

George Washington picnics at Great Falls, July 10, 1778

On this day in history, July 10, 1778, George Washington picnics at Great Falls with the Marquis de Lafayette and aides Alexander Hamilton and James McHenry. The Great Falls, on New Jersey's Passaic River, is the second largest waterfall by volume in the United States east of the Mississippi River. It sits approximately 20 miles northwest of New York City. Washington and his entourage dined in the shadow of the falls shortly after their victory at the Battle of Monmouth, on their way to the north of New York City where they intended to monitor the British army.

James McHenry was originally a surgeon in the Continental Army, but was asked to join Washington's personal staff at Valley Forge. He later became the 3rd Secretary of War under President Washington. McHenry wrote of the meal at Great Falls:

"After viewing these falls we seated ourselves round the General under a large spreading oak within view of the spray and in hearing of the noise. A fine cool spring bubbled out most charmingly from the bottom of the tree. The travelling canteens were immediately emptied and a modest repast spread before us, of cold ham, tongue and some biscuit. With the assistance of a little spirit we composed some excellent grog. Then we chatted away a very cheerful half hour – and then took our leave of the friendly oak – it's refreshing spring."

Alexander Hamilton took note of the power of the falls. Years later, as Washington's first Secretary of the Treasury, he developed a plan to harness the falls' power to kick-start an industrial revolution in the new United States. Hamilton's plan became the Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures, a state sponsored corporation that developed the falls into an industrial powerhouse.

The State of New Jersey founded the corporation, along with the city of Paterson, New Jersey, adjacent to the falls, in 1791. Pierre

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Charles L'Enfant, the designer of Washington DC, was recruited to develop a system of raceways to harness the power of the falls for watermills to be built in the town. Raceways are canals used to carry water back and forth between the mills. By 1815, thirteen new mills were built in the town, employing over 2,000 people. For decades, Paterson was the center of cloth manufacturing in the United States.

By the 1830s, cloth manufacturing in the US was in decline and the Great Falls area shifted to producing locomotives and other steel products. This industry thrived for several decades, until the silk industry supplanted it in the 1880s, earning Paterson the name "Silk City."

The Society for Establishing Useful Manufactures played a large part in America's Industrial Revolution. It became a model for future public/private partnerships in the United States. Unfortunately, in recent decades, as manufacturing shifted overseas, Paterson's industry saw great decline and urban decay. Today, the city of Paterson, the State of New Jersey and the federal government are making strides to see the former industrial area surrounding the Great Falls refurbished into parks, apartments and retail establishments.