



## The Historical Society of St. Catharines

*\*NEW Address \** P.O. Box 25017, 221 Glendale Avenue, Pen Centre,  
St. Catharines, Ontario, L2T 4C4

Our Mission and Goal is to increase the knowledge and appreciation of the  
history of St. Catharines and vicinity.

Founded in 1927. Our Society is affiliated with the Ontario Historical Society.

Our website is: <http://stcatharineshistory.wordpress.com/>

# Summer 2010 Newsletter

## UPCOMING PROGRAMMES

Our monthly Membership meetings are held at the St. Catharines Museum. Doors open at 7:00 p.m. and the Museum is open also at 7:00 p.m. so that members may view current exhibits. The Society meeting starts at 7:30 p.m. sharp. Reminder: as our members are inside the Burgoyne Room and unable to monitor those entering the Museum, the Museum's door will be locked at approximately 7:45 p.m. on meeting nights. Members are reminded to be on time but if they are late, ring the doorbell to the right of the main doors.

**Thursday, September 23** - Linda Bramble, a noted oenologist will be talking about "**How We Got Here From There**" or a very similar title, referring to the beginning of Prohibition in Ontario, 1927 (the same date as the formation of our Society) and the development of Niagara's wine industry within that framework.

**Thursday, October 28** - Tom Malcomson of George Brown University, a military historian, will talk about a completely unique view of how the Brock Monument was designed and has called his talk "**Dueling Columns: Horatio Nelson vs. Isaac Brock, Parallel Monuments a World Apart.**" Tom is the brother of the late Bob Malcomson.

**Thursday, November 25** - An expanded version of our popular "**Show and Tell**" night. The evening will be open for display of artifacts, comments and anecdotes that are not just related to Niagara, but a larger sphere.

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### ***Reminder: Membership Renewal Time!***

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Your Membership in the Society is Important!

**Membership year is from September 1 to August 31**

**Please return Membership Form on Reverse Side**

# The Historical Society of St. Catharines

## Membership Information

*As a member:*

- You are supporting the mission and goal of the Society to increase the knowledge and appreciation of the history of St. Catharines and Vicinity
- You are supporting a program of speakers on historical topics and the research that goes into the preparation of the speech
- You will receive a membership card to show you are in good standing
- You are eligible to become a member of the Board of Directors and hold an executive position in the Society
- You are encouraged to assist in programs and activities of the Society
- You will receive the Society newsletter which is usually distributed on a quarterly basis
- You are entitled to vote at the annual meeting and at any general meeting
- You may receive a discount on items sold by the Society
- You will receive first opportunity to participate in Society activities
- You may receive a discount on Society activities when offered

Membership is for one year beginning on September 1 and ending August 31

Annual Membership Dues: Individual - \$10.00 or Family - \$15.00

(note: family memberships receive only one newsletter)

Please make your cheque or money order payable to:  
The Historical Society of St. Catharines

Please Remit to: The Historical Society of St. Catharines  
P. O. Box 25017, 221 Glendale Avenue, Pen Centre  
St. Catharines, Ontario, L2T 4C4

*Remove and return with your cheque ... thank you for your membership!*

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### The Historical Society of St. Catharines – Membership Application

Please enter my/our membership in the Society as: Individual  Family

This is a New Membership ; This is a Renewal

Names(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone # \_\_\_\_\_ ; e-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Yes I wish to receive Society e-mail reminders:

Enclosed please find a cheque/money order in the amount of \$ \_\_\_\_\_

## Minutes of the Annual General Meeting - Thursday, April 22, 2010.

Burgoyne Room, St. Catharines Museum, Welland Canals Parkway.

President John Burtniak opened the meeting at 7:30 p.m. A quorum of 30 attended. The meeting had been advertised in the March 2010 newsletter. John welcomed members and guests to the meeting.

The minutes of the Annual General Meeting of April 2009 were published in the September 2009 newsletter. It was moved by Bill Steinman and seconded by Bill Dixon that the minutes be accepted. There were no errors or omissions noted. Carried.

The Financial Report and auditors' reports for the fiscal year 2009 were circulated amongst the members. As the treasurer Chris Loat was absent, John Burtniak noted that the Society had a total operating income of \$2154.75 and total operating expenses of \$2231.88, with total assets of \$11184.11.

