

Not-so-old man river

Retired teacher explores the mighty Passaic



EMILY BROWN/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

The Passaic River makes a dramatic transition at the Great Falls in Paterson, above, on its 81-mile journey. The river crosses seven counties and 45 municipalities.

By **RICHARD COWEN**
STAFF WRITER

The Passaic River has meant many things to many people during its 11,000-year run past the fields, farms, factories and flood plains of northern New Jersey.

To Philip Jaeger, the Passaic is living history.

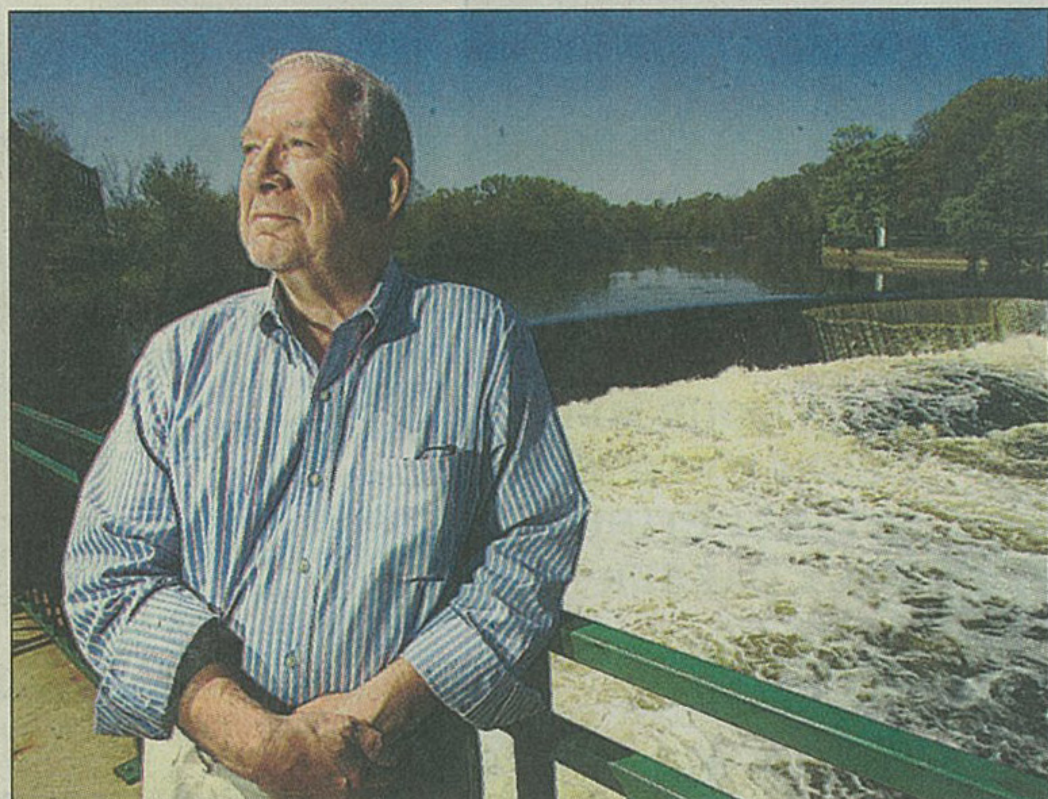
Jaeger, a retired math teacher from Cedar Grove, has an abiding fascination with the 81 miles of meandering river that crosses seven counties and 45 municipalities before emptying into Newark Bay. Retirement gave him the time to explore the Passaic from top to bottom, and what he found is contained in a slide show, "The Passaic River: 81 Miles of History," which he recently presented to the Passaic County Historical Society.

To Jaeger, the Passaic is kind of

a crooked timeline that charts America's birth as a nation and its rise as an industrial and military power – and the disasters that followed, such as pollution that fouled the river and the frequent floods that continue to wreak havoc on overdeveloped areas. Just three weeks ago, the river rose to its highest level since 1984.

