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NIAGARA
RIVER AND FALLS.

FROM LAKE ERIE

To LAKE ONTARIO.

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T. Pugh

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NIAGARA RIVER FROM LAKE TO LAKE.

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UPON a prominent rock-supported, though not very steep, bluff, that rises quite a fair height above the Niagara shore, and stretches like a green ridge along the southwestern corner of the city, stand the unpicturesque ruins of Fort Porter; a place of far more importance, topographically, and of greater capabilities as a post of defence, than would be supposed from a view of its present abandoned and dilapidated condition; a condition, happily, soon to be remedied; the Secretary of War having ordered its immediate restoration and enlargement, with a view to its permanent and efficient occupancy, by a competent body of U. S. Troops.

Naturally, and especially since the beautiful green esplanade adjoining it on the east has been attached to the City Park System, the position is very attractive and pleasing; affording a charming variety of beautiful prospects, and many far-reaching views of both Lake and River. It is the one chief point of picturesque interest to which all visitors to the City are taken by their resident friends. And its many beauties justify the surprised exclamations of delight and admiration bestowed upon it by complaisant strangers. In whatever direction the eye of the sympathetic observer turns, over land or over water, there springs to view a succession of pictures of singularly diversified attractiveness and brightness. It is a glorious place for the loiterer and dreamer; for there is a lavish supply of such stuff as dreams are made of associated with the surrounding region, which, as far as the view extends, in almost any direction, is fertile in reminiscences of exploration and adventure, and prolific in traditional and provincial lore. Vestiges of vanished generations; memories of heroic deeds; ever green chronicles of illustrious and honored names; the wonder-waking trail of the spectral past; such are the inspirations that come to us from every bank and rock, and grove and pathway, that enters so pleasingly into the composition of the tranquil landscape. But occurrences and activities of more recent dates have also left here their impress, and equally invite our attention and contribute to our enjoyment. We see, at this moment, the broad stream before us enlivened by passing water-craft, of different descriptions; ferry boats, sailing yachts, and small row-boats, scudding and paddling and steaming about in considerable numbers. The small boats and sculls, just here, have a pretty hard and struggling time of it, as the current of the River at this point begins to move with increased rapidity; rushing down its impatient and perilous course, in fact,
at the rate of over seven miles an hour; though before it reaches Grand Island, some ten miles below, its velocity becomes reduced to only two and a half miles an hour; and there the small boats have a more comfortable crossing.

Just below us, on the River, and drifting towards the International Bridge, that spans the River so gracefully and lightly, about a mile farther down, we see a fine sight; a fleet of five large and shapely barques heavily-laded with sawn lumber. The vessels move easily with the current, but they are attached by long tow-lines to each other, and from the bow of the leader to the bustling, smoke-enveloped little tug, that keeps them in line and aids their progress. If we turn to the left, towards the Lake, we shall see, just entering the head of the River, another smoking tug, dragging into the current, three other similar vessels, also deeply loaded with lumber, the broad piles of which completely cover the decks. These indications of business activity, and especially of the enormous trade in lumber of which this short River is the principal channel, are but instances of similar spectacles to be seen on these waters, and even, at times, of still greater magnitude, almost every day, for six months of the year. These vessels are on their way to Tonawanda, a busy town of rapidly advancing importance, situated on the River bank at the mouth of Tonawanda Creek, about ten miles below our present position. This stirring place, is the great lumber mart of the State, from which is annually distributed, by water and rail, over 500,000,000 feet of lumber, chiefly pine in the shape of heavy timber and rough planks and boards; though a large proportion of it first goes through the local manufacturing establishments. This remarkable town, already distinguished for its enterprise, and for the large capital and shrewd intelligence engaged in the management of its immense annual business, is one of the surprises and commercial curiosities of our beautiful River, and well repays the visitor’s inspection of its massive piles and heaps of sweet-smelling wood, and its humming saw mills, and huge rattling factories of boxes and shingles, and planed flooring. This is an activity in which, of course Buffalo takes a hand, and much of the business is under the management of men who have their residence in that city. The fleet of barques that attracted our notice a few moments since, are now approaching the Bridge, the revolving girder, or draw of which, is, as we see, already turning on its central pivot pier to admit them. It is worth noting how smoothly and firmly the draw,
362 feet in length, swings on its turn-table, without sag or deflection of any kind. The whole structure is an unusually perfect example of the Pratt quadrangular Truss Bridge; a superstructure of riveted wrought iron, resting on heavy cut stone piers. There are six of these piers, and two massive abutments for the shore ends. The entire length of the roadway of the bridge is 3,652 feet, about one third of which is by embankment across Squaw Island. This fine Bridge, the only entrance into Canada of the immense transportation business of the Grand Trunk Railroad, was built by English capital, under the supervision of the principal contractor, Col. C. S. Gzowski of Toronto, aided by an able staff of Engineers, of which Mr. E. P. Hannaford was chief. The structure has been much, and very deservedly, admired, for its plain but elegant simplicity, no less than for its thoroughly tested strength and stability. Its erection was determined on, and even commenced, under the most discouraging difficulties, and in spite of much openly declared and persistently urged opposition. But there was a will enlisted in the enterprise, that could only be deterred by the impossible; and the genius and energy of the principal promoter and contractor of the undertaking, Col. Gzowski, finally triumphed over all obstacles, both natural and frivolous, and in less than three years from the removal of the first barrow of earth, the work was accomplished; and on the 27th day of October 1873, the first locomotive, under direction of an engineer of the Grand Trunk Railroad of Canada, crossed the bridge without a throb or tremor.