Tom Whitelaw read the auditors' remarks, stating that in the opinion of himself and Carol Gaspari the Financial Report of 2009 fairly represents the financial position of the Historical Society as of December 31, 2009.

John Burtniak remarked that our Provincial Grant was \$496.00 in 2009 but had been \$831.00 in 2008.

There were two questions from members regarding the GIC investment of \$219.92 and use of the term "Capital (GIC) Transactions". A motion was made by Bill Dixon and seconded by John Calvert that these queries be noted and discussed at the next (May 3, 2010) Board Meeting and explained at the next (May 27, 2010) General Meeting. Carried.

There were no Constitutional Amendments.

Memberships- Outgoing membership secretary Mary Leighton reported that there are currently 202 members.

Dues will again be accepted in September as our membership year now runs from September to August.

President's Remarks: John Burtniak acknowledged and thanked all members for their participation and noted the all-time high membership. He thanked all members of the Board for their various services with a special thank you to Bill Stevens who has edited the newsletter for the past twelve years and now steps down as editor.

Nominations: Bill Stevens as Nominating Chair explained that only directors (one - year term) needed to be elected as the executive positions were for a two-year term and those elections were held at the April 2009 Annual General Meeting. He announced that we still need a membership chair. He asked for nominations. The nominees were: Gail Benjafield, John Calvert, Joe Muskat, and David Sharron, who currently sit on the Board, as well as Joe O'Brien who will be new to the Board. Bill Steinman seconded the nominations.

Bill then requested more nominations from the floor, but receiving none, Lorraine Steinman moved that nominations be closed. John Stevens voted to accept the slate.

John Burtniak welcomed the new editor of the newsletter, John Calvert. He also thanked Alun Hughes for his many newsletter articles. He thanked Anthony Percival of the Museum for his artefact presentations and announced that the new Museum Director will be Kathy Powell.

Notices: John Burtniak noted a recent photo of member Bill Steinman in the St. Catharines Standard. He announced the May 27, 2010 general meeting: speaker to be Nina Stahlschmidt with a presentation on local Mills. The 34<sup>th</sup> Oille Fountain ceremony will be held May 8, 2010. The next newsletter will be published in June 2010.

At this point the speaker for the evening, Peter Martin of Fort George, was introduced by Elizabeth Finnie. He gave an interesting presentation on the restoration of Brock's Monument and Fort George, with many rare close-up photographs of the monument. Members asked many questions. John Calvert thanked the speaker.

The meeting adjourned for refreshments at 9:00 p.m.

### Newsletter Notes

The Historical Society of St. Catharines *Newsletter* is published up to 4 times per year by the Society.

The purpose of the *Newsletter* is to inform the membership of issues pertaining to the Society and items of historical interest. Comments and queries should be directed to the Society postal address. Opinions and comments expressed in the *Newsletter* are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society.

Subscription is by paid membership only. This issue was produced by Bill Stevens.

**Next Issue: September 2010 - Deadline** for submissions for the next issue is **September 1**

*The Society gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ontario Ministry of Culture*

## Unstrung Hero

Contributed by Gail Benjafield

(A version of this article was first published as an 'Ode to St. Catharines', in *The Downtowner*, Vol.5, no. 2 February/March 1989.)

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, St. Catharines was graced by the presence of an extraordinary citizen whose name has since become synonymous with doggerel, or rather wretched poetry. The kind of florid Victorian poetry was practiced by many, but James McIntyre became a master. His works and that of four other Canadian poets of that era have been immortalized in W. A. Deacon's book '*The Four James*'. All four shared the same given name.

James McIntyre was born in 1828 in Scotland and emigrated with his parents, Peter and Primrose McIntyre, to St. Catharines in 1841. In 1850 he opened a business as a cabinetmaker and undertaker in Thorold. Cousins of James were in the same business in downtown St. Catharines, variously known as McIntyre's Furniture and Undertaking on St. Paul Street. Until recently, another funeral home, Passmore's, worked from that same building on the SE corner of St. Paul and Carlisle. One cousin of James became prominent in his own right by becoming the city's mayor in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

But none of the McIntyre's shared the zeal for literature that infused James' life. He penned poetry on anything that came to mind, and is immortalized for his best known bad poem *Ode to the Mammoth Cheese* which he wrote about the Oxford County dairy industry. He may have moved to that county, but he is one of St. Catharines unsung, or as I have labeled him, unstrung heroes. He plied his trade in Ingersoll, and penned his poetry at off times. His neighbour in Ingersoll, James Harris, created a legendary-sized piece of cheese which went on show at exhibitions. After Harris molded the Big Cheese, James McIntyre wrote:

