

MORRIS PESIN, 1986

A vision, a canoe ride, and the birth of Liberty State Park

It's half a century since his famed canoe ride to Liberty Island, and yet Morris Pesin is still in our midst. As our National Park Service boat departed Liberty State Park on Saturday for a re-enactment of his 1958 trip demonstrating the proximity of Jersey City to Liberty Island, objects appeared and disappeared in hazy horizons. The Verrazano Bridge arcs across the bay, pushing apart Brooklyn and Staten Island as colossal ships pass and seemingly pose under her steel-meshed belly. A quick glance up the river reveals Manhattan, its swelling skyline lost in a hovering smog.



John Gomez
Legends & Landmarks

are joined by Jersey Journal reporter Paul Koepf and LSP Superintendent Josh Osowski, rowing through stubborn currents toward Liberty Island.

Precisely 50 people — Pesin family members, friends, advocates, the press — are overtaken by silence as a small hand-paddled skiff passes our boat. Sam and Judy Pesin, Morris's children,

Our boat picks up speed, and Liberty State Park's great web of sycamore trees recedes. Within seconds the park is out of reach.

I look straight back at Morris's launch site and imagine what he once witnessed. Fifty years ago, what is now Liberty State Park was a scorched and slimed swath of industrial earth back-dropped against the Statue of Liberty — a national monument so close to the Hudson County mainland that it appeared, from a Manhattan vantage point, to be situated not on an island at all but stapled to the blackened bulkheads of Communipaw Cove.

Post-World War II Jersey City and its neighboring waterfront municipalities had evolved into a coastal kingdom of blight brought on by railroad abandonment and factory closures.

While New York Bay continued to bustle with fleets of ferries, shipping containers and tugboats, New Jersey's banks had faded into an embarrassing esplanade of forlornness. Piers, wharves, cranes, terminals, access roads — all had become enveloped by neglect and entropy, as if that fate were written into Hudson's annals and nothing — no one — could transform it into a cherished destination.

Except Morris Pesin, a former lawyer who ran a modest children's clothing store on Bergen Avenue and who one day in 1957 left with his family from their Van Nostrand Avenue home and unknowingly embarked on a journey that would lead to a pivotal piece of America.

