

An Overview of the History of the
City of Passaic, New Jersey
by, City Historian, Mark S. Auerbach in 1998

Part I

One hundred and twenty-five years ago on Wednesday, April 2, 1873, an act to incorporate the City of Passaic was signed. As we celebrate 125 years as an incorporated city, we also celebrate 320 years of existence, as the area of modern day Passaic was originally settled in 1678 by Dutch pioneers. The following overview of the history of the City of Passaic is based upon information from many different sources and even to this day numerous facts are questioned and debated as to their accuracy and or validity. Please keep in mind that over a long period of time historical facts tend to become distorted, embellished, exaggerated and in many cases outright falsified. With this said, it is the hope of this writer that you will enjoy the following brief overview.

On April 4, 1678, a Dutch settler and trader, Mr. Hartman Michielsen (later Vreeland), purchased a "great island in the river of Pasaick near by Aquickanucke by the Indians called Menehenicke (translation of the Dutch from the original deed)." The island came to be known as Dundee Island and today that area is known as Pulaski Park and Dundee Island Park. Between 1679 and 1684-1685 deeds and patents were acquired between the original settlers and the native Americans, the Lenni-Lenapi, that secured for the original settlers the land including and surrounding modern day Passaic. In October of 1693 the Township of Acquackanonk was created in the northern part of Essex County. In February of 1837 the County of Passaic was created from parts of northern Essex and western Bergen County. In 1854 the Village of Acquackanonk took the name of the river that it bordered, Passaic. By the late 1860's the Village of Passaic was steadily growing in population and commercial and residential size. This growth was mostly due to the completion of the Dundee Dam and Dundee Canal in July of 1861. The vastly enlarged and now abundant fresh water supply became the basis for the industrial boom that would fuel Passaic's rapid growth. Coincidentally, between April 2, 1873 and exactly five years later, a series of Acts, enacted by the Village of Passaic, terminated in its incorporation as a city. The last half of the nineteenth century and that part of the twentieth century before World War I were great growth years for Passaic's numerous factories, mills and mom and pop businesses. The population growth during this time was over ten fold and peaked in the 70,000's during the decade after World War I.

Some of the more memorable factories/mills that attracted and employed a vast majority of Passaic's citizens were The Botany Worsted Woolen Mills, The Forstmann Woolen Mills, Passaic Cotton Mills, The Gera Mills, The McLean Cotton Mills, Brighton Mills, The Waterhouse Mill, The Acherson & Harden Manufacturing Co., The Okonite Company, The Pantasote Company, U.S. Rubber Company, Manhattan Rubber Company, Paterson Parchment Paper Company, J.L. Prescott Company, Reid and Barry Co., Passaic Print Works, The Dundee Power and Water Company, The Falstrom Company, Pitkin & Holdsworth Company, Jacques Wolff & Company and many more too numerous to mention but all equally important. Passaic has always been a city of immigrants and always will be. After the original Dutch settlers of the latter seventeenth century, came the English, the Scottish, and a small but varied mix of mostly Western Europeans following the American Revolution. The first half of the nineteenth century saw the arrival of the Germans, Irish, more English, Scandinavians, Austro-Hungarians (i.e. those from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire which included Ruthenian, Slovak, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, Hungarian and other heritages) and a mixed group of political émigrés from all over Europe. The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the arrival of more Germans, Irish, and a small influx of African-Americans, mostly former slaves. The last fifteen years of the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of the great waves of immigrants that would populate Passaic and all other industrial cities in America.

Large numbers of immigrants came from Italy, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Austria-Hungary, and lesser numbers came from virtually every other county in Europe and points beyond. After World War I Passaic saw a migration of Southern Blacks to our city, as did most other industrial northern cities. After World War II, Passaic saw an influx of Puerto Ricans, the first Hispanic group to come to our city in any numbers. In 1956, during the Hungarian revolt, many Hungarians came to Passaic to join their relatives and friends. Since the 1970's many Hispanic immigrants from Central America, South America, Mexico and the Caribbean Island countries have chosen Passaic as their home, to make a new start and share in the "American Dream." As I have stated before, we will always be an immigrant city. The religious history of Passaic is as diverse as any great city in the world. The Dutch (Protestant Reformed) came here first in 1685, then in the middle years of the nineteenth century came the Methodists, the Episcopalians, the Presbyterians, the Protestants, the Catholics, (both Eastern and Western Rite), the Eastern Orthodox, the African Methodist Episcopalians, the Baptists, the Jews, the Lutherans and a host of other religious denominations that more often than not were originally part of the afore-mentioned groups.