*We have seen thee, Queen of cheese  
Laying quietly at your ease  
Gently fanned by evening breeze,  
Thy fair form no flies dare seize*

He has become known as The Cheese Poet. When he heard the cheese was going to France for an exhibition, he added these lines:

*May you not receive a sear as  
We have heard that Mr. Harris  
Intends to send you off as far as  
The great World Show at Paris.*

Doesn't scan? Consider then McIntyre's only known offering to our own city – he penned the following poem which he read at the Welland House at an Oddfellows Grand Lodge banquet:

*St. Catharines famed for her mineral waters  
And for the beauty of her daughters,  
For some do worship at the shrines  
Of the fair St. Catharines.*

*St. Catharines your greatness you inherit  
From the genius of a Merritt  
You still would be a village dreary  
But for this canal from Lake Erie  
But on its bosom there doth float*

*Full many a ship and steamboat,  
Brings world's commerce to your doors  
And many gifts on you it pours.*

*Among its many great rewards  
It gives you dry docks and shipyard  
To drive your mills great water power  
It doth give you as a dower.*

*Since we above did lines compose,  
Through new canal vast steam it flows,  
The lock gates at the hill of Thorold  
Cannot be equaled in the world.*

Well what can one say to that? Some would say that this 'poetry' rivals the world's famous bad poet, McGonigle. I, for one, am glad to have found at least one of McIntyre's poems which ostensibly celebrates our city.

Gail Benjafield is a member of the Society, and proud owner of a copy of *The Four James*.

### **Reports of General Membership Meetings** **that were held at the St. Catharines Historical Museum**

**February 25, 2010** – President John Burtniak called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m. He welcomed members and guests. Four new attendees introduced themselves. There were 72 people in attendance. Anthony Percival of the Museum displayed a rare map of the early Welland Canal. The map was donated by Fred Leeson to the Museum in 1978 and has been restored. It is a copy from the 1840s of a survey of the route of the first canal in 1829 and a property map of 1835 through Thorold. It shows the land holdings of George Keefer and his sons Jacob, Samuel and John, as well as Thomas Kerr, James Black and John Vandenberg. Anthony gave us some biographical information on these men.

Member Bill Steinman introduced our speaker, Alun Hughes. Alun produced an excellent and well researched presentation on early mapping of the "Great Swivel Link": he showed and described many first and second Welland Canal maps, including surveys, engineering plans, construction plans and canal property maps. Alun was well received as always with a full house in attendance, remarkable for such a snowy night. John Calvert thanked the speaker.

The meeting adjourned for refreshments at approximately 9:15 p.m.

**March 25, 2010** - President John Burtniak called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m. He welcomed members and guests. There were 39 people in attendance.

John Burtniak read a tribute to Dr. John Jackson, professor and former member of the Society, who distinguished himself with many books and other publications concerning the history and urban geography of the area.

Anthony Percival of the Museum made mention of the Top Hat Ceremony held today (opening of the Welland Canal for the year). He also mentioned the exhibit coming up, "Love'em or Hate 'em", an exhibit of Canadian political cartoons including two images of our 1849 St. Catharines City Council. Anthony then showed a few images from the St. Catharines Standard collection of thousands of photographic negatives which have been turned over to the Museum and are currently being indexed and restored. He chose photos of St. John's Church, Port Dalhousie, in keeping with the topic of the evening. These concerned the dedication of the reredos (definition: an ornamental screen or partition wall behind an altar in a church) in April of 1939.

Member Lorraine Cordner introduced our speaker, Brian Leyden. Brian gave a very informative and

*March 25, 2010 continues .....*

..... *March 25, 2010 continued*

delightful "fireside presentation" on the history of Port Dalhousie, St. John's Anglican Church and more. His talk was very well received by the members. He was assisted by Canon Gordon Kinkley of the Church as well as Anthony Percival. Bill Stevens thanked the speaker.

The meeting adjourned for refreshments at approximately 9:00 p.m.

**May 27, 2010** - President John Burtniak called the meeting to order at 7:30 p.m. He welcomed members and guests. There were 38 people in attendance. He reminded us that it was the last general meeting before the summer break until September.