To the Lenni-Lenape Indians, the "Pahsayek" – which means "valley" – was the giver of life, with water to drink and food to eat. To Alexander Hamilton, the river was the source of power, the key to the new nation remaining independent of England following the American Revolution. To the poet William Carlos Williams, the polluted Passaic of the industrial age would become "the vilest swillhole in Christendom."

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THOMAS E. FRANKLIN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Philip Jaeger in Little Falls. The amateur historian explored the Passaic, from its headwaters in Mendham to Newark Bay in Jersey City.

Fast facts

The Passaic River touches seven counties: Passaic, Bergen, Morris, Essex, Hudson, Somerset and Union.

It twists and turns, flowing north, south and east. The river is 81 miles long, but as the crow flies, it is only 27 miles between the headwaters in Mendham and Newark Bay in Jersey City.

The river was formed 11,000 years ago when a glacier retreated.

Passaic

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"To me, the river represents an endless sequence of events," Jaeger said. "It's the water that fed the livestock and then provided the food. Then it's the water that powered the mills, and the mills that built the cities."

"The river represents life," said Ed Smyk, the Passaic County historian. "Civilizations all over the world take root in cities, and cities are built around rivers."

Jaeger considers himself an amateur historian, but says the idea to explore the Passaic River had as much to do with his appetite as it did with his passion to learn about the past.

He and his wife, Jean, originally set out to write a book about historic places to dine in New Jersey. They kept crossing bridges over the Passaic River during their travels. "The Passaic River seemed to be everywhere," he said. "So I decided to take a closer look."

He began his journey on the Passaic River two years ago, alternately exploring by car, on foot, and by boat. (Once, he fell in the river, at a remote stretch somewhere in Morris County, but quickly got out.)

Using a Hagstrom map, Jaeger began by locating the headwaters, lying just beyond a cul de sac behind Lowery Lane in Mendham. The thrill of discovery remains hard to describe two years later.

"The river is no more than 3 feet wide at this point and branches off into two unnamed streams," Jaeger said. "It was every exciting to stand there."

Following history

The headwaters were not far from Jockey Hollow National Historic Park, where George Washington and his ragtag Continental Army spent the miserable winter of 1779-80. And there was a lot more history to follow downstream.

Near Route 46 in Montville, Jaeger discovered the place where Colonial hay farmers had carved the Great Ditch, a canal built to prevent the Passaic River from flooding their fields. Like many more modern flood-prevention plans, it didn't work very well, Jaeger said.

Jaeger says the area around Two Bridges in Lincoln Park was flooded during his visit in September 2005, "but I just didn't have the heart to take a picture of all that suffering."

In Little Falls, he came upon the roaring thunder and whitewater of the Beattie Dam, where the East Jersey Water Co. built the huge fil-



Passaic River historian Philip Jaeger says the first bridge across the river in Little Falls was built around 1850. The single span covered bridge was replaced later by one made of steel. The Morris Canal aqueduct is downstream.

