

Standing on the Edge: Challenging Boundaries and Power

Northeast Regional Honors Council conference at Niagara Falls, April 3-6

The history of the city and region of Niagara Falls is as rich and dramatic as the natural wonders themselves – natural wonders that form the boundary between the United States and Canada. For centuries, the thundering waters have lured settlers and visitors. In the 1800s, the falls began to serve as a major source of industrial power. Today they again drive the tourism industry that is the city's and region's major revenue source, attracting an annual 10 million visitors who want to see those thundering waters. After surviving severe economic decline triggered by the collapse of its heavy industry and environmental disasters, the city's and region's leaders, economic planners and developers see themselves on the edge of a brighter future, just like the success their Canadian counterparts enjoy a short walk away across the border in Ontario. The interplay of power and beauty places Niagara Falls at the center of debates over environment/industry and preservation/renewal, all of which can be explored during the 2014 Northeast Regional Honors Conference.

The American-Canadian border at Niagara features distinctive geology with two falls on the Niagara River – the American Falls and the Canadian or Horseshoe Falls – as well as the smaller Bridal Veil Falls to the south. Geologists believe when the falls were formed an estimated 12,000 years ago; their edge was as much as seven miles farther down river than it is today. The brink of the falls moved backward an estimated 3 feet every year because of erosion until the 1950s, when the flow of water began to be controlled. Today the amount is controlled by the Canadian and American governments, and activists and environmental groups keep watch over those efforts and more.

Before Niagara Falls was first explored by European settlers, it was a symbol of peace and nonviolence. The North American indigenous people who lived on the shores of the river were dubbed “The Neutrals” by the French because of their commitment to diplomacy between the warring Huron and Iroquois tribes. The Neutral tribe was governed by a “Queen of Peace” and was the leader of a group of 10. Also known as the Attiwandaronk or “Onguiaahra,” meaning the strait or thunder of waters, historians trace a derivation of the tribe's name to Niagara Falls. Since then, the area has had more complex social interactions that challenge competing claims on the area.

Much of the literature calls the history of Niagara Falls a reflection of the shifting boundaries of social dominance in the United States itself. For example, it figured prominently in the French and Indian War and then the War of 1812, served as a gateway to Canada for slaves fleeing through the Underground Railroad amid America's great Civil War, and welcomed thousands of immigrants – many from Italy and Poland – eager to improve their lives at the turn of the 19th century.

The impressive natural power of the falls prompted human efforts to harness water power for energy. As early as 1805 Augustus and Peter Porter of Buffalo, N.Y., purchased the American Falls from the State of New York at a public auction to produce power for businesses and homes. The Porters built a water-powered gristmill and tannery but were forced out of business when the Erie Canal opened 20 years later. In 1853, the Niagara Falls Hydraulic Power & Manufacturing Company was first chartered, and work began on a canal to transport water from the Niagara River above the falls to the mill sites below. Nikola Tesla designed the first hydroelectric power plant at Niagara Falls, and it started producing electrical power in 1895. The Niagara generating stations currently supply one-quarter of all power used in New York State and Ontario.

Harnessing the falls for electricity led to a different kind of challenge. In the 1860s, a small band of early environmentalists – led by America's first landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted – was concerned about the river's waning flow and founded the Free Niagara movement. The movement held that the natural beauty of the land surrounding the falls should be protected from commercial interests and exploitation and remain free to

the public. The Niagara Appropriations Bill was signed into law in 1885, creating the Niagara Reservation, and it led to the creation of America's oldest state park.

By the end of the 19th century, railroads helped the city's heavy industry prosper in two ways: transportation for heavy industry and easier travel for vacationers. They included many notable visitors and daredevils trying to conquer the falls. The falls became well known as a honeymoon destination, popularized even more by the 1953 film "Niagara" starring Marilyn Monroe. But tourism was considered a secondary niche, while industry was the main producer of jobs and economic backbone.