Anthony Percival introduced the new Museum Supervisor/Curator/Manager Kathy Powell. Anthony then showed an artifact from the Museum, a cooper's stencil marked "J. H. Ball, Crown Mills, St. Catharines". He gave a short history of this item which was used for stenciling barrels likely between 1844 and 1853. John Burtniak welcomed Kathy Powell on behalf of the Society. Kathy explained her 'open door' policy of inviting members and the public to offer any suggestions to improve the Museum.

An announcement of the **October 23, 2010 Heritage Book Fair** to be held at the St. Catharines Public Library was made. This is being organized by Kevin McCabe.

Member Elizabeth Finnie introduced our speaker Nina Stahlschmidt. Nina presented a "Trunk Show" of part of her collection of historical feed bags from mills in Ontario, the U.S. and even farther afield. She then showed many quilts that she has hand made from these items. Gail Benjafield thanked Nina for this unique and interesting speech and display.

The meeting ended with refreshments at 9 p.m.

Program Reports Contributed by Elizabeth Finnie

### **34th Annual Oille Fountain Potting Ceremony**

**Saturday, May 8** - When the court house bell rang at 11:00 a.m. a small band of faithful gathered under threatening rain clouds to place a plant atop the Oille Fountain. John Burtniak made a brief speech explaining the significance of the Fountain prior to the planting

### **William Hamilton Merritt Anniversary Ceremony**

**Tuesday July 6, 2010** - Nine intrepid souls turned out on an extremely hot early Tuesday evening for the commemoration of William Hamilton Merritt's birth and death anniversaries. At this annual event, Society president John Burtniak addressed another aspect of Merritt's life, this being a well-researched look at his three sons, their lives and contributions to the history of St. Catharines. After this address, two wreaths were laid at the Merritt monument, the first by Society member Alex Ormston, with Society secretary Elizabeth Finnie as deputy, and the second wreath by Canadian Canal Society president Tom Whitelaw.

The plan had been to have a walk across the Glenridge Bridge, led by John Burtniak, but due to the heat, John gave us an abbreviated presentation with maps, under a shade tree. Most of the attendees then repaired to the Mansion House for some light refreshment and discussion of current local issues.

### **2010 Board of Directors of the Historical Society of St. Catharines**

President - John Burtniak - tel. 905-227-5120

Past President - Bill Stevens - e-mail [bibmstev@computan.on.ca](mailto:bibmstev@computan.on.ca) - tel. 905-934-8966

Vice President - Paul Lewis - e-mail [paul\\_e\\_lewis@ridley.on.ca](mailto:paul_e_lewis@ridley.on.ca) - tel. 905-684-9918

Secretary - Elizabeth Finnie - e-mail [finnies@sympatico.ca](mailto:finnies@sympatico.ca) - tel. 905-684-4416

Treasurer - Chris Loat - e-mail [chris\\_loat@ridley.on.ca](mailto:chris_loat@ridley.on.ca) - tel. 905-685-6939

Director - Membership - Joe O'Brien - e-mail [vobrien@cogeco.ca](mailto:vobrien@cogeco.ca) - tel. 905-685-1623

Director - Publicity - David Sharron - e-mail [david\\_sharron@hotmail.com](mailto:david_sharron@hotmail.com) - tel. 905-684-5355

Director - Director - Joe Muskat - tel. 905-687-3359

Director - John Calvert - [jcalvert57@hotmail.com](mailto:jcalvert57@hotmail.com) - tel. 905-228-3188

Director - Gail Benjafield - [egailb@sympatico.ca](mailto:egailb@sympatico.ca) - tel. - 905-685-6039

## ON THE MEANING OF "NIAGARA"

The name Niagara first appears, in the form Onguiaahra, in the writings of Jesuit priest Jérôme Lalemant, Superior to the Huron Mission, in 1641. The word is clearly of aboriginal origin, but Lalemant says nothing about its meaning. However, a survey of subsequent literature reveals two dominant interpretations. The first, with obvious reference to Niagara Falls, is "thundering waters" or some equivalent like "resounding with great noise," while the second, apparently referring to the Niagara River, is "neck," denoting the strip of water connecting the "head" and the "body" (Lakes Erie and Ontario).

Which of these interpretations is correct? Or are they both wrong, and is the true meaning something else altogether? In seeking to answer these questions I shall trace the evolution of the name over time, sketch the history of native peoples in the Niagara area, and examine how the word has been understood by the many individuals who have sought to explain its meaning.

