced immigrants at work and at home, "living" must be redefined to include developments within the immigrant neighborhood governed by family and, most often, church and/or immigrant associations. These institutions remained separate from "labor" and one potential opportunity for interpretation, a planned discussion of "a city of immigrants" at the Old City Hall suffers from the same deficiencies in location.

This deficiency is particularly important because the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission's "Preservation Plan" strongly emphasizes the "story of people." By grouping living experiences as a subtopic of labor history, the GMP neglects much of the recent work in the so-called "new social history" as well as important topics in ethnic history, for example, the need to develop the theme of immigrant migration to Lowell and the change from European peasant culture to American industrialism. Within the immigrant "living" experiences, important contrasts must also be drawn between the experiences of Yankee farm women and their immigrant successors. More specific treatment of the thousands of immigrant day laborers who helped to construct the mills and power canals also is essential. Fortunately, these deficiencies do not pose an impossible obstacle; the Preservation Commission or other agencies might assist interpretive redevelopment by acquiring, for example, any one of the numerous tenements or workers' cottages within the Preservation District which also lie within old immigrant neighborhoods. By doing so, the GMP would more accurately reflect interpretive development by adopting a position which more closely complements the Preservation Plan.

The theme of "the industrial city" also requires redevelopment. The "industrial city," as presently defined, represents a curious mixture of urbanization, politics, immigration, and decline/revitalization. The planned industrial city was a management decision which would be better relegated to the theme of capital investment. Immigration could be successfully downplayed to include only immigrant political involvement with a fascinating presentation on segregation/discrimination. The themes of "decline" and "revitalization" are concepts better incorporated into overview exhibits at the Lowell Manufacturing Company or the Boott Mills. As the GMP indicates, the Old City Hall exhibit space represents an excellent opportunity to depict commercial development within the industrial city.

With the exception of a plausible exhibit space to depict immigrant living experiences, park officials have all of the resources necessary to develop a magnificent national park celebrating the strengths and horrors of American Industrial History. The GMP represents an important and largely-successful first step at in-

terpreting the story. Although the Plan requires redefinition, park officials have uncovered the broad themes affecting American industrialism and located sites into which these concepts will find expression in Lowell. A redefinition of their interpretive outline will provide a fresh and exciting prospectus which will accurately reflect Lowell's place in American Industrial History yet which will also be broad enough to incorporate revisionist interpretations. The General Management Plan is an excellent management guide and a sound interpretive study; suggested changes will make it a genuinely outstanding model.