In the 1950s and early 1960s the area witnessed an economic boom, as several industries moved into the city to take advantage of the hydroelectric power and the higher demand for household and industrial products. Companies producing paper, rubber, plastics, petrochemicals and abrasives – as well as a Nabisco plant – located in the city. The city's population rose to more than 100,000. This period of prosperity ended in the mid-1960s, marked by the collapse of the locally owned Schoellkopf Power Project into the Niagara River.

The heavy industry in the city of Niagara Falls included Hooker Electrochemical Company, which used a small body of water, Love Canal, for disposal of its toxic chemical waste. Although sealed off with clay and buried, the toxic chemicals were released when the city subsequently attempted to build schools and houses on the site. In 1978 President Jimmy Carter declared Love Canal a federal emergency, and hundreds of residents were relocated. It attracted national media attention. The Superfund law, which protects people, families, communities and others from heavily contaminated toxic waste sites, was enacted in 1980 in response to the Love Canal situation.

The post-Love Canal Niagara Falls witnessed a reversal of fortunes over the next two decades. Several factories closed, and the population dropped in half to 50,193 by the 2010 census as blue-collar workers fled in search of jobs elsewhere. The city's economy plummeted after a series of disappointing urban renewal projects failed to meet their goals.

However, in the 2000s several steps toward redevelopment have been taken. In late 2001, the State of New York established the USA Niagara Development Corporation, a subsidiary to the state's economic development agency, to focus specifically on facilitating development in downtown Niagara Falls. The official tourism promotion agency, Niagara Tourism and Convention Corporation, was adopted in 2005. In 2004, the Seneca Nation of Indians opened the Seneca Niagara Casino in the former Niagara Falls Convention and Civic Center, thereby establishing sovereign Native American territory in the midst of the city.

Conference attendees should know that Niagara Falls is considered one of the United States' top 10 tourist destinations. Local and state government officials have vowed to embrace the physical and cultural advantages that the Niagara region possesses, such as the Niagara Gorge, wine trail, historical landmarks, Little Italy Niagara and Niagara Falls itself.

In this resurgence, some notable successes: A new Conference Center Niagara Falls, the site of this conference, opened in 2005. The historic United Office Building and The Niagara (hotel) have been redeveloped. The restoration of Old Falls Street, once the primary tourist thoroughfare downtown, has helped. A new Sheraton resort with several restaurants, including the city's first Starbucks, replaced a former hotel. And, finally, Niagara County Community College's Culinary Arts Institute relocated into part of the former Rainbow Centre mall. The college has developed a hospitality and tourism complex that includes all of its hospitality and tourism programs, including culinary arts, baking and pastry, winery operations, casino operations, hospitality operations, and food and beverage management.

Writers, activists, community groups keep a close watch on developments in the city and the surrounding area. For example, the Niagara Heritage Partnership advocated the removal of the 6.5-mile section of the Robert Moses Parkway that runs along the Niagara Gorge from Niagara Falls to Lewiston. While the New York's state

government agreed, it's still a subject of intense debate. The group and other environmentalists want a natural environment there while some businesses in towns north of the city want a roadway with an adjoining hiking and biking path. Work on removing the freeway will go ahead, government officials said, while planning continues. The goal: In a few years the freeway will be gone and replaced by the largest expansion of Niagara-Falls parkland since the 1880s, when the Niagara Reservation was first created.

Our conference is designed for you to explore Niagara Falls' past and its present, and, with passport in hand, compare it to its Canadian counterpart. It allows for all kinds of interpretation and discovery: Border Crossing, Nature vs. Man, Man vs. Nature, The Underground Railroad, The Senecas, Urban (economics, politics, industrialization and Love Canal) vs. Nature, as well as the testing of limits as they appear in the carnival and freak show atmosphere, especially on the Canadian side. And you'll have to opportunity to be awed by the falls and explore Niagara Falls State Park, the Cave of the Winds, Maid of the Mist, Goat Island, Prospect Point and its observation tower, Niagara Discovery Center.