

A History of Tourism in Niagara, Pre–1969

Introduction

Tourism is a key sector in Niagara's economic policy today and the region's development as a world-class destination dates back to the 1800s. Tourist attractions include physical wonders like Niagara Falls, feats of engineering like the Welland Canal and hydroelectric generating stations, agrifood tourism associated with Niagara's wine and tender-fruit industries, and historical attractions such as the military forts.

The Niagara tourism sector has also been purposefully nurtured with the establishment of cultural attractions such as the Shaw Festival, sports events like the annual Henley Regatta, and nature tourism along the Bruce Trail which traverses the Niagara Escarpment and its conservation areas. All these sights, and more, draw more than 13 million visitors each year to the region, thus requiring transportation infrastructure and accommodation. At the same time, these attractions provide jobs and income to people and businesses in the region.

This paper will focus on the significant aspects of Niagara's tourist industry from its earliest days until 1969. Each category will explore important developments and highlight how the tourist industry changed over time. Niagara's unique geography, with its ample water access, temperate climate, and strategic location on an international border, made it an attractive place for visitors to relax and explore. Over time, the industries and infrastructure that built up in the region attracted families and businesses, and communities grew and expanded throughout the peninsula. Eventually, attractions such

as hotel spas, luxury accommodations, sporting events, agricultural festivals, campgrounds, 1812-heritage sites and amusement parks added another layer of amenities to the tourism sector. Niagara's diversity of offerings proved beneficial through the ebbs and flows of human interest and economic trends, as different parts of the region with their unique settings offered different types of attractions over time—a one-of-a-kind medley of excitement and relaxation.

Commercial attractions at Niagara Falls such as the Burning Springs, the *Maid of the Mist*, and death-defying stunts over the cataract, stand out as some of the key points of interest for out-of-towners. However, for many, the journey was also part of the tourist experience. Trains and ships brought thousands of tourists to the hotels and resorts of Niagara throughout the 19th century, the wonder of such advanced technology itself a treat, enhanced at times with dining options and ornate decoration. Yet by the early 1900s the advancement of automobiles revolutionized the tourist experience along with the concept of "day tripping." This was mirrored by the rise of campgrounds, motels, cabins, and parks.

The sector has been fueled for decades by tourist dollars funneled into the region, government spending on roads and infrastructure, and private investments by eager entrepreneurs. This has created jobs in transportation, hotels and lodging, retail and restaurants, tour operations, performance arts, campgrounds, parks management, and more. It has also helped to diversify the agricultural sector. The following sections will discuss why these attractions became popular and how they developed over time, becoming recognizable as the Niagara we know today.

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Niagara's Lakes, Rivers, and the Mighty Falls

Niagara region is sandwiched between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, with the Niagara River on its eastern border with the United States. It is part of the densely populated Golden Horseshoe, with the industrial city of Hamilton on its western border and Toronto close enough to be a day trip. Americans also make up a significant portion of visitors, with more than three million people crossing the border every year.¹ This location has provided opportunities for individuals to travel by train, ship, and automobile over the years, with each mode of transportation allowing tourists to experience Niagara in different ways.

The region's tourist attractions were embedded in the natural offerings unique to the region including the beaches of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, the incredible Niagara Falls, and the quiet countryside. Niagara attracted entrepreneurs eager to capitalize on its tourist potential, building summer cottages, amusement parks and campgrounds along the lakeshores, and large hotels and tour companies near Niagara Falls. They also built spas, tennis courts, marinas and rowing clubs next to major waterways like the Twelve Mile Creek and the Niagara River.

Indeed, the thundering waters of Niagara Falls are what has made the region an international destination for centuries. Thousands of years ago, Indigenous peoples placed spiritual significance on this place. In the 17th and 18th centuries, these lands were Seneca dwelling spaces and when French and British explorers and fur traders arrived, they in many ways became part of the spectacle. Initially, Niagara's first people were stereotyped as exotic and noble "savages", and eventually relegated by many tourists as a race of individuals not in keeping with Western civilization.

Explorers' accounts of the Falls, like the one in Basil Hall's "Travels in North America," enticed Europeans to visit Niagara. The Falls were, as historian Patricia Jasen calls it, an "icon of the sublime" for members of the middle and upper classes who had the time and especially the money to spend on the high costs of travel before the mid-1800s.² A major tour loop was formed in the 1820s and 1830s called the "Northern Tour", bringing people across the northern United States from New York City up the Hudson River and ending in Canada at Niagara Falls, following what would eventually become the route of the Erie Canal.³

Through the years, in large part due to the grandiose stories told and the accounts written by travellers about Niagara Falls, some people built such an image in their minds that it became common for visitors to leave in disappointment. It was "famous for being famous."⁴ Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde described Niagara as "a melancholy place filled with melancholy people, who wandered about trying to get up that feeling of sublimity which the guidebooks assured them they could do without extra charge."⁵

Developments in transportation aided the growth of tourism at Niagara Falls in the second half of the 19th century because people could now travel by both rail and steamboat as a day trip, rather than needing to spend multiple days. By 1840, Niagara Falls was connected to Buffalo by two steam-powered trains running daily, and the number of visitors to the Falls doubled in just one decade.⁶ What was once a spectacle for mainly the middle and upper classes became more readily available to the working classes from nearby urban centres.

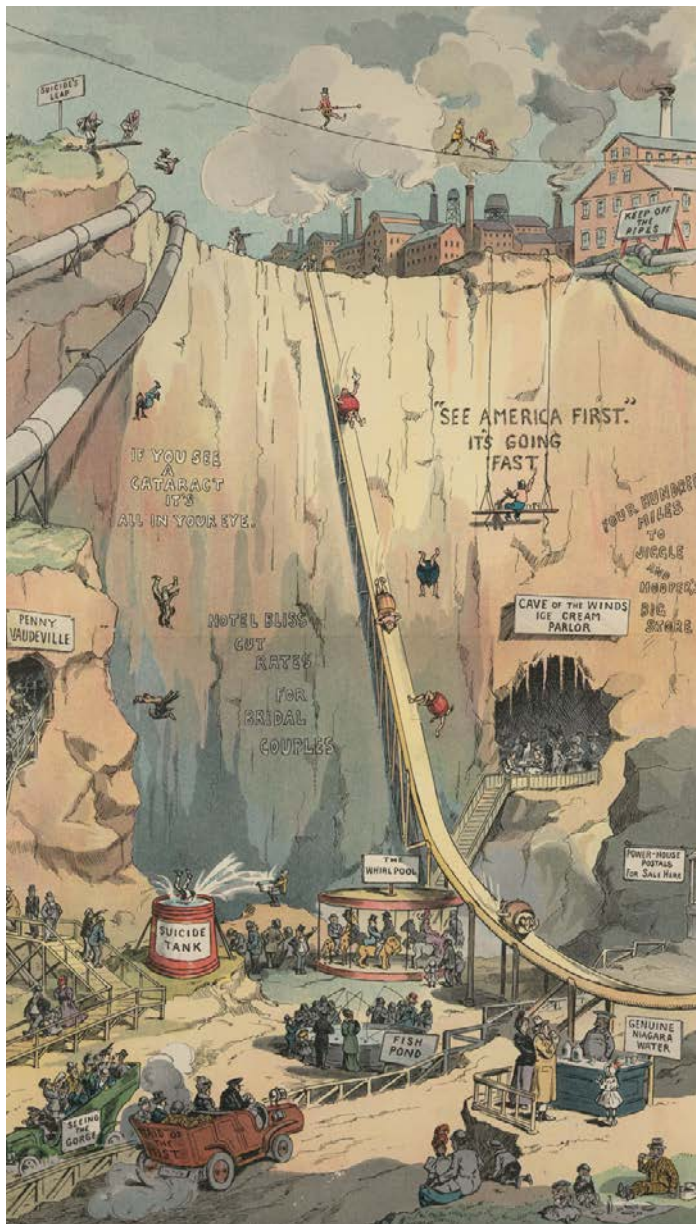
Apart from the Falls, historical accounts talk about Niagara's parks, rivers, and lakes as beautiful venues that attracted many tourists pre-1900. For example, in the 1820s and 1830s, Niagara's moderate climate and rural views attracted visitors from the southern United States who wanted to escape the "sickly season" at home.⁷ During the Victorian era, folks enjoyed spending time out in nature, but in a curated way, which is why parks became popular places for leisure. Queen Victoria Park in Niagara Falls was opened in 1888, becoming one of the first parks opened by the newly formed Niagara Parks Commission.⁸ The Park offered visitors a place to relax and explore adjacent to the Falls, and continues to appeal to tourists today. This was just one of several attractions along the Niagara Parkway, which many celebrated in their travel accounts. One visitor travelling from the Town of Niagara (now Niagara-on-the-Lake) to Queenston in the 1790s remarked:

Nothing can be more romantic than a road that leads from it [Niagara] to a place called the Landing about nine miles distant . . . in the summer evenings, it is the usual resort of those who seek air and exercise and aided by the mild radiance of a setting sun, takes at every open, landscape worthy of the pencil of Claude.⁹

The Niagara River, itself, also offered exciting experiences. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, people came in the winter to witness the formation of ice bridges near the base of the Falls. This spectacle was promoted by the Parks authorities because it was more difficult to bring tourists out during the colder months. Booths sold souvenirs, hot coffee, hard liquor, and photographs.¹⁰

Commercialization

Niagara Falls slowly became more commercialized over time. Sources from the early- to mid-1800s mention the growing number of peddlers, museums, curiosity-shops, taverns, and pagodas—small businesses that appeared as a byproduct of the tourism sector in the area. One of the earliest tourist attractions, for example, was the Burning Springs, a natural gas spring on the Canadian side of the Niagara River above the Horseshoe Falls near the Dufferin Islands. By the 1830s, the Falls was already becoming a popular honeymoon destination. People also came to witness death-defying stunts, and shocking spectacles.



