

America's newest national park features the second-most-powerful waterfall east of the Mississippi, at the spot where Alexander Hamilton founded the country's first planned industrial city to win America's economic independence from Britain.

Paterson Great Falls National Historical Park is "the most historic site in America that no one has heard of, let alone seen," says Leonard Zax, a Paterson native and retired Washington lawyer who fought to create the park system's 391st unit here.

So why do critics, including some congressional Republicans such as Rep. John Campbell of California, call it a "pork park" — a parochial economic development scheme?

The battle over the park, authorized by legislation signed by President Obama this spring, reflects two competing views of how to run national parks:

- An already overextended National Park Service needs to focus its limited resources on maintaining existing parks, not adding new ones.
- The Park Service needs to reach people with whom it has had little contact, including urban residents, immigrants and racial and religious minorities such as Muslims.

Hamilton founded Paterson in 1792 at a 77-foot-high waterfall on the Passaic River, the most powerful cataract east of Niagara Falls. He envisioned a model for American economic self-sufficiency, a place to establish the primacy of immigrant-powered manufacturing over the slave-based agriculture practiced in Thomas Jefferson's Virginia.

Paterson became the site where Samuel Colt built his first gun mill and John Holland built the first motorized submarine. Its mills produced more locomotives than anywhere else in America, more silk than anywhere in the world.

If "national park" suggests grizzlies and glaciers, Paterson today — a gritty, dense, impoverished city of about 145,000 — may seem an odd site.

The Great Falls historic district struggles to attract visitors. Signage is inconsistent or poor — the sign on the interstate from New York is covered with graffiti — and, given Paterson's narrow old streets, "it is difficult to find the place," says Gianfranco Archimede director of the city Historic Preservation Commission.

Visitors might be deterred by worries about crime, real or imagined, Archimede says. On an episode of *The Sopranos*, a drug dealer was "thrown to his death" from the narrow footbridge over the chasm at the falls. After recent non-staged crimes, such as shootings, elsewhere in Paterson, the City Council is considering a temporary late-night curfew for all residents.

People here believe the Park Service can help change perceptions. Archimede says the designation is an assurance of quality, "like any brand name. People know what to expect at a national park, if it's Death Valley or the Statue of Liberty or Yellowstone."

Critics, however, say Paterson's economic plight doesn't justify a national park when the system faces an annual operating shortfall of \$600 million and a deferred maintenance backlog of about \$8 billion.

In 2006, a park service study recommended against making Great Falls a national park, noting that the system already had lots of waterfalls and old factories. When the park proposal came before the House in 2007, California's Rep. Campbell wrote in a blog post that it was "blatantly counterproductive."

Rep. Bill Pascrell, D-N.J., a former Paterson mayor, sponsored the bill that overrode the Park Service recommendation. "There's a prejudice that the only national parks should be out there in the wilderness," he says. The Park Service can bolster its public support — and overall attendance, flat over the past eight years — by opening units near people who'd never think of visiting one, he says.

It will take several years and millions of dollars before Great Falls looks like a national park; there won't even be ranger programs until next year. Since the designation, though, the site has received many more visitors.

Robert Marshall, a retired public works director from a nearby suburb, had often driven past the falls, but until last month he'd never seen it up close.

"I didn't know you could park and walk around here," he says, standing on the footbridge across from the falls. Then Marshall professed confusion over the national park designation: "The park service seems to be talking about laying people off, and they're adding a park here."

As if to illustrate the debate, along came Hamid Amer, his wife and three kids. All seemed mesmerized by the falls. None had ever set foot in a national park. Amer, a Palestinian barber who moved his family to the USA five years ago from the West Bank, voiced concern over the amount of trash on the ground and in the water and said he thought the Park Service could clean it up.