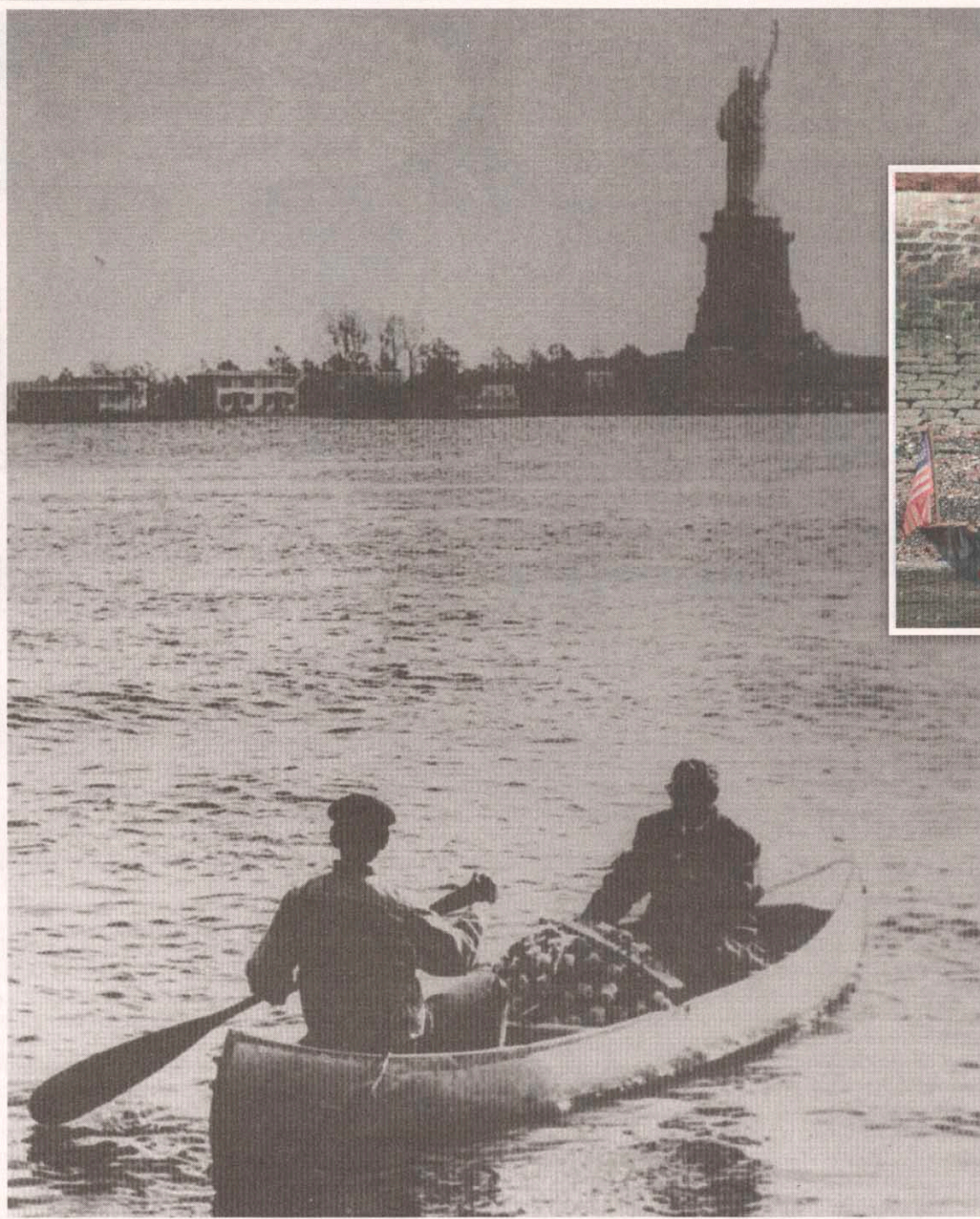
AN AMERICAN ODYSSEY

Morris's urban odyssey began that day when he struggled with his family through Manhattan traffic jams and nightmarish lines to visit the Statue of Liberty. Agitated, he peered across the river at Jersey City and saw, all at once, a vision of an urban Eden on the wracked

shore.

Over the next year, Morris raved to everyone about his vision, his idea of transforming the uninhabited waterfront — used exclusively by the railroads for more than a century, tax-free, and, in the end, abandoned and left to rot — into a green open space that would provide respite and a new, easier means of accessing the island.

A suggestion by The Jersey Journal prompted the canoe ride by Morris and reporter Tom Durkin to demonstrate the proximity of the statue and the seriousness of Morris's idea. A few weeks later Morris was standing before the City



MORRIS PESIN, facing camera, recreates his 1958 publicity stunt in 1961, canoeing from Jersey City to Liberty Island to show how close the Statue of Liberty is to what is now Liberty State Park.

Commission (the precursor to today's City Council) with an outline of his park idea, detailing its costs, design and purpose.

He called for a park as an extension of the Liberty and Ellis Island national monuments. Ahead of his time, he called for a museum of immigration in the new park. (It was eventually established on Ellis Island.) He called for changing the perception of Jersey City as a metropolis of filth and decay to one of national pride.

But Morris's odyssey would not be brief. Despite positive response and press, Liberty State Park took 18 years to realize.

On June 14, 1976, Morris

watched as a street lined with tall poles holding international flags led visitors into a picnic area and large lawn — once the site of the slimed earth he had spotted across the river.

Liberty State Park soon opened, and a national initiative to restore Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty was launched. A commission headed by Lee Iacocca helped raise restoration funds and educate the public about the significance of the two sites. Morris played a pivotal role and was recognized in 1985 with a volunteer award from President Ronald Reagan.

FAMILY REUNION

Standing on the boat, pointing

my video camera at the landed skiff, I contemplate this moment and sense its deeper meaning.

When Sam and Judy step off that slim skiff, they are not only recreating a moment already decreed historic — they are reaching out to their late father, rowing to the sandy Statue of Liberty shore to reunite with him as he had been when they left, half a century before, their Van Nostrand Avenue home.

EDITOR'S NOTE: John Gomez, founder of the Jersey City Landmarks Conservancy, graduated last month from Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation. He may be reached at historyrules1999@gmail.com.



SAM PESIN, below left, cheers after reaching the shore of Liberty Island on June 14 in a re-enactment of his father's 1958 canoe trip from Liberty State Park.

BYRON SMITH JOURNAL PHOTO

GET MORE ONLINE

See John Gomez's video documentaries of the re-enactment, a photo gallery and more coverage at:

nj.com/hudsoncountynow



LIBERTY STATE PARK is now enjoyed by more visitors each year than any other state park.



FILE PHOTO



MAYOR JERRAMIAH HEALY presents Sam and Judy Pesin with a proclamation honoring their re-enactment of their father's canoe ride.