"Save Niagara Falls—From This," 1906 illustration. Courtesy USA Library of Congress.

Hotel Accommodations

Commercialization began in the early-19th century, with hotels playing a significant role in the tourism industry. Hotels were a space for wealthy and upper-class tourists. Some became more than a place of rest but rather a resort destination with activities such as mineral baths and sports tournaments. Niagara Falls was a significant location for hotel accommodations as tourists would often arrive by ship. In 1822, William Forsyth built the Pavilion Hotel, a six-storey building located on Portage Road overlooking the Horseshoe Falls and the American side of the Niagara River. Proximity to the United States was key to attracting American tourists throughout the 19th century.

THE CELEBRATED
BURNING
SPRINGS!

A Great Natural Curiosity situated on the Niagara River, one and one-half miles above the

HORSESHOE FALL
ON THE CANADA SIDE.

This Spring is annually visited by thousands, charmed at once with the sight. The Spring is charged with Sulphuretted Hydrogen Gas, and when ignited burns with a brilliant flame. The Gas is composed from a bed of Coal, Iron Ore, and Sulphur. Sulphur, Iron and Magnesia are the Mineral properties of the water.

IT IS AN INDIAN DISCOVERY, accidentally found by them eighty years ago, shown as a curiosity over fifty years. Close to the Burning Springs is a

Pure Sulphur Spring, but not containing any gas, but its water is of a high Medicinal quality. The drive to the Springs is one of the most delightful around Niagara, being a continuation of Rapids all the way, passing

Cedar Island, Cynthia & Log Islands.

Arriving at the Springs, there is a stretch of the fastest Rapids above the Falls, on either side, running at the rate of twenty-seven miles per hour. All visitors are willing to say that the trip is a complete success, and that the Springs are among the best sights at Niagara.

P. S. CLARK, Proprietor Burning Springs,
NIAGARA FALLS.

Handbill advertising the Burning Springs in Niagara Falls, Ontario. Courtesy Brock University Library Archives & Special Collections.

Upper Canadian hotel proprietors Forsyth and John Brown were both acquainted with hotel owner Parkhurst Whitney in Niagara Falls, NY. They cross-promoted each other's businesses and coordinated transportation over the Niagara River by starting the first regular ferry service in 1818.¹¹ Forsyth took advantage of the early demand for tourist services at Niagara Falls, by building the hotel, offering tours such as a trip behind the Falls, tours of 1812 battle sites, and co-organizing the infamous *Michigan* spectacle wherein he, Brown and Whitney sent a boatful of live animals over the cataract in 1827.

Other hotels began to emerge throughout the Niagara Falls area soon after, marking the early beginnings of commercialization in the area. The three-storey Clifton House was built in 1835, located at the present-day Oakes Garden Theatre. Tourist guidebooks of the early-19th century ensured that visitors could find accommodation, highlighting hotels such as the Pavilion and Clifton House. For example, *Orr's Pictorial Guide to Niagara Falls* from 1842, described the Clifton Hotel as "a large, elegant, commodious, well-finished, and well-furnished hotel, [that] stands on the brow of the bank, near the ferry, and commands a splendid view of the Falls, in which all their majesty and glory are revealed."¹²

Death-defying Stunts

"Existential tourism" is a term used to describe the sorts of experiences that some tourists seek out that allow them to reflect on the reality of life and death and the nature of human existence. A facet of existential tourism in Niagara Falls was the performance of death-defying stunts, such as tight-rope walking over the Niagara Gorge and going over the Falls in a barrel.

The carnival-esque spectacle of the *Michigan* is an example of tourists visiting Niagara for the sole purpose of being "wowed" in a morbid fashion. Somewhere between 10,000 to 15,000 people were said to have come to see this ship full of animals go over the Falls that day in September 1827, including the leader of the Upper Canada Rebellion, William Lyon Mackenzie.

Newspaper sources published after the fact generally condemned the event and it went down in history as a "spectacle of shame" due to the mistreatment of the animals.¹³ This was seen by many historians as the turning point in Niagara Falls tourism towards a newfound "crass materialism."

Performers like Blondin and Farini were famous for their stunts at the Falls in the 1860s, and very much a part of the

commercialization of the area during the mid-19th century. "The Great Blondin", born Jean Francois Gravelot in France, crossed the Niagara River on a tightrope for the first time in 1859 and eight more times after that, once with another man on his back. The Great Farini was a daredevil who performed similar stunts throughout the 1860s, doing it blindfolded and even adding in somersaults.

It was not until 1901 that a schoolteacher named Annie Edson Taylor chose to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel and survived, inspiring many others to do the same. Even the 1940 Niagara Parks Commission tourist guidebook highlighted several of the death-defying stunts of the early-20th century, in a section titled "Feats of Daring at the Falls."¹⁵ This type of stunting is now illegal.



Blondin carrying Harry Colcord on his back over the Niagara River in 1859. Photo courtesy Niagara Falls Public Library.

War of 1812 Military Sites

Another example of existential tourism can be seen in the popularity of military heritage sites from the War of 1812. Niagara was a significant location for the War of 1812, and many historical sites throughout the Peninsula have been restored, protected, and promoted as tourist attractions today. In fact, these places started attracting tourists almost immediately following the war.

Very soon after the War of 1812, the battle sites in Niagara such as Lundy's Lane, Fort Erie, Chippawa, Queenston Heights, and Fort George became part of the tourist route through the region. William Forsyth, the notorious hotel proprietor, promoted these tours through his businesses along the Falls in the 1820s and 30s. Stagecoach drivers even entertained tourists with war stories of Sir Isaac Brock.¹⁶

Early tourist guidebooks emphasized significant locations of the War of 1812, reminding visitors to take some time at the famous sites in Queenston. In the late 19th-century, the Niagara Parks Commission set out to preserve the heritage areas around the Niagara River. Tourist guides in the 20th century continued to highlight locations of the war and the Niagara Parks Commission built on this interest, including with the publication of its information booklet, *A Glimpse of the Places of Scenic & Historical Interest Around Niagara Falls, Canada and Along the Niagara River* in 1940.



Tourists at Brock's Monument in Queenston. Photo courtesy Brock University Library Archives & Special Collections - RG 797.

Indigenous Tourism and Colonialism

Indigenous peoples such as the Attawandaron, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee had hunted, fished, grown crops, canoed and portaged in and around Niagara Falls for centuries. With this knowledge, many of the peninsula's first tourists of European descent came in the hopes of seeing Indigenous peoples in their "natural state," viewing them as wild and uncivilized. With this Social Darwinist view of Indigenous peoples as a quaint, picturesque element of the natural landscape, middle-class urbanites could convince themselves that they were still the superior society in a rapidly changing world. Thus, the tourist industry, as historian Patricia Jasen notes, acted as "yet another colonizing force in nineteenth-century Ontario."¹⁷

Even the Maid of the Mist Corporation, which opened in 1846, was named after a legend falsely associated with an Indigenous myth. Yet, as the tourism industry evolved, so did the relationships between the Indigenous peoples and tourists. The men were sought out as guides and boatmen on a regular basis, while the women participated in the tourist economy by making and selling crafts to the many souvenir-hunters.¹⁸

During the 20th century, Niagara continued to use Indigenous culture and identity for consumerism, such as the Indian Village in Niagara Falls in the 1960s. The Indian Village was a commercial tourist venture, built and operated by three non-Indigenous entrepreneurs to offer visitors a living display of an Iroquoian village.¹⁹ Located on Portage Road in Niagara Falls, the Indian Village featured a reconstructed settlement with Indigenous inhabitants, and offered multiple performances, along with souvenirs and craft sales.

Many of the employees were from the Six Nations, though some were from other Iroquois communities in Ontario, and in later years, non-native high school students were hired as village guides.²⁰ It was challenging for Indigenous people to find employment during this time, and historian Marian Bredin reminds us that "the same colonial agents that organized these living displays were actively involved in the destruction of actual First Nations communities and the incarceration or assimilation of Indigenous peoples."²¹

The Indian Village constructed Indigenous people as objects for tourists to observe, and with emerging Indigenous rights movements during the second half of the 1960s, the popularity of the tourist attraction faded. In 1965, the Marine Wonderland and Game Farm, later known as Marineland, began sharing the same property, and by 1968 the Indian Village had lost significant business, forcing it to close with the land then transferred to Marineland.

Watercraft Tourism

Due to the abundance of navigable water, some of the earliest tourists came to the region by paddle steamers or steamships. Propelling vessels by steam power had become a commercially profitable endeavour that quickly crossed over into the tourist sector. Paddle steamers brought American visitors across the Niagara River to tour the Falls, along Lake Ontario to view the Welland Canal, and docked at the various piers along its shoreline to enjoy the beaches.

The steamship companies of Niagara, including the Northern Tour, the Niagara Navigation Company, the Niagara, St. Catharines & Toronto Navigation Company, Lake Erie Excursion Company (Crystal Beach), and the Maid of the Mist contributed heavily to the influx of tourism in Niagara throughout the 19th and early-20th centuries. By the early 1900s, some steamers dropped off tourists directly at destinations such as the Crystal Beach amusement park in Fort Erie, while others landing in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Port Dalhousie, and Queenston

allowed visitors to use the train stations nearby to travel to a variety of locations throughout Niagara.