### The Evolution of the Name

Nowadays the name Niagara is attached to a great variety of things, but in early times its use was largely restricted to Niagara Falls and the Niagara River. Accordingly, three overlapping phases in the use of the name can be identified: first, when the falls and river are alluded to but not named; second, when they are named, but spelled inconsistently; and third, when "Niagara" becomes the accepted form.

French explorer Jacques Cartier may have heard of the falls from natives as early as 1535, but there is no conclusive proof of this. The first clear reference comes in 1603, in fellow explorer Samuel de Champlain's *Des Sauvages*, wherein he repeats a native account of "a fall that may be a league broad, over which an exceeding great current of water descends." On Champlain's map of New France dated 1612 the falls are symbolized and labelled "sault de au" [sic], and on a later map of 1632 they are numbered "90" and described in the map legend as "Waterfall at the end of Lake St. Louis [Ontario], of great height, where many kinds of fish are stunned in descending."

Champlain had no first-hand knowledge of Niagara, nor did Jérôme Lalemant, who was the first person to record the name. His informants were fellow priests Jean de Brébeuf and Pierre Chaumonot, who learned it from the Neutral Indians they visited in 1640. Written as Onguiaahra, the name appears in Lalemant's *Relation* (report to his superiors in France) of 1641, and refers specifically to the river, not the falls.

Lalemant writes: "This Stream or River is that through which the great lake of the Hurons, or fresh-water sea, empties; it flows first into the lake of Erié, or of the Nation of the Cat, and at the end of that lake, it enters into the territory of the Neutral Nation, and takes the name of Onguiaahra, until it empties into the Ontario or lake of saint Louys, whence finally emerges the river that passes before Quebec, called the St. Lawrence."

In the same *Relation* Lalemant also mentions a Neutral village called Onguiaahra. It was presumably located close to the Niagara River, but where exactly, and on which side of the river, is not certain (though some place it on the east bank below Lewiston). The village would have belonged to the Onguiarahronon, one of the constituent tribes of the Neutral peoples.

(It should be noted that another Jesuit, Paul Le Jeune, mentions a tribe called the Ongmarahronon in an earlier *Relation* of 1640, and some authorities believe he meant to say Onguiarahronon. Whether or not this means that Le Jeune, not Lalemant, deserves the credit for being the first to record the name Niagara is a matter for debate.)

Lalemant makes no mention of the falls, but in 1648 his successor Paul Ragueneau writes of the waters of Lake Erie being thrown "over a waterfall of a dreadful height" into Lake Ontario, though he does not state its name. Not until 1656 are the falls named, this on a map by Nicolas Sanson, where they are labelled "Ongiara Sault." Ongiara is clearly a variant of Onguiaahra, and the same spelling occurs on maps by Francesco Bressani in 1657 and François du Creux in 1660.



Detail of Sanson's map of New France, 1656

In 1670 Sulpician missionaries Bréhan de Galinée and Dollier de Casson sailed past the mouth of the Niagara River on Lake Ontario. They heard the roar of the falls, but did not venture upstream to find the source of the noise. In Galinée's account of their travels he mentions the falls without naming them, and refers to the river as "properly the River St. Lawrence," which in a sense it is.

Accompanying Galinée and Dollier was the explorer Cavelier de La Salle. He returned in 1678

with Recollet priest Louis Hennepin, who has the distinction of being the first European to publish an account of Niagara Falls based on personal observation. In his *Description de la Louisiane*, published in 1683, Hennepin speaks of "le grand Sault de Niagara," and labels it thus on a map. He also refers to "la belle Riviere de Niagara."

Hennepin uses the modern spelling Niagara, though whether or not he was the first to do so is uncertain. There is a suggestion that this spelling was used by Aubert de La Chesnaye in 1676, in which case it may have been known to Hennepin before he came to America. Regardless, it is the modern form that prevails in French writing thereafter, as in "Saut de Niagara" on maps by Pierre Raffeix and Vincenzo Coronelli in 1688. It was also used for Fort de Niagara, established by the French at the mouth of the Niagara River in 1726.

