

# A New Book, 'Liberty State Park,' Tells the Story of Our Most Famous Greenspace

The Jersey City Times by [Tris McCall](#) June 27, 2025

Liberty State Park feels eternal. It feels inevitable, too. Most Jersey City residents can't remember a time without it. Why *wouldn't* there be a grand, dramatic greenspace overlooking the Hudson River, the Statue of Liberty, and the Manhattan skyline? Urban planners and civic leaders could hardly have messed that one up, right?

Well... not so right, as it turns out. The big park south of the Morris Canal Basin was not an inevitability. For decades of railroad control of the Jersey City waterfront, it was closer to an impossibility.

As **Gail Zavian** reminds us in "Images of America: Liberty State Park" [Arcadia, 2025], it wasn't merely that the Park wasn't there for most of the history of Jersey City. Most of the *land* that the Park was built on didn't exist until the twentieth century. Liberty State Park took a lot of digging, a lot of dealing, a lot of disinfecting, and a tremendous amount of determination to become the place we now know it to be.

Over 127 pages — almost all of which are decorated with archival photographs — Zavian tells the story of the transformation of a waterlogged estuary flat that she describes as a "decayed postindustrial wasteland" into the beloved, bucolic acres that we currently know. Liberty State Park, she concedes, had certain advantages, including proximity to New York City and an ecosystem filled with colorful plants and charismatic animals. But the area also required environmental cleanup that exceeded the capacity of the municipal government to do, and, just as toxic to the dream of the park, politicians and businesspeople who saw the waterfront as a prime target for commercial development. Greenspace advocates had to outflank entrenched interests to make the Park a reality. It took the combined effort of a hundred community groups and the passage of the Clean Water Act and other regulations to get the job done.

Such a massive effort has established a pantheon of Park heroes. You probably know their names. They're inscribed on the landscape — roads and monuments are named for them. Zavian's book gives us a rare glance at their faces. We see Morris Pesin, the activist often called the father of the Park, on the 1958 Hudson canoe trip that demonstrated our closeness to Ellis Island and Lady Liberty and increased public faith in the feasibility of LSP. Historian J. Owen Grundy, bow tie loosely fastened and gray hair spraying out from beneath a broad-brimmed black hat, looks the part of the proud, crusading writer with the future of his city on his mind. Preservationist Ted Conrad, the builder of the first Park architectural model, is as soulful as a priest in his suit and tie; Audrey Zapp, the environmentalist who worked with the state Green Acres program to buy land for the LSP from the railroads, appears, blueprints in hand, in a staggering shot on a flotsam-choked pier.

Zavian does nothing to disguise her immense respect for her subjects. Her captions are passionately laudatory. We're told that Friends of Liberty State Park founder John Tichenor,

shown smiling behind a big Santa-white beard, was a steward of exceptional vigilance with “eyes alert to anything requiring care and attention, his heart always ready to speak with anyone about the wonderful blessings this much-needed park provided.” Is this a little much? Probably. But the proof of the massive achievement of the Park champions is right there, in soil, grass, trees and clean water, at the end of Zapp Boulevard. It’s hard not to wonder what Zavian thinks of our current community leaders, operating at a time when cooperation is scarce, grant money is drying up, and the federal government has turned downright adversarial to environmentalists. Do we have the goods, the smarts, and the perseverance to come together and create something as grand and glorious as LSP?

We’d have to begin by remembering that city greenspace is, ironically, unnatural. It requires design, maintenance, and fierce guardianship. As Zavian shows, Liberty State Park, verdant though it may seem, is a thoroughly human creation — as shaped by constructive forces as Journal Square or the PATH system. Old maps reprinted in the book show where the shoreline used to be; astonishingly, in the nineteenth century, the site of the Science Center, now a good fifteen minute walk from the Hudson, was underwater. The railroads are often the villains in the Liberty State Park story, but they did their part, filling in the estuary with new earth and industrial detritus, and padding out the city map in the process. Many of the most spectacular photos in “Images of America: Liberty State Park” are the ones taken just before the cleanup and conversion to usable greenspace. The low, broken sheds, leaning telephone poles, disused warehouses, heaps of bricks and oil drums, and thoroughly unnecessary “Keep Out” signs testify to the amount of work that the Park demanded.

Park stewards also had to turn to the task of coaxing wildlife back to a once-poisoned shore. This, too, required guidance from environmentalists and scientists, sweat from birdhouse-builders and flower-planters, and money from the public. Once in the Park, the nonhuman denizens are carefully watched, weighed, and balanced against each other. Hawks are enlisted in the pest control effort. Even the flowers, Zavian tells us, are picked to keep the deer population in check. This constant oversight — the sense that the Park is, fundamentally, a human place, part of the urban tapestry — is reinforced in the captions. A turtle cannot lay her eggs without a reminder that Park staff is making sure she can do her reproductive business unmolested.

“Images of America: Liberty State Park” doesn’t have much to say about current debates over the fate of LSP’s undeveloped land. Yet Zavian implicitly puts our current batch of would-be privatizers in the context of a decades-long struggle to keep big business out of the Park. The Big Apple photobombs picture after picture of the Park area (it still does), exerting not-so-subtle pressure to join the commercial rodeo. It must have occurred to the Park’s founders — just as it occurs to us now — that there are more lucrative uses for these acres than the ones we’re putting them to. Yet in plain view of the heart of international capitalism, Liberty State Park remains a place where an urbanite can go, for free, and never see an advertisement, or a logo, or evidence of corporate sponsorship, or a passionate entreaty to buy anything. It’s taken a heck of an effort to defy gravity like that. It’ll take even more to keep this oasis unspoiled.

*(Gail Zavian’s website — [gailzavianphotography.com](http://gailzavianphotography.com). The author promises plenty of photos of LSP in all four seasons. “Images of America: Liberty State Park.” is available at Amazon and other booksellers.)*