In response to tourism, shipping itself changed in terms of health and safety regulations. Now that ships could carry double the number of passengers, this required updated policies and thus, a push for better safety in general marine transportation developed out of the tourism industry.²² However, for most passenger ship companies, the costs became prohibitively expensive, thus signaling the end of an era for passenger cruising by the mid-1900s.

The Northern Tour

Early travellers of the 1820s and 1830s visited Niagara through the “Northern Tour.” Theodore Dwight (1796–1866) was an American author who wrote some of the earliest North American travel guides and provided a detailed description of the Northern Tour in his book, *The northern traveller, and northern tour: with the routes to the Springs, Niagara, and Quebec, and the coal mines of Pennsylvania, also the tour of New England*, published in 1831.



Crystal Beach was a popular destination, especially for Americans who visited by steamboat in the early 20th century. Photo courtesy Fort Erie Public Library.



The Maid of the Mist travelling along the Horseshoe Falls in 1914. Photo courtesy Brock University Library Archives & Special Collections.

During the early 1820s, the American tourist industry was just beginning to develop, with Niagara part of the first tourist circuit.²³ Steamboats allowed tourists to enter the British side of Niagara, but there was a lack of access to other areas of the region besides Queenston and Niagara Falls. Dwight's guidebook encouraged tourists landing at Lewiston "to devote several days to viewing the Falls of Niagara, the battlegrounds in the vicinity, and perhaps in making short excursions in different directions."²⁴ For those stopping on the American side of the Falls, Dwight emphasized the beauty of the British side, stating,

*...to such, however, as have but a short time to spend in this neighbourhood, it may be strongly recommended to proceed directly to the British side. The cataract on that side is higher, broader, more unbroken, and generally acknowledged to be the noblest part of the scene.*²⁵

The Niagara Falls and Queenston steamboats were significant modes of transportation for tourists, but visitors were restricted by the lack of land transportation outside these areas. Dwight recognized the potential of the tourist industry in Niagara outside of the Falls, writing that one could travel along a seven-mile level sandy road to get between Queenston and Niagara Falls, but that the rest of the countryside heading towards what is now Toronto was worth exploring:

*...the country between Niagara and York, U.C. [Upper Canada], is considered the most beautiful, most fertile, and best cultivated part of the province. It will therefore be worthy of the traveller's attention, as soon as the desired improvements and accommodations shall have been introduced.*²⁶

The Maid of the Mist

The popular *Maid of the Mist* that brings passengers up close to the base of Niagara Falls today on the American side was originally a side-wheel steamboat ferry with twin smokestacks, built in 1846 and capable of carrying people, luggage, mail and cargo as well as a stagecoach and horses if necessary.

During the 1820s and 1830s, only small boats were transporting people across the Niagara River. Dwight's 1831 book, *The Northern Traveller*, describes the ferry that crossed the river at the Queenston-Lewiston border, stating, "the passage is not dangerous, although the water is much agitated by counter currents and changing whirlpools; for the ferrymen are taught by their experience to manage the boat with care."²⁷ The *Maid of the Mist* became a convenient way for passengers to travel with their luggage across the river, but with the completion of the suspension bridge in 1848 between Niagara Falls, Ontario, and Niagara Falls, New York, the ferry became strictly a tourist attraction.

Like today, tourists in the 19th century were in awe of the Falls, and some recorded their thoughts in travel journals. One example of this comes from Stephen Baker's travel journal, in an entry dated "Thursday [August 17], 1848, 8 o'clock":

*...went on board the steamer 'Maid of the Mist' and passed within two nods [knots] of the highest Falls, the boat trembled exceedingly from the effect of the fall of water, and the spray was thrown over us so as very much to alarm some of the female passengers. It is impossible to describe the effect produced on the mind by this greatest of natural curiosities. It was truly magnificent.*²⁸

The *Maid of the Mist* steamboat operated along the Niagara River for around a century until the first modern diesel-engine version was built in the 1950s. It remains a popular tourist attraction into the 21st century.

Navigation Companies of Niagara

During the late-19th and early-20th centuries, navigation companies began to establish regular steamship routes for tourism that stopped throughout Niagara, bringing visitors from Buffalo, Toronto, and other locations throughout Ontario. Steamship travel businesses, like the Niagara Navigation Company, operated from 1878 into the early 1900s, carrying freight and passengers between Toronto, Niagara-on-the-Lake, and Lewiston.²⁹

The interior cabins of their paddle steamers, with names such as *Cibola*, *Chippewa*, and *Cayuga* were fitted with mahogany wood and electric lights and had opulent decoration in their dining rooms and main cabins. This method of luxurious travel was affordable to the middle classes as well, and passengers were encouraged to play a game of cards on the deck, enjoy a beverage, watch the scenery, and hop off at Niagara to grab a train to the Falls to see the rapids.

At its height during the summer months, as many as 26,000 daily passengers from Toronto and its surrounding areas would take part in this travel. The years around the turn of the 20th century were also some of the busiest for the fruit growers who were shipping peaches and other tender fruits out of nearby ports along Lake Ontario in the summer. This made Niagara-on-the-Lake an extremely busy place for steamer traffic. This excerpt from one young couple provides a good picture of what this may have looked like:

*Like hundreds of other young couples, my wife and I, in our courting days, made the Saturday afternoon trip on the Chippewa a regular journey in the summer. My wife's mother would pack a fine lunch and we would eat our meal on the top deck while at the docks at Lewiston or Niagara-on-the-Lake. There we would watch peaches being loaded before the trip back to Toronto in the evening.*³⁰

During the early-20th century, the Niagara Navigation Company included four steamers during the height of the season, "making eight round trips daily (Sunday excepted), between Toronto, Ont., and Lewiston, N.Y., via Lake Ontario and the Niagara River, calling at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., and Queenston, Ont. The trip occupies about two hours and a half."³¹ Other navigation companies travelled to and from Niagara, carrying visitors from the U.S. and other parts of Canada.

Niagara was just one stop along the "From Niagara to the Sea" tour operated by Richelieu & Ontario Navigation Company, which was formed around 1890.³² This tour brought travellers from Niagara to Toronto where they could hop on another paddle steamer towards the Thousand Islands and other ports along the north shores of Lake Ontario, offering a transfer once again at Prescott and a ride through the Lachine Rapids into Montreal, eventually on to the Saguenay River.



Originated around 1890 by the Richelieu & Ontario Navigation Company, "Niagara to the Sea" soon became one of the most famous travel slogans in North America. Courtesy Toronto Public Library.

The *Lakeside*, the *Garden City*, and the *Dalhousie* were also popular vessels that operated between Toronto and Port Dalhousie in the early-20th century. In 1899, the Niagara, St. Catharines & Toronto Railway (NS&T) began developing one of Canada's largest interurban railways and established the Niagara, St. Catharines & Toronto Navigation company in 1901. Those arriving in Port Dalhousie by steamboat were able to board the NS&T railway and travel to a variety of tourist destinations throughout the Niagara Peninsula. Both steamboats and railroads worked together during the early-20th century to offer tourists a convenient and entertaining journey, thus increasing tourism throughout Niagara.

The Niagara Navigation Company, the Richelieu & Ontario Navigation Company, and the Niagara, St. Catharines, & Toronto Navigation company all went out of service during the 1920s and 1930s due to the growing popularity of the automobile. Rather than spending the same time on a steamboat, individuals and families preferred riding in their own vehicle to Niagara's tourist destinations. Also, the Great Depression was a contributing factor to the lack of consumers and travellers, shutting down passenger steamboats, as well as railroad service in Niagara.

The Lake Erie Excursion Company (Crystal Beach)

Owners of tourist destinations, such as John Rebstock of Crystal Beach in Fort Erie, understood the importance of transportation and used steamboats to bring groups of people in the summer months to the local amusement park. In 1907, Rebstock sold the assets of the park to the Lake Erie Excursion Company (LEEC), which operated large passenger steamships on Lake Erie, and brought visitors over from the United States.³³

Soon after the LEEC gained control of the park's assets, the construction of twin steamers began. The *Americana* (1908) and *Canadiana* (1910) were built with a combined capacity of 7,000 passengers.³⁴ The park owners built a dock that would allow the steamers to drop off passengers arriving from New York. The *Crystal Beach Guidebook*, published in 1922, outlines transportation to the park, stating, "Crystal Beach is reached by the sister boats, 'Canadiana,' and 'Americana,' starting at 6:45 a.m. and nearly every hour until 11:30 p.m."³⁵ Most visitors to Crystal Beach arrived by steamship, but after the building of the Peace Bridge in 1927, many tourists travelled by car.

While boats, ferries, and steamships were extremely popular for a time, the eventual rise of the automobile in the 20th century contributed to the end of the era of steam travel for tourists in Niagara. Like the railroad companies

of Niagara, steamships also lost significant business due to the Great Depression, whereby many individuals could no longer afford to vacation.

Railway Tourism

Just like steamships, trains were popular for tourist travel from the 1830s into the 1930s. The development of railroads allowed greater numbers of tourists to travel into the Niagara region. As early as 1840, Niagara Falls was connected to Buffalo by two daily steam-powered trains, increasing the number of visitors from 20,000 in 1838 to 45,000 in 1847.³⁶ Summertime became a popular season for tourism, increasing the number of trains stopping at Niagara, and by the 1890s there were 92 daily trains that stopped during the summer months.³⁷ The railroads of Niagara were ever-changing. Some of the most significant trains that focused on tourist travel included the Erie & Ontario Railroad, the Great Gorge Trip, and the Niagara, St. Catharines, and Toronto Trolley Lines.