The English were much slower to follow suit, and were responsible for most of the early spelling variants, 40 of which appear in O'Callaghan's *General Index to the Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*. These should be accepted for what they are, simply attempts to record the native pronunciation of Niagara in writing, reflecting spelling vagaries and transcription problems rather than anything fundamental. Thus Thomas Dongan, Governor of the Colony of New York, spelled the name six different ways (Oneigra, Onijagaro, Onyagaro, Onyagars, Onyagro and Onyegra) in letters he himself wrote between February 1687 and February 1688, and five other spellings (Oneagoragh, Oniagoragh, Onjagra, Onnyagaro and Onyagra) appear in official documents composed by others.

In the early 18th century the spelling became standardized in English, as witness "The Great Fall of Niagara" on Hermann Moll's map of 1715. The British retained the name Niagara when Fort de Niagara was captured from the French in 1759, and the first Loyalist settlement on the west bank of the Niagara River in 1780 was called the Settlement at Niagara. The name was subsequently applied to the Town and Township of Niagara (1798), the Niagara Peninsula (1820s) and the Niagara Escarpment (1850s), as well as other features.

### Local Aboriginal History

The Niagara Peninsula has a very long history of native occupation, dating back thousands of years, and rich archaeological sites have been unearthed at Fort Erie, Grimsby, Thorold and St. Davids. This history is divided into five major periods: Palaeo-Indian (commencing 9000 BCE), Archaic, Initial Woodland, Terminal Woodland, and Historic, of which only the last-named concerns us here.

The Historic period begins with the first European contact (by the French) in the late 16th

and early 17th centuries, at which time the Peninsula was occupied by the Neutral Indians. Their primary homeland was in the Hamilton area, but their territory extended westward beyond the Thames River and a short distance east of the Niagara River. In terms of language, the Neutral belonged to the Iroquoian family, which also included the Huron and Petun (or Tobacco) tribes around Georgian Bay, and the Five Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy in the Finger Lakes region — the Seneca, Cayuga, Oneida, Onondaga and Mohawk — which became the Six Nations in 1722 with the addition of the Tuscarora. (Note the difference between the terms "Iroquois," denoting the Five or Six Nations, and "Iroquoian," denoting the broader linguistic family.)

What the Neutral called themselves is not known, but the French named them "la nation neutre" because of their refusal to become involved in the longstanding hostilities between the Huron and the Iroquois. They themselves were far from peace-loving, however, and had for many years engaged in vicious conflict with the Mascouten (the "Fire Nation") of modern Michigan.

In the late 1640s, what had been intermittent fighting between the Iroquois and Huron erupted into full-scale warfare. The instigators were the Iroquois, and their main motives were likely twofold: to unite all Iroquoian tribes as one people on one land, and to replace population losses caused by smallpox by taking prisoners. A third factor may have been the desire to expand their hunting territory and secure a stake in the fur trade. The Iroquois, having the advantage of muskets acquired from the Dutch of New Netherland, easily defeated the less-organized Huron, and destroyed the Jesuit presence in Huronia in the process.

The Iroquois then turned on the Petun and Neutral, and by 1651 had killed, dispersed or assimilated both. The Iroquois used the former Neutral lands mainly as a hunting ground and a routeway, though they did establish some villages north and west of Burlington Bay. Their ascendancy was only temporary, however, and by the end of the century they had been ousted by more northerly tribes from the the Algonquian linguistic group, specifically the Mississauga Ojibwa. The latter built villages along the north shore of Lake Ontario, but left the Niagara Peninsula largely uninhabited.

It remained uninhabited until after the American Revolutionary War, when the Peninsula was opened up to settlement for those who had been left landless by the conflict — members of Butler's Rangers, loyalist refugees, discharged soldiers and natives who had fought for the Crown. To facilitate this, a huge piece of land extending westward to the Thames was bought from the Mississauga in 1784, and over the following decade surveyors were engaged to divide the Peninsula into townships and lots of 100 or 200 acres. In the process a lengthy tract extending 6



miles on either side of the Grand River was set aside for the Six Nations Indians who had lost their ancestral lands in the Finger Lakes region.

It is important to note that the Niagara Peninsula was basically empty when European settlement began. There had been no significant native presence close to the Canadian side of the Niagara River since the elimination of the Neutral in 1651, and the creation of the Grand River Tract, which lay some distance to the west, did not change this. On the American side, however, the westernmost Iroquois tribe, the Seneca, had moved into former Neutral territory near the Niagara River before any appreciable white settlement took place.