The population of the City of Passaic started along stretches of the Passaic River for the obvious reason of transportation. As the city grew in size, the first population concentration was in the area of Prospect Street and Main Avenue as this was close to the landing and beginning in 1831 the newest mode of transportation was the railroad (horse drawn until 1834). With the advent of waterpower for the factories the city needed to expand its housing stock for its citizens, so in rapid order the Eastside or Dundee section quickly filled up. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the current First and Fourth Ward areas started to build up. The Hill Section of Passaic, the homes of the captains of industry and the

wealthy, started to spring up in the middle 1870's and peaked by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. The Second Ward area of the city started to rapidly develop in the beginning of the twentieth century and became a predominately Italian and Jewish area until the end of the 1940's. The Third Ward was the last to physically develop as it was "too far" from the rest of town to be desirable. Today, Passaic, a city of 3.25 square miles of which 1.25 square miles is parkland is a very densely populated city, especially in its First, Second and Fourth Wards.

The City of Passaic today has fourteen public schools, which includes one high school, one middle school, a learning center, and eleven elementary schools. Our educational history in Passaic has been one of excellence in education for the better part of one hundred and thirty years. Everybody who has ever attended school in Passaic will always identify with their neighborhood elementary school. Jefferson #1, Washington #2, Franklin and/or Mario P. Drago #3, Lincoln #4, Lincoln Junior High or Middle School #4. Harrison #5, Lafayette or Martin Luther King #6, Grant #7, McKinley or Pulaski #8, Columbia or Etta Gero #9, Roosevelt #10, Memorial or William B. Cruise #11, Woodrow Wilson #12, Passaic High School, School #13 and School #14. Passaic has a proud history of parochial schools. Pope Pius XII High School is no more but fondly remembered. St. Nicholas Roman Catholic, Mount Carmel Roman Catholic, St. Anthony's Roman Catholic, St. Michael's Greek Catholic (Byzantine), Holy Trinity Roman Catholic, St. Joseph's Roman Catholic, St. Mary's Slovak Roman Catholic, St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic, St. Stephen's Magyar Catholic, Hillel Academy, Yeshiva K'Tanah and others have or still do contribute to the fine education of our city's children.

PART II

Movie houses were an integral part of the Passaic landscape for many years and just their names conjure up many great moments for many of us. The Palace on Market Street was a longtime memory for the immigrant groups that crowded our city's eastside for several generations. The original Montauk, on the corner of Madison Street and Main Avenue was a famous vaudeville theater until replaced by the current building in 1924 (it was a fine family movie theater). The Capitol Theater, on Monroe Street, was originally a vaudeville house and then a movie theater. Most will remember it for the great rock concerts under the ownership of John Scher. The Central Theater, the site of the legendary Glenn Miller's last American performance in September of 1942, was in its day the finest theater around. On opening day in September of 1940 the entertainment was Charlie Spivack and his band, the Andrews Sisters and Moe, Larry and Curly; also known as The Three Stooges. The Rialto, on Lexington Avenue, had a storied life. It was later called the Lincoln Theater, the Lexington Theater and finally, the Fine Arts Theater. Last but not least is the Playhouse on Main Avenue (currently the home of Home Liquors). It was a fine movie theater but it too started its life with vaudeville and live stage shows.

Previously, I touched upon the railroad coming to Passaic in 1831. It was originally horse drawn and people of the time preferred horse drawn as opposed to steam driven, an unknown and obviously dangerous advance in transportation. By 1834, all the trains were powered by steam engines and the future was here. Originally, the train ran from Passaic Bridge (Aycrigger and Main Avenues) to Paterson (near Grand Street.) Eventually, the success of the railroad for both passengers and freight caused its expansion south to Jersey City and north to upper Bergen and Passaic Counties and west to Morris County and to points beyond. In the later 1890's the time to mid-town Manhattan was the same as it is today, 100 years later. The train lines that ran through Passaic over the years were the Erie, The D.L.&W. (The Delawanna, Lackawanna & Western, now the New Jersey Transit Line in the Park), the Susquehanna and the Bergen Short Cut (still there). Over the years the City of Passaic has had several names. Acquackanonk was its first as it is believed to be either the name or a variation of the name used by the native Lenni-Lanapi Indians (there are over 200 different spellings known for Acquackononk). Acquackanonk Bridge was the name used by General George Washington in a letter he wrote from here on November 21, 1776 to then Governor William Livingston. In rapid succession we were called Acquackanonk Landing, Paterson Landing, Huyler's Landing (for Mr. Huyler who owned the general store where the train stopped) and finally, Passaic.