Erie & Ontario Railroad

In 1831, Niagara businessmen Robert Hamilton, George Forsyth, John Burtch, and Archibald Cunningham formed the Erie & Ontario Railroad Company, successfully building one of Canada's first railroads. The Erie & Ontario Railroad began construction in 1835 and began operation on July 3, 1845, running from Queenston to Chippawa. The "trains" were horse-drawn rail carriages with doors on each side, carrying about 20 passengers with their luggage stored on the roof, moving along at 13 kilometres per hour.³⁸ The railway began at Queenston depot, known today as York Road and Front Street, continuing to the next stop on Concession 2 (Stanley Avenue) at Ferry Road (Ferry Street) where passengers travelling to America would transfer to a stagecoach that would take them to the *Maid of the Mist* dock.³⁹

The railway conveniently stopped at locations that would allow for easy transfers and picked up passengers coming off steamships. The next stop on the original Erie & Ontario Railway was at the Chippawa terminal, a dock along Chippawa Creek known today as Front Street and Norton Street. That was a stop where steamboats from Buffalo brought visitors to Niagara Falls each day.⁴⁰ Due to weather conditions and lack of tourists, the railroad did not run during the winter months.

In 1853, the railroad was relocated closer to the Niagara River and rebuilt for steam-powered trains, and by 1854 extended from Queenston to Niagara-on-the-Lake. Passengers from the steamers on Lake Ontario entering Niagara-on-the-Lake now had access to transportation

throughout Niagara. In 1863, the railway was extended to Fort Erie and Buffalo, NY. Three daily trips running from Buffalo to Niagara-on-the-Lake were offered by 1873.⁴¹ Over the years, the railway changed ownership, also becoming known as the Fort Erie Railroad Company in 1857, the Erie & Niagara Railroad in 1863, the Canadian Southern Railway in 1878, and the Michigan Central Railroad by 1882. The Canadian Southern Railway built two main stations in Niagara Falls, known as the Clifton Station and the Niagara Falls Station, or better known as “Victoria Park Station.”

The Canadian Southern Railway also offered a 15-minute stop for visitors to enjoy the view of the Falls. Famous tourists such as the Prince and Princess of Wales took a ride on the former Erie & Ontario Railway. Indeed, in 1901 the future King George V and Queen Mary boarded the Michigan Central train in Niagara-on-the-Lake, at the stop located at the intersection of King and Front Street.⁴²

However, the railway would not outlast the growth and convenience of automobiles, terminating passenger service during the 1920s. Transportation of passengers from Fort Erie to Chippawa ended in 1925, and the following year from Niagara Falls to Niagara-on-the-Lake. The former Erie & Ontario Railroad was later used throughout Niagara for transporting troops to Toronto during the two World Wars and remains today as the Upper Canada Heritage Trail.

The Great Gorge Trip

One of the only experiences of its kind was the Great Gorge Trip, not only allowing more tourists to travel to Niagara Falls, but also providing travellers with some of the best views of the Niagara Gorge, Whirlpool, and Falls. In the early 1890s, The Commissioners for the Queen Victoria Niagara Falls Park (now the Niagara Parks Commission which continues to own and maintain parkland along the Canadian side of the Niagara River), along with American businesses, began developing electric railways with hopes of attracting more visitors.

The Niagara Falls Park and River Railway company, granted by The Commissioners, built an electric railway from Chippawa to Queenston in 1893, successfully carrying 354,000 passengers during its first season.⁴³ The next year a second track was built, and by 1895 the line extended to Slaters Dock (north of Navy Island) allowing passengers from Buffalo’s steamships to use the railway.⁴⁴ On the American side, in 1895, the Lewiston Electric Railway had built a similar line that ran from Niagara Falls to Lewiston travelling up and down that side of the Niagara River with only 213 metres being flat ground.⁴⁵

Both lines were convenient modes of transportation, as well as popular attractions that allowed passengers to view the Niagara River and Whirlpool rapids. In 1902, the two lines were merged with the purchase of the railways by the International Railway Company and were combined into the Great Gorge Route. The route started in Niagara Falls, NY at the Gorge Terminal where passengers paid \$1.00 to board one of the 38 electric trolleys that ran from May to September. The passengers would then journey across the Falls View Bridge into Canada, following along the top of the gorge to Queenston, stopping to meet incoming ships from Toronto, and then proceeded to cross the Queenston-Lewiston Suspension Bridge into the United States. The trolleys descended to the water’s edge of the gorge and ended in Niagara Falls.⁴⁶

While a magnificent experience, the route was also dangerous due to weather, erosion, and falling rocks. Many fatal accidents occurred during the early years of the 20th century. On July 1, 1917, heavy rain caused a trolley to derail and plunge into the Niagara River at the Whirlpool Rapids, killing 12 passengers.⁴⁷ After further erosion to the track during the first half of the 20th century, as well as a lack of passengers due to the Great Depression, the Great Gorge Route was closed on September 10, 1932. All that remains today are nature trails along the gorge on the American shoreline.

Niagara, St. Catharines & Toronto Railway

Throughout the 19th century, many railroads sporadically covered areas of the Niagara region. The Niagara, St. Catharines & Toronto Railway (NS&T) purchased many of these existing lines during the late-19th and early-20th century to create an electric interurban empire. The NS&T was incorporated in 1899, purchasing the St. Catharines, Merritton & Thorold Electric Street Railway (SCM&T) the same year. That extended from Niagara Falls through Thorold to St. Catharines.⁴⁸ In 1900, NS&T purchased the Niagara Falls, Wesley Park & Clifton Tramway, a four-mile-long horse-drawn streetcar line that was electrified in 1900.⁴⁹

The last line purchased was the St. Catharines Street Railway, originally built in 1879 as a four-mile-long horse-drawn line but was later extended six miles through Merritton to Thorold in 1882, and one mile to Port Dalhousie town line in 1883. It was renamed the Port Dalhousie, St. Catharines & Thorold Electric Street Railway and electrified in 1887.⁵⁰ This line was purchased by the NS&T in 1901. The railway included a 75-mile (around 120km) track, including

car shop, railyards, industrial spurs, and double-tracked lines, and was one of the largest interurban systems in Canada.⁵¹ The track covered much of the Niagara Peninsula, stopping through areas such as St. Catharines, Thorold, Merritton, Port Dalhousie, Niagara Falls, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Welland, Fonthill, and Port Colborne.

From local street cars to freight trains, the NS&T offered tourists and travellers a convenient way to access the Niagara region and, in doing so, increased traffic to tourist attractions. In 1909, the NS&T Railway published a travel book titled *The Garden of Canada*, describing the experience of a passenger on the railways, outlining the many tourist attractions customers could see throughout Niagara, as well as the train and ship times. The book emphasized the railway experience by stating,

“...through this glorious country, from east to west, run the track of the Niagara, St. Catharines & Toronto Railway, a road equipped with splendid rolling stock, and remarkably well built, affording the tourist and traveller a trip to be remembered.”⁵²

The NS&T Railway claimed it was the most direct route between Buffalo and Toronto, providing “hourly service between Port Dalhousie and Niagara Falls, N.Y., in either direction.”⁵³ Some of the tourist attractions highlighted in the book include Niagara Falls, the Niagara Gorge, Queen Victoria Park, the Welland Canal, the mineral springs of St. Catharines, the beach of Port Dalhousie, and significant locations of the War of 1812 such as Beaver Dams and Decew House in Thorold.

THE NIAGARA PENINSULA			
RATES OF FARE BETWEEN			
		One Way.	Round Trip
Niagara Falls, N.Y., and Falls View and Lundy's Lane	- - - -	\$.25	\$0.30
Niagara Falls, N.Y., and Stamford	- -	.25	.30
Niagara Falls, N.Y., and Thorold	- -	.40	.55
Niagara Falls, N.Y., and Merritton	- -	.45	.65
Niagara Falls, N.Y., and St. Catharines	- -	.50	.70
Niagara Falls, N.Y., and Port Dalhousie	- -	.55	.80
Niagara Falls, N.Y., and Toronto	- -	1.30	2.05
Toronto and Port Dalhousie	- - - -	.75	1.25
Toronto and St. Catharines	- - - -	.80	1.35
Toronto and Buffalo	- - - -	1.65	2.55
St. Catharines and Buffalo	- - - -	.85	1.20

Applicable fares for the Niagara traveller, 1909. Screenshot taken from the book *The Garden of Canada*. Courtesy Brock University Library Archives & Special Collections.

The cost for travellers on the NS&T varied by route, with the longest route from Toronto to Buffalo costing \$2.55 for a round trip in 1909.⁵⁴ Similar to other passenger railways, the Great Depression heavily affected the number of tourists travelling. With fewer jobs and fewer riders, the NS&T needed to cut costs. In January of 1931, buses replaced passenger rail service between St. Catharines and Niagara-on-the-Lake, and then replaced the line between St. Catharines, Merritton, and Thorold, in May of the same year.⁵⁵ By 1940, the main line that ran from St. Catharines through Thorold to Niagara Falls was suspended (only used during wartime measures) and the NS&T Railway ceased to exist by 1960.⁵⁶

The railways of Niagara allowed visitors to explore the many parts of the Niagara region with ease. In 1910, Howard Angus Kennedy recorded his travels through the Niagara Peninsula in the book, *Canada's farthest south: Niagara and Lake Erie fruit district, a trip through the famous peach orchards and vineyards of southwestern Ontario*. He wrote,

“...the country is so well served by railways that the roads are not so important as they used to be. And nowhere has a railway been devised more successfully to suit the convenience of a neighbourhood than along this favoured belt between the “mountain” and the lake.”⁵⁷

The railroad lost popularity due to the convenience of the automobile. Tourists were now able to follow their own schedule by using the automobile, with the freedom to visit the destinations of their choice.