Returning to our point of view upon the green and breezy escarpment of the Fort terrace, we observe still other, and equally interesting evidences of affluence and business thrift and enterprise, that invite inquiry, and testify to the vast amount of energy and shrewdly directed tact, that for so many busy years has been engaged in devising and directing the various industries by which all this solid and splendid prosperity has been achieved. A village of one or two thousand pioneer settlers, however industrious, however high and hopeful in their expectations, could never have become, in the period of two generations, an influential city of two hundred and fifty thousand people, without the co-operation of sagacious heads with willing and dexterous hands. Skillful labor was needed, truly enough; not much can be accomplished, in this world, without that; but the nimble functions of foresight and push were quite as indispensable, to enable any community to bring into existence such mighty agencies as are to be discerned even within the limited scope of our present range of observation. We see steamboats of every capacity hurrying to and fro on Lake and River; and bustling and screaming tug-boats, dragging out of the city harbor half a score of heavily freighted vessels, of all burdens, varying from
300 tons to 3000, which are soon to be delivered over to the treacherous, but generally favorable, gales of the open Lake; while at our feet flow the quiet waters of the broad and world-renowned Erie Canal, the broadest, longest, deepest, and most commercially serviceable, artificial water-way on this continent, considering only the part it has performed, during the 60 years of its life, in the eastward transportation of the annual produce of the vast grain fields and timber forests of the West. Reflecting on the drowsy plodding toil of this lowly ally of human enterprise it may be allowed to have fulfilled the promises of its projectors, and to have well earned, at last, its freedom: freedom, as at present, for whoever chooses to navigate its peaceful current; the freedom of a public highway.

Its great rival, the splendid steel-linked, knightly Railroad, that runs by its side for over 350 miles, whose echoing trumpet-blare of warning and defiance hourly proclaim it the master of the situation, and champion of the road, claims our notice also, as a feature of some consequence in the circuit of our present survey. The New York Central Railroad beyond all cavil, deserves its world-wide celebrity. In strength of construction, and in perfection of appliances, as well as in methods for effecting security and speed, and comfort of travel, this superb road has no superior on this continent. It has four steel tracks, reaching from Buffalo to the Hudson River, two for freight transportation and two for the exclusive use of passenger trains; a provision which insures safety from collisions, and greatly expedites the transit. The high position attained, and the conceded success of this grand highway, which connects the Great Rivers and Lakes of the western half of our country with the sea-ports of the Atlantic, are commensurate with the thoroughness of its organization and the excellence of its management. The portion of the road here seen, is only its special diversion to Niagara Falls; to which place the Erie Railroad, which skirts the city along
its eastern and northern boundary, and the Grand Trunk Road of Canada, which, with the
popular Canada Southern, crosses the International Bridge from Black Rock to the quiet
little village of Victoria, on the opposite bank of the River, also run frequent daily trains
to and from Buffalo. Travel by railroad between these two points began, it should be
mentioned, in 1836, which was eleven years after the arrival at Buffalo of the first boat to
reach the city by the Erie Canal; an event duly celebrated by powder and banners and
speeches. The general aspect of the whole surrounding landscape as viewed from the
River, or from our present position upon this fine bluff, was quite different, fifty years
ago, from what it is now. And there was no Fort here at that time; not even a battery;
though the eligibility of the situation for the purposes of a National military post, had
already attracted the attention of Col. Jos. G. Totten, Chief of U. S. Engineers; but it
was not until the spring of 1841, after a more thorough and careful survey of the site,
that its purchase was recommended by the War Department, and authorized by an act of
Congress, which appropriated for the purpose the sum of $50,000. The land was held by
several private owners, citizens of Buffalo, and was sold to the Government in parcels,
at an aggregate cost of about $20,000, including the two story embattled stone residence
of Col. James Mackaye to whom about two thirds of the tract purchased by the U. S.
had belonged. The final transfers of the whole tract of about 28 acres to the possession
of the United States, including the title acquired by patent from the State of New
York, of the portion it held under its original Canal reservations, were not completed
till the fall of 1842. Work upon the construction of the Fort was commenced the
following year, under the personal supervision of Capt. W. D. Fraser of the U. S.
Engineers, who, after many retarding vexations, delivered the structure ready for occu­
pancy, to the War Department, in the fall of 1846; the stone mansion of Col.
Mackaye, becoming, with some few alterations, the residence and head-quarters of the
commandant of the Post, as it still continues to be.

