

The use of "Indian Ladders": Early Technological Advancements as Tourist Attractions at the Niagara Gorge

By Jessica Linzel

When visitors first came to Niagara in the 1700s, whether as tourists or for business purposes, they used the main trails of the time. At first, these roads were difficult to navigate, so the feats of human engineering that made them more accessible became part of the attraction that people would recount to friends and colleagues when they returned home.

The improvement of the portage along the western shores of the Niagara River benefited trade and commerce primarily, but also made the travel route more accessible for visitors. A few visitors in the late 1700s spoke of the improvements to the American portage, with the invention of a device called "The Cradles" in the 1760s which acted as one of the first inclined railroads in the area, mainly used to haul goods up and down the steep mountainside.

Similarly, the Haudenosaunee inhabiting the lands around the Niagara River crafted trees into makeshift ladders to climb in and out of the Niagara Gorge. Accounts from the late 1700s, written by European travelers, describe these as thin cedar or pine trees with severed branches, naming them "Indian Ladders."

Eventually, bridges were built over the Niagara River, providing the Canadian side of the tourist industry with a steady supply of American visitors. The first of many impressive suspension bridges over the falls was an oak plank roadway suspended from iron cables constructed in 1848 along the narrowest part of the Niagara Gorge.



"Indian Ladder" at Table rock on the Canadian side.
Courtesy Niagara Falls Public Library.

Below are a few primary source references to these “Indian Ladders” by various tourists to the area in the late 18th century.

We were obliged to make use of an Indian ladder, which is simply two straight trees which, with their tomahawks or hatchets they cut notches at twelve (12) or fifteen (15) inches from each other. In these notches you put your feet and by this means we got to the bottom...

—Hector St. John de Crevecoeur (1785)

There was a rude Indian ladder to descend to the rocks below—160 feet—Which our traveler availed himself of, and after having satisfied curiosity, the party again remounted their steeds and pursued their course back to Niagara.

—John Clark (1791)

Some of our company descended the mighty hill, by the clefts of rocks and the help of Indian ladders, to the water below, supposed one hundred and ten feet.

—American Quakers visiting Pelham (1793)

I was so delighted with the sight of the Falls from this spot, just above what is called the “Indian ladder,” which gives so different a view of them from what I saw at the Table Rock that I am determined to return here again... Mr. Pilkington having been desired to put one or two short ladders to make the descent easy from rock to rock by the side of the ‘Indian ladder,’ which is a notched tree, we got cut to-day, determined to make our way to the bottom of the rocks below the Falls.

—Elizabeth Simcoe (1795)



Portrait of Elizabeth Simcoe
by Mary Anne Burges, 1790.
Courtesy Toronto Public Library.

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