Feats of Engineering as Tourist Attractions

Invention and Improvement at Niagara Falls

When people visited Niagara, they traversed the main network of trails in the region. 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 relay to their friends back home. For instance, the improvement of the portage along the western shores (Canadian side) of the Niagara River benefitted trade and commerce primarily, but it also made the travel route more accessible for visitors.

A few travellers 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.⁵⁸

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

Tourists were also curious for a behind-the-scenes view of the Falls—something that people can still do today with the Niagara Parks Commission’s “Journey Behind the Falls” attraction. This view was initially accessed in the early to mid-1800s by a steep stairway. A hydraulic elevator was later constructed in 1887 to bring people to a wooden walkway close to the base of the Falls. Eventually, a tunnel was dug through the rock in 1889 to allow visitors to explore behind or “Under the Falls” as part of the “Scenic Tunnels” attraction. This tunnel was improved upon and expanded a number of times since then, and even served a utilitarian purpose by allowing greater access for power station workers.

Hydroelectric generation was another important tourist attraction at the Falls closer to the turn of the 20th century. Tourists came especially during the summer months to behold these incredible technological feats, amazed by such advancements in the science of hydro power production. Already in the 1890s water was used to power an electric railway travelling between Queenston and Chippawa, driven by a 2,200-kilowatt power plant near the Horseshoe Falls. Incorporated in 1892, the Canadian Niagara Power Company built the Rankine Power Generating Station in 1905 as the most significant attempt up to that date for harnessing hydro power. The generators were based on a design by Nikola Tesla and provided electricity to Buffalo and Niagara. Today, the Canadian side of the Falls has three large power-generating plants that combine to provide almost two million kilowatts of electricity.

The Welland Canal

The original canal opened in 1829 to facilitate the movement of goods to and from inland North America by water—connecting lakes Erie and Ontario via Chippawa Creek (Welland River) and the Niagara River, thus circumventing the Falls and avoiding the necessity of portaging goods from Queenston up to Chippawa Creek.

It became a spectacle of human engineering, gaining popularity along with the Erie and Oswego canals in the U.S. In the era of the paddle steamer, American tourists came across the river to tour the Falls and the Canal on their way to the nearby beaches.

The Canal was featured as a tourist attraction in the NS&T Railway’s 1909 guidebook, *The Garden of Canada*, along with all the other notable destinations of the time, from the Falls and the Gorge to War of 1812 military sites.

Factories and Tourism

Some Niagara factories during the early-20th century ran successful campaigns to attract visitors,⁵⁹ including Shredded Wheat, Niagara Chocolate Factory, and the Spirella Corset Company. Their buildings appealed to an audience who appreciated modern architecture.

In 1904, the Shredded Wheat Company built a factory in Niagara Falls and later opened its doors to the public, advertising itself as “another wonder of Niagara.”⁶⁰ The factory became a popular tourist attraction, with over 100,000 people visiting both the Canadian and United States plants in 1907.⁶¹

The Spanish Aero Car

The Spanish Aero Car was engineered to entertain tourists and provide a mode of transportation to the Great Gorge Railway Route. In 1913, a group of Spanish entrepreneurs proposed a plan for the Aero Car to the Niagara Park Commissioners, and it was approved to run from the top of the gorge at Colt’s Point to the Whirlpool shore opposite, below Thompson Point.⁶²

On August 8, 1916, the project was completed, whereby a car would travel half a kilometre across the gorge, about 250 feet above the Niagara River, along six cables. It carried 40 people.⁶³ The attraction was not so popular in the beginning, as tourism decreased during the First World War and many visitors were frightened to take the trip.⁶⁴ Despite these setbacks, the Aero car remained and continued to improve its engineering. It continues to run today, seasonally from April to November.

Pampering and Indulgence

Many of the tourists arriving in Niagara needed a place to stay for their vacation. Hotels began to spring up in the 1820s, offering wealthy tourists the opportunity to stay in luxurious hotels or resorts. Hotels were built throughout the Niagara Peninsula, many located near tourist

attractions and transportation hubs. One example of such luxury tourism was the Queen's Royal Hotel, established at Queen's Royal Park in Niagara-on-the-Lake and known as a gathering place for the wealthy. Constructed in 1868, it offered leisure activities such as lawn bowling, a casino, tennis courts, and access to the nearby Mississauga Links golf club.



A postcard showing tennis being played at the Queen's Royal Hotel in Niagara-on-the-Lake, c. 1912. Courtesy Niagara-on-the-Lake Tennis Club.

The hotel was visited by the Duke and Duchess of York (the future King George V and Queen Mary) during the 1901 Royal Tour, and it hosted the World Tennis Tournament in 1907. Its hall was used for special occasions and balls, and during the First World War was especially popular with the thousands of soldiers living at the nearby military encampment.

The Queen's Royal Hotel created jobs for many people in town as well, including laundry maids, livery stable owners, farmers and merchants. The hotel closed in 1927 due to the decline in tourism to the region during the Great Depression, and was demolished in 1930.⁶⁵

In addition to the Queen's Royal Hotel, there were other buildings constructed in the late 1800s that added to Niagara-on-the-Lake's status as a tourist town offering luxurious activities. For example, the Prince of Wales Hotel, which still stands today, was built in 1882, and Queen Elizabeth II stayed there in 1973 during her visit to Canada.⁶⁶ Today, the town offers theatre performances at the Shaw Festival, spa treatments, tastings at a variety of wineries, shopping in the picturesque downtown, and high tea at the Prince of Wales.

During the early-20th century, hotels continued to be built throughout Niagara. The development of the railways during the late-19th century and early-20th century throughout the peninsula allowed tourists to visit other areas of Niagara such as St. Catharines, Welland, and Port Colborne. In the case of St. Catharines, hotels were centralized in the downtown core to accommodate tourists. In 1911, the St. Catharines City Directory recorded 12 different hotels. That number fell to nine in 1912, and then increased to 13 in 1916, with new hotels emerging and some businesses closing.⁶⁷

One of those hotels was the Mansion House, built in 1806 by William Hamilton Merritt and originally used as his home and general store before it was converted into a hotel in 1826. The building remains at 5 William Street, St. Catharines but has undergone many renovations and is used as a bar today.

The Welland House Hotel, once located at the corner of Ontario St. and King St. in St. Catharines, was built in 1856 to accommodate the overflow of the nearby popular mineral spa, Stephenson House. During the 19th century, the Welland House Hotel was used as a resort and spa, but with the decreasing popularity of mineral baths, the hotel reinvented itself throughout the 20th century by accommodating to the needs of the community and visitors.⁶⁸ The Welland House Hotel hosted dinner dances, banquets, and celebrations during the first half of the 20th century as a popular tourist destination and place to stay. It burned down in July 2021.

Spa Hotels

Like hotels of the 19th and early-20th century, resorts became a space for accommodation, entertainment, and relaxation, as well as a tourist destination on their own. The mineral springs in St. Catharines can be classified as a feat of human engineering, but they are also in a category of their own as a centre of both medicinal and luxury tourism.

The mineral baths at the Stephenson House spa hotel in St. Catharines, formerly on the southwest corner of Yates and Salina streets, were an incredible feat of human ingenuity. According to an 1864 pamphlet promoting the hotel, the well supplying the water was bored 600 feet into coniferous limestone, capable of yielding 30,000 gallons of water per day. It was pumped up by a steam engine into reservoirs on the summit of the bank of the Twelve Mile Creek. The water was then heated and distributed by pipes to the "Cabinets" in the bathhouse.⁶⁹ The Twelve Mile Creek, in this way, became the cornerstone of engineering tourism in St. Catharines during the 19th century.



St. Catharines Museum, N4229

*Advertisement for the Stephenson House spa hotel.
Courtesy St. Catharines Museum & Welland Canals Centre.*

Between the various spa hotels and the Welland canals, this waterway, unique to Niagara, was vital to so many aspects of the area's economic development, including tourism. Many wealthy tourists visited Niagara's spa hotels, looking for a fashionable getaway. The spa hotels were so popular that some people had to be turned away. While the spas were popular with the elite, they were also accessible to people with more modest incomes. The proprietors of the Stephenson House only opened the space to the public from May to November, but throughout the winter months they still allowed "invalids" to use the cleansing waters within the building.⁷⁰ Some sources referred to the journey to the hotel spas as a "pilgrimage," while other ads portrayed the hotels as a fun vacation spot for the whole family.

In this way, the mineral spa hotels were a tourist attraction for people seeking a variety of different experiences.⁷¹ Spa hotels and health resorts became popular in the mid-to-late-19th century, as people with chronic illnesses, skin conditions, and other medical issues flocked to St. Catharines to experience the mineral springs as a form of physical therapy. People would go to the mineral spa hotels with chronic suffering and be received there by a consulting physician who would offer treatment advice. Hotel spas in St. Catharines functioned mainly as health resorts from 1850 to 1880, as a "prototype for formal medical care."⁷² They eventually closed because of the late-century developments in modern medicine.

Niagara-on-the-Lake

Niagara-on-the-Lake holds a significant place in the history of Upper Canada, playing a pivotal role in its early governance and development. The town was the first capital of the Province of Upper Canada, from 1792 to 1797, and

became a central location for the War of 1812, whereby Fort George attracted many high officials from the British Army.

Niagara-on-the-Lake has made significant changes to appeal to tourists seeking a historical experience, transforming its downtown area and restoring historical sites. It was a prominent destination prior to the First World War due to its luxurious hotels and resorts, but this prosperity was short-lived. In the early 1950s, planning had begun to attract more tourists, especially heritage consumers.