### In Search of the Meaning

One place, of course, to look for the meaning of Niagara is in books on the origin of place names, but no definitive answer is found. The earliest book on Ontario names, Gardiner's classic *Nothing but Names*, published in 1899, gives the meaning as "thunder of water." But the most recent, *Place Names of Ontario*, written by Rayburn in 1997, asserts that there is no basis for "thundering waters" in any aboriginal language — Niagara is a Neutral word meaning "neck." As the dean of modern Canadian toponymists, Rayburn must be taken seriously, but he gives no source for his conclusion.

Other books on place names are just as contradictory, and complicate matters by introducing new meanings. Stewart in 1945 proposes "point of land cut in two," Harder in 1976 posits "at the neck," "across the neck" and "bisected bottom lands," while Hamilton in 1978 favours "thunder of waters" or "resounding with great noise." The most catholic is Armstrong in 1930, who offers several possible explanations: a Neutral word of unknown meaning, a Huron word meaning "thunderer of waters, resounding with great noise," or an Iroquois word meaning "neck ... connecting water," or "bisected bottom land," or "divided waterfalls."

In an attempt to sort out the confusion I have consulted over 100 sources — books, articles, maps and documents from the early 17th century to the present — that make some reference to Niagara, most of which say something about the meaning of the word. Aside from toponymists like Rayburn, the authors include ethnologists, anthropologists, linguists, philologists, historians, geographers, cartographers, geologists, government officials and others. Not surprisingly, there is no consensus, and additional interpretations such as "tobacco smoke" and "place of high fall" only add to the confusion.

But "thundering waters" and "neck" emerge clearly as the commonest meanings, and it is time to ask who first proposed them and when. Surprisingly, we find that they both originated with the same person, namely Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, a 19th

century American explorer, geologist and ethnologist who, amongst other things, worked for the government as an Indian agent, became an authority on North American native cultures, and located the source of the Mississippi.



Henry Rowe Schoolcraft

In 1821 Schoolcraft published his *Narrative Journal of Travels ... through the Great Lakes to the Sources of the Mississippi River*. Commenting on Niagara Falls he says: "[Niagara] is an Iroquois word said to signify *the thunder of waters*, and the word as still pronounced by the Senecas is *O-ni-áá-gáráh*, being strongly accented on the third syllable, while the interjection *O*, is so feebly uttered, that without a nice attention, it may escape notice." This, the earliest known written statement on the meaning of Niagara, comes almost two centuries after the name was first recorded by Lalemant.

A quarter century was to pass before another opinion was offered, and once again Schoolcraft was the person responsible. By this time he had spent several years in ethnological research, and had married Jane Johnston, daughter of an Irish father and an Obijwa mother. His *Notes on the Iroquois; or Contributions to American History, Antiquities and General Ethnology*, published in 1847, includes a lengthy discourse on native languages, and presents a completely different explanation of the meaning of Niagara. "This name is Mohawk," he claims. "It means, according to Mrs. Kerr, the neck; the term being first applied to the portage or neck of land, between lakes Erie and Ontario." He cites the Mohawk word for neck — *onyara* — as proof, and lists the equivalents in Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and Seneca (*oniawl*, *oniaah*, *onyaa* and *kaniasa*).

Two comments are in order here. The first concerns Schoolcraft's informant, "Mrs. Kerr." She would have been Elizabeth, widow of Dr. Robert Kerr, an important surgeon in early Upper Canada. As the daughter of Sir William Johnson and Mary (Molly) Brant and the niece of Mohawk leader Joseph Brant, Elizabeth Kerr would undoubtedly have been quite familiar with the Mohawk tongue.

The second comment relates to a certain ambiguity in what Schoolcraft says, for he speaks of "the portage or neck of land," not the river. Four years later in 1851, in *The American Indians, their History, Condition and Prospects*, he dispels any doubt when he refers to "the neck of water which connects lake Erie with Ontario," but the same land/water ambiguity is sometimes perpetuated in

later writing. Few authors, however, go as far as Merrill in *Land of the Senecas* in 1914. He says that the neck in question is the Niagara Peninsula, almost as though the neck, head and body were all land masses (the Peninsula, New York and the rest of Ontario) rather than bodies of water.