The Fort proper, or redoubt, rather—for it had neither the magnitude nor the strength
of a fortress—consisted of a deeply sunk keep, or tower, sixty feet square, and over seventy
feet in height, from the bottom of the excavation in which it stood. It was built
of cut stone columns, and covered with six feet of earth, resting on a thick coating of
mastic and gravel, its exposed surface smoothly finished with green sodded turf. This cen­
tral tower, or redoubt, was surrounded on all sides by a quadrangular walled breast-work
and parapet, provided with flagged traverse circles for carrying an intended armament of 32
guns. Along the inner sides of this parapet, was laid a banquette, or covert-way, connected
by draw-bridges to the central redoubt, which was two stories in construction, and its walls
pierced by loop-holes in each of its four sides, for the use of musketry. Within this tower were the men's quarters, and the magazines and store-rooms for a garrison of three hundred men. The whole work, but little more than a well constructed, casemated, bomb-proof battery, was designed for an armament of 39 guns; 13 on each of the two sides that commanded the Lake and the River, 3 on each of the other sides, 3 on its north-eastern angle, and one on each corner of the central tower, in connection with its bomb-proof roof. By this disposition of its armament, every approach to the Fort, by land or water, would have been guarded, securely enough, against the advance of infantry and light artillery; but under seige, or any serious and well-equipped attack, by land or water, no commander would be willing to expose his men to the destructive assaults of the missiles and appliances of modern warfare, in so insecure a shelter. Its defensive strength, however, was never put to trial; nor were the guns supplied by the War Department for its armament, ever mounted. They lay piled up about the walls, and in other parts of the city, unused, till 1862, when they were removed to Washington, and were soon effectually heard from in the active part they afterward took in the defense of the Union.
During the war the place remained simply a garrisoned rendezvous and recruiting station for the United States troops; while the open ground around it was utilized as a temporary drilling camp for State volunteers. By a fire, at night, which originated in some accident, in one of the storage rooms of the redoubt, on the 24th of November 1863, it was burnt, and its usefulness, for any defensive purposes, quite destroyed; and it has remained a ruin ever since. After 15 years of disuse and abandonment—excepting the use of the barracks for temporarily quartering U. S. troops, withdrawn from active service at other posts,—the War Department has at last ordered the restoration and improvement of the place, a work which is not, however, to include the reconstruction of the keep, or tower. It is quite probable, rather, that what remains of that structure, will be entirely removed, and the place put in condition to be maintained, with more suitable and slightly quarters, for officers and men, as a garrisoned post; but in a shape more effective and creditable than ever before, not withstanding the demolition of the so called Old Fort; the memory of which, and of its many pleasant associations, must long be perpetuated by its familiar and honorable name; which will, of course, still remain attached to the post, whatever destiny may attend it.

But we must tarry no longer on this interesting spot, though much remains to be pointed out. We may take a parting glance, as we descend, at the two steam vessels about to pass through the gate of the bridge. One is quite large, and is over-crowded with its hilarious company of excursionists; the other, a small and handsome craft, has apparently but few people on board. These boats are on their way to Grand Island, a green and beautiful spot, that lies in the middle of the River, just in the angle where it takes its sudden trend to the north, about four miles distant from this point. The larger boat is bound for the open groves of the Island, while the smaller and more graceful yacht is carrying its quieter party of members and visitors to the tasty and attractive house and grounds of the Falconwood Club, that beautify the southwestern corner of the Island. We shall have more to say of this Island in the next part.