Three significant facilities, Fort George (opening 1950), the Shaw Festival (opening 1962), and the Niagara-on-the-Lake Historical Museum (opening 1962), were established to increase tourism, along with the restoration of historically or architecturally significant buildings.⁷³

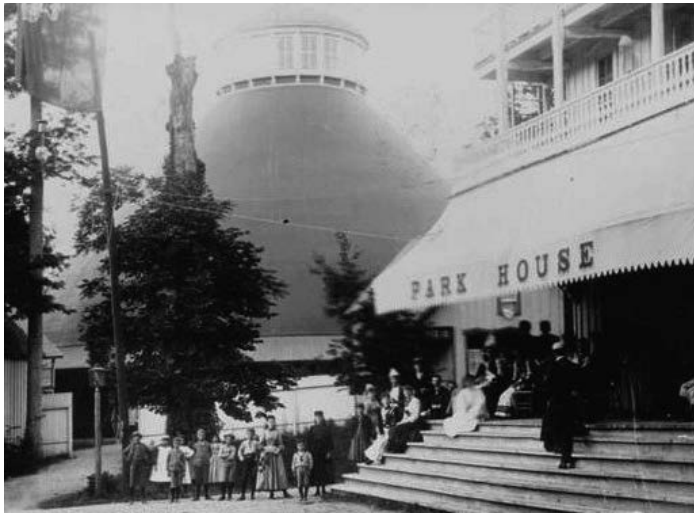
The opening of these facilities also changed the surrounding downtown area. In 1945 there were 45 local businesses in Niagara-on-the-Lake. That increased to 82 by 1969.⁷⁴ Drastic changes were made to rural landscapes, revamping historical sites to attract visitors. The downtown area and the homes surrounding it offered beautiful architectural designs and resembled what most visitors saw as a "historic" landscape, though many of these developments were made in the 20th century. Today, Niagara-on-the-Lake continues to be a very popular tourist destination, appealing to those looking for an aesthetically pleasing and historic town where they can shop, learn, and relax.

Religious Tourism

In the mid-1800s, Niagara had also become a popular destination for religious revivals. These people all contributed to the local tourist economy in the summer months by purchasing food and other necessities from within the communities they were visiting. One prominent example of religious tourism in Niagara prior to 1900 was found at Grimsby Beach, beginning in the 1850s. This land along the shores of Lake Ontario was owned at the time by a Grimsby Methodist named John Bowslaugh. Originally, travelling Methodists would camp at Grimsby Beach during the summer, pitching tents and using the location as a seasonal site for prayer and worship. Eventually, several painted cottages were built in the 1870s to replace the temporary tents and Grimsby Beach became a permanent place for these summer-long gatherings.⁷⁵ The painted cottages can still be seen today.

In 1888, the Methodists in Grimsby built a large temple that stood until 1922, with a dome that was said to have reached 100 feet high and could seat up to 7,000 people. This period was seen as the height of the revival movement.

Grimsby Beach visitors relied on water transportation, with a pier on the beach that allowed ships to arrive from Hamilton and Toronto. The Great Western Railway also built a station nearby.



From 1888 to 1922, the Methodist temple was a prominent feature in Grimsby Park. Photo courtesy The Grimsby Museum.

Many of these Methodists also travelled from outside of Canada to experience camp life in Niagara. Quite a few were from the United States, and this influx of people, most of them middle-class families journeying to the region for the summer, contributed to the leisure class of tourist consumers in the region during the mid-late-1800s. Thanks in large part to this popularity with Americans, Grimsby Beach became known as the “Chautauqua of Canada.”⁷⁶

Travelling Methodists would also stay at places like the Wesley Park International Campground in Niagara Falls. Their ministers preached in circuits to reach as many people as possible, and around this time the Niagara circuit went from Niagara-on-the-Lake to Fort Erie, through Wainfleet and as far west as Long Point. There was also a St. Catharines circuit which included Thorold from 1832 to 1854, and Allanburg became part of a Thorold circuit in 1854 along with Fonthill, Port Robinson, and St. John’s West.⁷⁷

In Niagara-on-the-Lake, the Niagara Assembly was formed in the early 1880s, purchasing a 90-acre property at Mississauga Point and sectioning the land into 500 building lots in a carefully laid out spoke-and-wheel pattern that still exists today.⁷⁸ Hotels were later built, but guests could also camp out in tents on site. In addition to participating in religious services, visitors engaged in leisure activities including lawn bowling, tennis, and croquet. The Toronto and Niagara Navigation Company was instrumental in funneling tourists into the area via their regular steamboat service.

The Rise of the Automobile: Investing in Roads

In the 1920s, a new mode of transportation became popular that transformed the tourism industry: the automobile. The automobile allowed tourists the opportunity to individualize their vacation experience and no longer be restricted to the schedule of the steamboat or railways. The developments made by the Niagara Parks Commission and the building of the Queen Elizabeth Highway (QEW) and other highways throughout Niagara greatly improved automobile travel, but negatively affected the tourist traffic on steamboats and railways.

The municipal and provincial governments recognized the importance of automobile transportation, developing major paved roads throughout Niagara during the 1920s and 1930s. Many of these roadways were the trails established by Indigenous Peoples and are still used today as major trafficways.

The Niagara Parkway

From 1908 to 1931, the Niagara Parks Commission began improving transportation for automobiles between Niagara-on-the-Lake and Fort Erie by building the Niagara Parkway, a 55-km road that follows the Niagara River. The route between Chippawa and Fort Erie was first completed in 1915, with the route from Niagara Falls to Niagara-on-the-Lake completed in 1927.⁷⁹ It was not until 1931 that the Parkway was fully connected from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie. Along this route, tourists could visit a variety of tourist attractions, from the Fort Erie Racetrack to Fort George. The Niagara Parks Commission Annual Report from 1919 reported there was great public interest in extending the Parkway to Niagara-on-the-Lake, stating,

“...the Commissioners have been urged upon many occasions to extend the boulevard scheme of the Park to Niagara-on-the-Lake, and public bodies during the year again requested that the work should be undertaken, pointing out the great necessity for it and the development of tourist traffic that would result.”⁸⁰

Originally, the Parkway was planned to end in Queenston, but Niagara-on-the-Lake businesses, as well as the Niagara Parks Commission, recognized the importance of tourist traffic and the impact of the automobile. During the 1920s, steamboats and railways lost significant business, whereby the Niagara Parkway offered a convenient mode of transportation for tourists with automobiles travelling along the Canada-U.S. border.

Other Roads of Niagara

Before the development of the QEW, regional roads allowed tourists travelling from other towns and cities north of the Niagara region to drive to a variety of destinations. Many of these roads were developed in the 1920s and early 1930s, reflecting the significant increase in road transportation for Niagara tourists.

Highway 8 was a convenient route for tourists travelling from outside of the Niagara Peninsula. Previously known as the Stoney Creek, Grimsby and Queenston Stone Road, Highway 8 can be seen on the Niagara Peninsula map from 1929 all the way from Bartonville in Hamilton, travelling through Grimsby, Clinton, Louth, and downtown St. Catharines, ending in Queenston. In 1918, Highway 8 became the first road to be designated as a provincial highway and was paved with crushed stone in 1920 and concrete in 1922.⁸¹

In 1930, Highway 20 was designed to alleviate the traffic of Highway 8, running from downtown Hamilton to Niagara Falls, via Smithville and Fonthill.⁸² Connecting off Highway 8 was Niagara Stone Road, also known as Highway 55 or historically known as Black Swamp Road. While the roadway did not become an official King's highway until 1970, the road can be spotted on all four of the maps, taking travellers from St. Catharines to Niagara-on-the-Lake. Highway 55 remains a major route today for tourists visiting Niagara's wineries and travelling to Niagara-on-the-Lake. Another significant route into the Niagara region for automobiles was Highway 3, following the Lake Erie shoreline from Windsor to Fort Erie. The Department of Public Highways assumed ownership of multiple roadways between the areas, taking nine years to complete paving. Highway 3 thus remained largely gravel, clay or sand during most of the 1920s. Many routes to Niagara before 1930 required motorists to travel along unpaved roads.

These major routes reflect the growth of roadways during the advancement of automobiles, as travelling by car became a significantly popular mode of transportation that would influence the growth of businesses along highways. Roadways were important for directing tourists towards certain destinations, growing around the popularity of specific areas and attractions throughout the Peninsula.

The Queen Elizabeth Highway

The Queen Elizabeth Highway (QEW) ensured a direct route from Toronto to Niagara, connecting to significant roadways that allowed tourists to journey to Niagara-on-the-Lake, Niagara Falls, and Fort Erie. The QEW was constructed in 1939, alleviating heavy traffic along other

routes from Toronto to Niagara, becoming Canada's first multi-lane highway.⁸³ The highway was significant for improving Niagara's accessibility and enhancing the way tourists were able to travel to more attractions. But it also limited the ways tourists moved throughout Niagara, consequently funneling most activity towards the immediate Falls area.

The development of the highways meant a vast improvement in accessibility for prospective tourists and had major implications for the industry. In the 1950s and 1960s, major developments emerged to attract more tourists outside of the Niagara Falls area, emphasizing longer trips to the Niagara region that appealed to the modern tourist. These included upgrading the Niagara Parks Commission facilities, developing more luxurious hotel accommodations, promoting Niagara-on-the-Lake historic sites, the opening of the Marineland theme park, and promoting Niagara as a wine-making area. Many of these major attractions remain active today, reflecting how the automobile became a significant tool in the growth of Niagara's tourism industry.