Passaic's hospitals are of paramount importance to our city and it is by no accident that we have three fine major facilities in our city. The General Hospital Center of Passaic started life in 1892 as the Passaic General hospital, Saint Mary's Hospital was founded in 1895 behind Saint Nicholas church and moved to the "Hill Section," several years later and Passaic Beth Israel started life as a twelve bed, one floor hospital in 1927 on the second floor of the newly built B'nai Israel Nursing Home on Madison Street. Today, these fine hospitals still serve our city in specific medical areas and both St. Mary's and The General have opened clinics in areas of our city with acute needs for their services. I have purposely omitted the names of prominent citizens of Passaic because I could never name them all and space and time prohibits it. However, several names must be recognized at this juncture. Mr. Charles McKnight K. Paulison, the man most responsible for developing a large area of our city, laying out many of our fine avenues and streets and having the foresight to plan and envision the beauty that our city enjoyed for over a century.

Mr. Alfred Speer, one of the city's early entrepreneurial gentlemen, who in addition to being a successful vintner, inventor, newspaperman, and political figure, gave our city its name. Mr. Benjamin Bogert Aycrigger, the first Mayor of the City of Passaic 125 years ago, who in addition was a fine physician, first president of our Free Public Library and an ardent abolitionist. Last but not least is Robert Dix Benson, a very successful industrialist, politician, president of the Board of Education, builder of the Marocco Funeral Home (former Benson mansion) and the man who was singlehandedly responsible for most of the park lands in today's City of Passaic. The prominence of Passaic's sons and daughters as they left our city to go into the world to make their fortunes is legendary beyond all expectations. Passaic's contributions to the world of sports is second to none. The basketball "Wonder Teams" (six in all) from

December 1919 to February, 1925, won a world's record 159 consecutive games, a record that will stand forever. Passaic has contributed more than her share to the major sports leagues and numerous state champions and championships have been attained by our sons and daughters to this very day. The field of entertainment has been led by our own fabulous Shirelles, Beverly, Shirley and Doris and the late Micki (incidentally, they will celebrate their fortieth year of existence this coming May.) Saul "Porky" Zaentz, the three time Oscar winner from the "Corner of Myrtle and Monroe," Joey Dee, who championed a "real dance craze," and Loretta Swit, the most famous "Lips" in television. The aforementioned celebrities are but the tip of the iceberg as far as our home grown talent is concerned. Scientists, inventors, Pulitzer Prize winners, judges, attorneys, screen writers, educators and virtually every level of success has been achieved by citizens from our fine city.

The Passaic Fire Department has a long and proud history that will be celebrating its 130th Anniversary this coming October. From 1868 until 1909, the Passaic Fire Department was one of the premier volunteer departments in the State of New Jersey. From 1909 to date the paid Passaic Fire Department has similarly been one of the premier fire departments in the whole country. Two records of note are that the Passaic Fire Department was the first fully mechanized fire department in the entire country starting in 1910 and that our second Mayor, Bird W. Spencer, was the founder and first president of the New Jersey State Fireman's Association, which is still going strong over one hundred years later. The Passaic Police Department, like our Fire Department, had its beginnings during our village days and was established between 1870-1871. Prior to 1875, it had various homes in old structures that were considered suitable for the purpose. In 1875, the Police Department found a permanent home on Howe Avenue behind the municipal building, which also housed the Fire Department's headquarters. In 1923, on the site of the original Number 1 School (northeast corner of William and Passaic Streets), a new Police Headquarters was erected with much fanfare. In 1980, the current headquarters, in the City Hall Municipal Complex, were occupied. For 130 years the Fire and Police Departments of Passaic, New Jersey have served, protected and laid down their lives for their friends, neighbors and fellow citizens. We, the City of Passaic, New Jersey, salute you and thank you for helping us through the first 125 years.

No narrative, overview or observation on the City of Passaic could or would have been able to be written if it were not for my predecessors. The first city historian, William W. Scott (Willscott Street) did physically preserve a vast part of what we have in our city historical holdings today. As a practicing attorney, Mr. Scott diligently pursued, preserved, and published a vast majority of our early history in a concise, orderly and accurate fashion that has stood the test of time and challenge. His successor, Mr. Robert E. Bristor, who was the son of a newspaper editor, picked up the baton that Mr. Scott had passed to him and greatly enhanced our knowledge of our past with his incisive and diligent research techniques. The current city historian is still learning from his illustrious predecessors but at the same time is humbly aware that his efforts would not be able without their tremendous scholarly research and "pack rat" habits. Mr. William W. Scott and Mr. Robert E. Bristor, I thank you both very much on behalf of myself, but most assuredly on behalf of the City of Passaic. I have often said that history is an

ongoing entity, that it is truly a work in progress and that today's news is tomorrow's history. All of this is true when it comes to our city. We have demonstrated over many, many years that we are the best, that we produce the best, and that if you want to be the best then come join us in Passaic. Passaic, New Jersey is a microcosm of America, from the colonial experience to urban decay, but with one vast difference, we are here to stay, bigger and better than ever before. To the Citizens of Passaic, new Jersey; I salute you and wish you a very healthy prosperous and joyous 125th anniversary to you and your children and your children's children. Thank you for the honor of being your historian.