If what Schoolcraft wrote in 1821 went unnoticed, his 1847 book did spur some discussion. Orsamus Marshall, a noted Buffalo lawyer and historian of the aboriginal peoples of western New York (later the Chancellor of the University of Buffalo), was the first to enter the fray. In an appendix to the *Narrative of the Expedition of the Marquis De Nonville against the Senecas*, published in 1849, he disputes the claim by “one writer” that Niagara derives from Nyah'-gaah', the name of a former Seneca village below Lewiston, this because the name existed long before the village did. Noting that Nyah'-gaah' has no meaning in the Seneca tongue, which is at odds with aboriginal naming practice, he concludes that the village name is simply “a reappearance of Ongiara in the Seneca dialect.”



Orsamus Marshall and Lewis Henry Morgan

That “one writer” was probably Lewis Henry Morgan, a Rochester lawyer and an expert on aboriginal kinship systems. In 1851 he refers to presumably the same Seneca village in *The League of the Ho-de'-no-sau-nee or Iroquois*. Noting the similarity between its name in Seneca, Ne-ah'-gä, and in other Iroquois tongues, he claims that one of them is the source for Niagara. But the meaning is lost, unless it is derived, “as some of the present Iroquois suppose,” from the word for neck. Of one thing Morgan seems certain — the word is not of Neutral origin. (This is puzzling, for the date he gives for the village, 1650, is improbably early, and suggests that he may be confusing it with an earlier Neutral village.) He complicates matters further by providing a map of Iroquois land on which Ne-ah'-gä appears three times: as the name for Youngstown, for the Niagara River below the falls, and for Lake Ontario. The falls themselves are labelled Date-car'-sko-sase, meaning “the highest falls” in Seneca, the word Ne-ah'-gä, he says, “being understood.”

Writing again in 1865, in *Historical Sketches and Local Names of the Niagara Frontier*, Marshall states that the modern form Niagara probably comes from the Mohawk pronunciation Nyah'-ga-rah'. The meaning in Mohawk is neck, “in allusion to its connecting the two lakes,” and was likely the same in Neutral, “as they were kindred dialects of one generic tongue.” Echoing Morgan, Marshall states

that the Seneca name Nyah'-gaah refers only to the river below the falls, and the waterfall itself is Det-gah-sko-ses. The Seneca, says Marshall pointedly, “never call it Niagara, nor by any similar term; neither does that word signify in their language *thunder of waters*, as affirmed by Schoolcraft. Such a meaning would be eminently poetic, but truth is of higher importance.”

Which would seem to settle matters, except that in 1882 Jean-André Cuoq, a Sulpician missionary, philologist and expert on native languages, states the exact opposite in *Lexique de la Langue Iroquoise*. In his view Niagara is a corruption of Iorakahre, meaning “retentir, résonner, se faire entendre, faire du bruit, être sonore,” which sound not unlike “thundering waters.” We have come full circle.

### Conclusion

Numerous others have written on the meaning of Niagara, but while some, like Bourinot in 1875 and Beauchamp in 1907, do make useful contributions, many simply repeat what previous writers have said, often uncritically and without citing sources. The early writings quoted above, by Schoolcraft, Marshall, Morgan and Cuoq, are sufficient to illustrate both the nature of the debate and the difficulty of reaching a definitive answer.

Some facts are clear, however. When Lalemant first wrote “Onguiaahra” in 1641 the Peninsula was occupied by the Neutral Indians, so it must be a Neutral word. But the Neutral nation was destroyed in 1651, the language died out, and no-one was left to explain the meaning. Subsequent attempts to do so have all been in terms of extant Iroquoian languages such as Seneca and Mohawk, which were closely related to Neutral and often used similar words to mean similar things. But, to quote one linguistics expert, such an approach is always a “hazardous task” — and especially so given the 170-year gap between the disappearance of the Neutral and the first attempt to explain the meaning. Besides, the field of linguistics was still at an early stage of development in the 19th century, and people like Schoolcraft were not only self-taught, but they were pioneers breaking new ground in the study of Amerindian languages. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that no consensus exists.

So, we are left with two principal interpretations of the name, each quite different (aside from both involving water), plus a number of other meanings, and no obvious way of deciding which is correct. The conclusion, alas, is inescapable — we may never know for certain what Niagara really means.

**Principal Sources:** (in addition to those cited in text): Thwaites and Campeau versions of *Jesuit Relations*; articles by Heidenreich on Great Lakes exploration and mapping, and Jesuit and native history; articles by Noble, White and others on Neutral history; Tanner, *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History*; Hughes, “The Early Surveys of Township No. 1.”

**Credits:** layout (Loris Gasparotto); editing (John Burtiak, Joyce Little)