New Forms of Accommodation

In the early-20th century, the automobile revolutionized Niagara's tourism sector. Day-tripping and the concept of short-term leisure travel became popular, as families looked for places to go for a swim and take in the quaint scenery far enough from the big city, at a price that was still affordable. Northern Niagara townships received a lot of traffic from around the Golden Horseshoe, and the southern townships catered more heavily to the Buffalo crowd. The cottages that popped up along the Lake Erie shoreline were often summer homes belonging to American citizens, as many are still today, and Niagara's motels, inns, and autocamps (campgrounds) advertised deluxe resort vacations.

Tourist Homes

Residents throughout the Niagara region began using their homes to accommodate tourists as early as the 1890s, competing with the hotel industry. Tourist homes resembled the modern "bed and breakfast," and were a low-cost option in comparison to hotels during the early-20th century. According to historian Karen Dubinsky,

“...throughout the 1920s newspapers regularly reported that, during busy weekends, “hundreds” of private homes were thrown open to tourists, especially when hotels were booked. The first local publication to advertise tourist homes, the Niagara Falls Illuminator, published in 1926, listed fifty-seven establishments, most of them run by women.”⁸⁴



Dr. Levin's Tourist Home (1940-1950), Danby Cottage, Niagara Falls, Stamford, offering rooms for tourists. Photo courtesy the Niagara Falls Public Library.

when many accommodation businesses were struggling due to the Great Depression, enhancing the rivalry between hotel owners and tourist home operators. In the end, tourist home operators managed to continue, bringing in visitors throughout the 20th century and later transforming into what is now known as a bed-and-breakfast or a short-term rental (such as Airbnb). They continue to compete with the hotel industry today.

Campgrounds and Motels

With the growing popularity of the automobile in the 1920s, tourists were more often travelling by car to Niagara, allowing visitors to rest on the side of the road or stay further away from popular attractions. No longer did tourists have to stay in centralized hotels, and visitors even camped in their cars on the side of the road or in farmers' fields. By 1924, privately owned autocamp businesses began to emerge throughout Niagara.⁸⁶



Clark's Tourist Camp, Stamford Centre, Ontario, located on Highway No. 8, about three kilometres from Niagara Falls. Photo courtesy the Niagara Falls Public Library.

Again, hotel owners faced competition, petitioning against the autocamp industry in Niagara to defend hotel business. Autocamps opened travel opportunities to middle- and lower-class tourists due to the low cost of accommodation. Hotel owners argued that they were bringing in the "wrong kind of strange." The owners were inflamed by class and race prejudices that resulted in local council banning autocamps from central tourist areas, forcing them to the outskirts of town.⁸⁷ Autocamps or tourist camps were then located in areas such as Beamsville or along major roadways that led to areas of attraction in Niagara. Tourist camps later offered small cabins, running water, refreshments, and other amenities that attracted visitors. Eventually, autocamps transformed into the more commonly known motels, which quickly developed throughout popular areas.

With more tourists choosing affordable accommodation during times of economic difficulties, the motel emerged as a higher-end option over autocamps but continued to be an affordable option in comparison to hotels. During the post-war period, the motel business model spread throughout Ontario as a popular form of accommodation. Importantly, they were not only affordable, but more accessible than downtown hotels for working-class or middle-class families.⁸⁸ There were no motels in Ontario in 1945, but by 1955 there were 79, and by 1961 there were 115.⁸⁹

Motels were extremely popular and necessary in order to withstand the post-war tourist boom in Niagara. By the early 1960s, Niagara had only one-eighth of the population of Ontario, but 20 per cent of the province's motels.⁹⁰ But by the 1990s, motels were no longer a popular choice and many of them closed.

Cottaging

In the early 1900s, Niagara's lakeshore communities expanded with the construction of more cottages and homes. Some of these housed permanent residents but many of them were simply summer vacation spots, as many remain to this day—especially in the southern Niagara municipalities like Fort Erie, Port Colborne, and Wainfleet. In fact, in Port Colborne, owners of the Humberstone Club had already begun constructing cottages in the 1890s. Founded by Peter McIntyre in 1888, the Humberstone Club became a summer resort exclusively for the wealthy. McIntyre formed a stock company of individuals who purchased plots of land on the 45-acre property. An advertisement from 1897 for the resort, featured in *The Globe and Mail* newspaper states, "there are now some seventeen or eighteen cottages in this colony, costing all the way from \$600 to \$2,000 each and the expenditure each season for wages and supplies alone foots up to \$10,000."⁹¹

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on Lake Erie.

Advertisement for the Rathfon Inn appearing in the Buffalo Courier Express, 1958.

The cottages were built along the shore of Lake Erie, from Steel Street to Rosemount Avenue, south of Sugarloaf Street, and were closed and gated to the public. The cottages were built without kitchens, as summer guests had their meals in the dining hall. By 1912, there were around 30 buildings, including cottages, a central dining hall that could seat 175 people, a bowling alley, and casino. Many of the inhabitants were American, either owning a cottage on the resort or renting for the summer months.

Like many hotels and resorts of the 1930s, the Humberstone Club was negatively affected by the Great Depression, and fewer people were able to afford their cottages. Owners sold or walked away from the properties. The Humberstone Club closed in 1933, with many cottages acquired by local residents. Only a few sections of the original buildings remain today, which you can still see today on a drive down Tennessee Avenue in Port Colborne, or on a guided walking tour with the Port Colborne Museum.



The Casino of the Humberstone Club, 1915, located at 19 Tennessee Avenue today. Photo courtesy Brock University Library Archives & Special Collections.

Entertaining the Masses

Niagara's diverse physical and social landscapes have allowed people to explore a wide range of experiences, from the natural beauty of Niagara Falls, and human feats of engineering like the Welland Canal, to the recreational hubs of music and theatrical entertainment in city centres, venues for sporting events, and amusement along the lakeshores. This section identifies other tourist-related industries that have existed in Niagara over the past two centuries and have played a critical role in attracting visitors to the region. These industries have generated significant revenue and provided jobs to thousands of locals over the years.

Music, Theatre and the Arts

Niagara's music scene evolved alongside music trends throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, attracting visitors to concerts and clubs while also producing singers and bands that impacted the nation's broader music history. As a border town, Niagara Falls was often one of the stops that musical pioneers would make while on tour, aided around the turn of the century by the completion of the transcontinental railroad and with easy access to the Buffalo jazz scene. At this time, jazz and blues were becoming popular genres, and clubs in Niagara emerged to accommodate the growing crowds, especially within the Black community, many of whom were descendants of 19th-century freedom seekers. Musicians born in Niagara Falls, such as composer R. Nathaniel Dett and jazz artist Mynie Sutton, helped to put Niagara on the map in the evolving world of Black music. Throughout the jazz age, the Falls saw the growth of dance pavilions, bowling alleys and other entertainment venues as the tourist town modernized. After 1927, Americans traveled across the border not only to enjoy the exciting music scene, but also to consume alcohol after Ontario ended prohibition.⁹²

A few decades later, St. Catharines would become a rock music hub, attracting teens from across the region as well as Hamilton and other surrounding cities. St. Catharines was home to several music agencies in the 1960s and 70s, supporting young pop bands in this new era. While the minimum legal drinking age was still 21 (pre-1971), young people would dance and listen to their favourite bands in wildly popular teen nightclubs like The Castle on the corner of Lake and Wellington streets, and the roller rink at Lakeside Park in Port Dalhousie, spurred by visionaries like Ronn Metcalfe, and allowing for the cultivation of stars like Rush drummer Neal Peart.⁹³

To connect on the latest music trends and news of the day, kids would gather at 'polka king' Walter Ostanek's St. Catharines music store on Geneva St. which was dubbed "the largest music store ever in the Niagara peninsula" at the time. Bands played in dance halls, churches, and high schools in places like Chippewa, Crystal Beach, and Stamford, and some of the better groups played on tour in towns and cities throughout Ontario.

Niagara was not only home to musical scenes, but it also attracted visitors interested in experiencing other forms of art and culture. For example, the Shaw Festival became a theatre event attracting thousands of visitors to Niagara-on-the-Lake each year. The Festival was founded in 1962, first offering theatre performances in the historic town hall (built in 1847 as a municipal headquarters and public meeting place). The Shaw Festival Theatre Foundation was established the following year, and the festival company toured throughout the United States and Canada, increasing its popularity.⁹⁴ In June 1973, the Festival Theatre opened in Niagara-on-the-Lake, allowing the company to perform large-scale productions and dramatically increasing national and international attention.⁹⁵ In 2011, the Shaw Festival celebrated its 50th anniversary.

Stage actor Jack Medley recalled those early days of the Festival in the 1960s:

I remember Niagara-on-the-Lake being such a tiny town in those days. Very tiny and very pretty, like a chocolate box. None of the glitzy stores that are there today, and we all stayed at a tiny motel by the lake.⁹⁶

Sport Tourism

Throughout the 1900s, Niagara also drew large crowds for various athletic events. Horse racing and competitive rowing stand out as two unique aspects of Niagara's local sport tourism history. In Fort Erie, the racetrack that still operates to this day was opened in 1897, drawing in spectators, writers, broadcasters, and opening opportunities for people in the southern parts of the region as well as Buffalo to become invested in the horse-racing industry. There was also a horse racetrack in Stamford Park, which opened in 1923. The Garden City Raceway opened in 1964 in St. Catharines, operated by the Ontario Jockey Club. The facility cost more than three million dollars to complete and on the opening night alone, a crowd of 4,687 fans put approximately \$160,000 through the system.⁹⁷ In the mid-1900s, racetracks like these were popular throughout Ontario, and this method of gambling for many had become a socially acceptable form of entertainment.