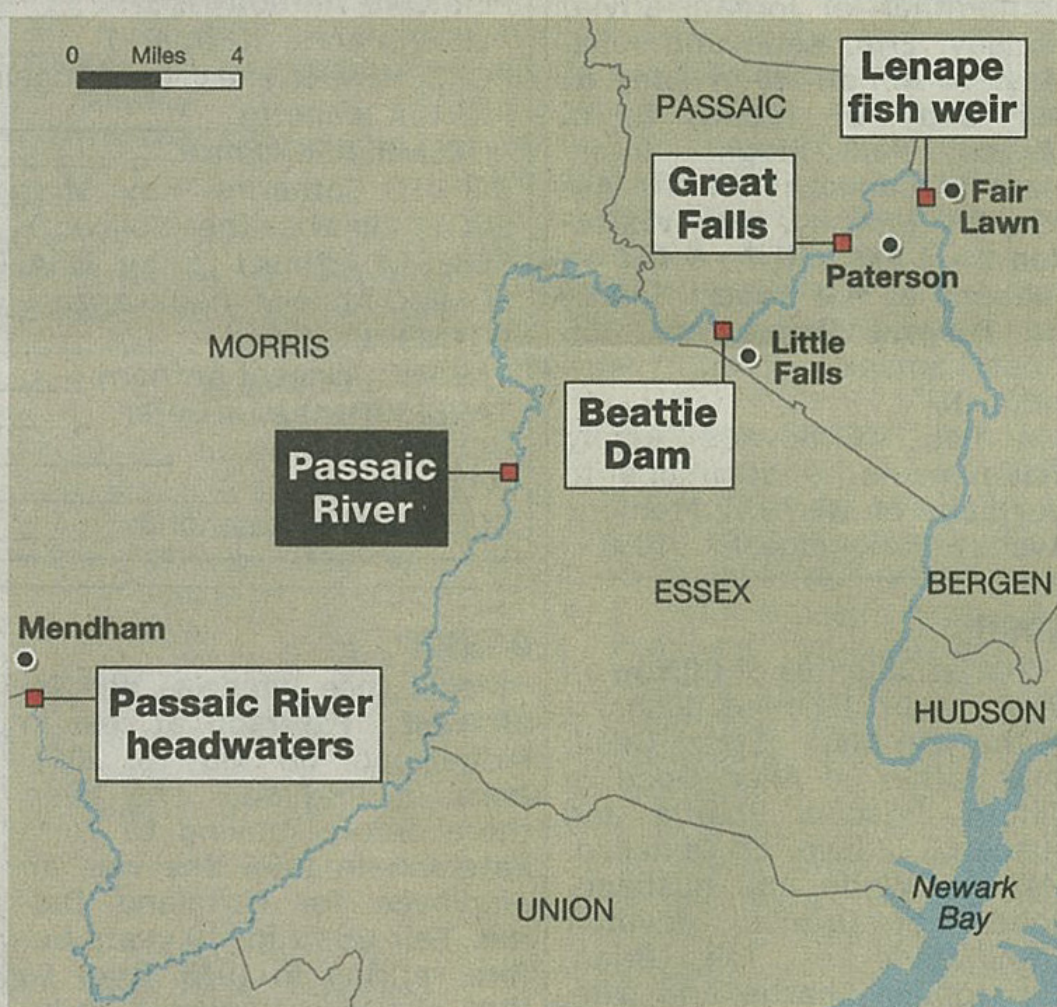
tration plant in 1899 that is now operated by the Passaic Valley Water Commission. The arrival of the filtration plant was both a blessing and a warning of things to come: It was built at a point in the river that was above Paterson, where industry had already fouled the Passaic into the "vilest swillhole" described by the poet Williams in his epic poem, "Paterson."

First sub launch

Paterson would also host the world's first submarine launch by John P. Holland in the Passaic River in 1878. Holland ended up sinking the 14-foot prototype to protect his design from other inventors. The sub lay at the bottom on the Totowa bank of the river until 1927, when a group of engineering students raised it. The submarine is now in the Paterson Museum.

Jaeger's travels also took him to a mysterious spot in Garfield where there is a bear claw and a fish carved in a rock along the banks. There's also an ancient fish weir believed to have been built by the Lenni-Lenape Indians at a spot in the river near the Fair Lawn Bridge. The weir, which is made of boulders to trap fish, can be seen from the bridge during dry periods in the summer months.

Jaeger's travels also took him downriver and into the paranoia of the post-9/11 world. One day he was standing in downtown



R.L. REBACH/STAFF ARTIST

Newark trying to photograph a bend in the river when he was approached by three men wearing suits.

"They were FBI agents," Jaeger said. "The FBI headquarters was nearby and they wanted to know what I was doing. They told me I wasn't allowed to photograph the building."

Jaeger knew his journey – and slide show – wouldn't be complete without the final picture: the point

where the Passaic joins the Hackensack River at Newark Bay, which is visible from a spot on the New Jersey Turnpike.

Click.

Jaeger takes his slide show around to any group that wants to see it. For inspiration, he draws on a line by the writer William Faulkner: "The past is never dead. In fact, it's not even past."

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