The ability to participate in this sport as a competitor, owner, or investor was mostly limited to wealthier individuals, yet spectating was affordable to the average middle-class person. The same can be said for competitive rowing, which became popular in Niagara around the same time. In 1903, Port Dalhousie became the permanent site of the Royal Canadian Henley Regatta. The aftermath of the Third Welland Canal construction resulted in a section of the Twelve Mile Creek being made available as the perfect location for such activity. An estimated 10,000 spectators came to witness the first regatta at the new Henley Rowing Course in 1903 and a year later, the first rowing clubhouse was built.⁹⁸ People at the City of St. Catharines no doubt saw the value of this new endeavour and granted \$2,500 for the construction of the first grandstand which could hold a crowd of 1,200. Throughout the 20th century, athletes trained and competed at the Henley Rowing Course, and it became an important venue for high school and university students as they strove to compete at a high level.



A postcard c. 1912 showing spectators waiting between races at the Royal Canadian Henley Regatta. Courtesy the St. Catharines Museum & Welland Canals Centre.

Amusement Parks

In the early-20th century, amusement parks were at the height of their popularity in Niagara, although many had their roots in the late-19th century. The two main amusement parks in the region were located at Grimsby Beach and Crystal Beach. Both parks took advantage of water access to attract visitors. Around 1910, the Grimsby beach evolved from being the site of a Methodist church camp to becoming an amusement park. Founded by H.H. Wylie, the park had a dance hall, a movie theatre, a carousel, and a roller coaster named the "Deep Dipper."

Crystal Beach Park, near Fort Erie and across from Buffalo, was also purposefully reminiscent of Chautauqua, NY. Founded by Buffalo native John E. Rebstock in 1888, the park created a century's worth of memories for locals and out-of-towners alike. With its crystal ballroom, midway, restaurants, and clubs, the park attracted many local families as well as families from Buffalo who would arrive on the ferry boat, *Canadiana*, which operated for 45 years.⁹⁹

This facet of Niagara's tourist economy was heavily influenced by the supply of U.S. tourist dollars. *The Crystal Beach Guidebook*, published in 1922, boasted that the park was visited by over a million people annually, in addition to its regular cottagers.¹⁰⁰ The first roller coaster was built in 1907, and later rides included the building of the Cyclone in 1927 and the Comet in 1947, which now sits at the Great Escape, a Six Flags Park in Lake George, NY.¹⁰¹ Due to financial difficulties, the amusement park was forced to close in 1989, ending a century-long attraction in Niagara. During the 1960s, other amusement parks emerged throughout Niagara, including Prudhommes Landing (1960–2010) and Marineland (1961–Present).

Agritourism

Today, many visitors come to Niagara from surrounding cities to partake in various forms of agritourism including pick-your-own fruit operations, roadside stands, tulip festivals, wine tours, and more. This phenomenon began early in the 20th century as middle-class families purchased automobiles and day trips became increasingly popular. Additionally, as urban populations grew, the occasional taste of country life became appealing to those raised in towns and cities. Thus, this final section details the evolution of Niagara's agritourism economy and the benefits offered by the region's geographical situation along the Niagara Escarpment and between two of the Great Lakes.

Parks and Beaches

Parks were established throughout the 19th and 20th century for both locals and tourists to enjoy. Queen Victoria Park, for example, opened on May 24, 1888, comprising around 154 acres of land adjacent to the Niagara River and Falls. Owned and maintained by the Niagara Parks Commission, the main park was free for visitors, but two smaller parks upriver, Cedar and Dufferin Islands, charged people to cross the bridges.

By the 1920s, the Park offered many services and amusements, including pavilions, gardens, picnic tables and benches, band concerts, and refreshment stands.

The Niagara Navigation Company's guidebook from 1911 described the "famous" Queen Victoria Park as offering "every requirement for comfort, convenience and amusement."¹⁰² During the 1920s and 1930s, it was popular for tourists to take day trips to Niagara to relax in the parks and beaches of the region. The Great Depression brought economic challenges, and these "free" attractions allowed visitors to continue enjoying their leisure time in Niagara. Picnicking in these parks and along the Niagara Parkway is still popular today.

With increasing automobile travel, lakeside beaches throughout Niagara became extremely popular for tourists, including Crystal Beach and Grimsby Beach.

Over the years, the parks and beaches of Niagara also became popular backdrops of annual events, such as the Emancipation Day Picnic that took place at Lakeside Park in Port Dalhousie in the early-20th century. Organized by Bertrand Joseph Spencer Pitt, a Black lawyer from Toronto, and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the Emancipation Day Picnic was held on the first Thursday of August every year, beginning in 1924.¹⁰³ More than 3,000 people would attend each year, and according to historian Thomas Owen, "Events like the Lakeside Park 'Big Picnic' (as it became known) were one way that the UNIA worked to raise both racial consciousness and racial pride within the Black Community."¹⁰⁴

The "Big Picnic" remained an annual event until 1951 but has returned in recent years as a historical celebration to commemorate Emancipation Day.



Celebrating Emancipation Day at Lakeside Park in Port Dalhousie. Photo courtesy the St. Catharines Museum & Welland Canals Centre.

Festivals: The Blossom Festival

By the mid-1800s Niagara was seen as the “Garden of Canada” and attracted visitors looking to enjoy its natural beauty. For example, in the 1920s and 30s, as automobiles and leisure time became more available, people took day trips to see the peach blossoms of Niagara during the month of May. This was known as blossom time, and today people can still be seen parked along the side of roads throughout the region, taking photos with the tree blossoms in the background.



This image ran in The St. Catharines Standard reporting nearly 100,000 cars coming to view the blossoms in Niagara. Photo courtesy the St. Catharines Museum & Welland Canals Centre.

By the 1930s, many blossom-inspired festivities were established during the month of May, particularly in Grimsby and Niagara Falls which included parades, the crowning of a Blossom Queen, live bands and choirs, and community theatre.¹⁰⁵ Alongside the festivals, thousands of tourists travelled the Blossom Route through Niagara, which largely followed old Highway 8 from Hamilton to Niagara-on-the-Lake. On May 2, 1938, the *St. Catharines Standard* reported:

*“ Blossom traffic heavy throughout the district yesterday ... Long lines of cars carried an estimated 100,000 people around the Niagara district yesterday to see the beauty of orchards in blossom. Despite the fact that about 20,000 cars took part in the blossom procession, no serious accidents occurred.”*¹⁰⁶

Festivals: Grape and Wine Festival

Today, Niagara is widely known as a wine region, but the wine industry did not become popular until the latter half of the 20th century. The Grape and Wine Parade marked the beginning of Niagara’s wine tourism, kicking off a wine festival at Montebello Park in St. Catharines in September 1952. The festival moved locations over the years but has consistently taken place in St. Catharines. The first festival parade included over 20 floats and 14 bands, and attracted 500,000 onlookers, becoming one of the largest street parades in Canada.¹⁰⁷ The Grape and Wine Festival helped Niagara market its grapes and gain recognition for its wine, attracting both locals and tourists to celebrate the industry and visit the local wineries.

Conclusion

Many of the elements that were historically important for the development of Niagara’s tourism sector remain relevant today. In 1829, Niagara Falls saw between 12,000 and 15,000 tourists annually¹⁰⁸ and now hosts more than 13 million¹⁰⁹ people per year. Niagara’s proximity to the American border and its location within the Great Lakes Basin helped attract visitors prior to 1900 and continues to do so today.

Ultimately, while tourism as a sector was directly tied to the unique Niagara landscape, it was also heavily influenced by societal and technological factors such as scientific innovation and the evolution of transportation, immigration, and social class. Thus, the tourism sector was developed relative to a range of both human and environmental characteristics.

Tourism continues to be an important part of Niagara’s economy, with many of its current attractions founded in the 18th century and earlier. These days, luxury tourism with its high-end hotels, restaurants and casino, and agrifood tourism via wineries, breweries and pick-your-owns, are leading the way. But whatever the subcategory of tourism, they are all anchored by the one draw that dates back to time immemorial: the Niagara Falls.

With this understanding of certain historical successes within Niagara’s tourism sector, some considerations arise for this sector in the modern day. For example, when it came to funneling tourists in and out of the region, water and rail travel played an essential role. Perhaps this could be taken into consideration today, considering the consistent issues with heavy traffic along the QEW. On a different note, the quaint agricultural feel of Niagara, especially during blossom season, has drawn tourists for decades.

This facet of the tourism sector, if it is to continue in the future, will require an intentional focus on supporting farmers and their businesses. Finally, Niagara Falls will no doubt remain the region's premiere tourist destination, as it has been for centuries. To an extent, care has been taken to balance the aesthetic appeal of the Falls with the economic benefits of commercialization. For tourists to have positive experiences there in the years to come, this balance must be upheld.

Image Credits

Page 3: "Save Niagara Falls—From This", 1906 illustration. Courtesy USA Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2011645834>

Page 4: Blondin carrying Harry Colcord on his back over the Niagara River in 1859. Courtesy Niagara Falls Public Library <https://nfpl.historicniagara.ca/s/images/item/89309>

Page 5: Photo of woman at Brock Monument, Township of Wainfleet photo albums, c. 1890–1940, RG 797, Archives & Special Collections, Brock University Library.

Page 8: Originated around 1890 by the Richelieu & Ontario Navigation Company, "Niagara to the Sea" soon became one of the most famous travel slogans in North America. Courtesy Toronto Public Library. <https://bit.ly/3SgRf5K>

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