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EDITOR'S NOTE:

The following report, published in 1880, addressed certain concerns Olmsted had for a preservation strategy at Niagara. The report has not been reproduced elsewhere, and is provided here as an NAOP "Reprint" because it contains interesting observations on the specific qualities of vegetation and landscape composition that Olmsted felt contributed to Niagara's unique and powerful emotional effect. —*Ethan Carr*

SPECIAL REPORT
OF
NEW YORK STATE SURVEY
ON THE
PRESERVATION OF THE SCENERY
FOR THE YEAR 1879.

JAMES T. GARDNER, DIRECTOR.

ALBANY:

CHARLES VAN BENTHUYSEN & SONS.

1880.

NOTES BY MR. OLMSTED.

The few notes which I propose to append to Mr. Gardner's report will be directed to a single point.

There are those, and I fear that most of the people of Niagara are among them, to whom it appears that the waterfall has so supreme an interest to the public that what happens to the adjoining scenery is of trifling consequence. Were all the trees cut away, quarries opened in the ledges, the banks packed with hotels and factories, and every chance-open space occupied by a circus tent, the Falls would still, these think, draw the world to them. Whatever has been done to the injury of the scenery has been done, say they, with the motive of profit, and the profit realized is the public's verdict of acquittal.

It must be considered, therefore, that the public has not had the case fairly before it.

The great body of visitors to Niagara come as strangers. Their movements are necessarily controlled by the arrangements made for them. They take what is offered, and pay what is required with little exercise of choice. The fact that they accept the arrangements is no evidence of their approval.

The real question is, how, in the long run, is the general experience of visitors affected by measures and courses which are determined with no regard to the influence of the scenery?

I have myself been an occasional visitor at Niagara for forty-five years. My attention was first called to the rapidly approaching ruin of its characteristic scenery by Mr. F. E. Church, about ten years ago. Shortly afterwards, several gentlemen, frequenters of the Falls, met at

my request, to consider this danger, one of them being a member of the Commission now reporting on the subject. I have thus had both occasion and opportunity for observing the changed courses into which the public has been gradually led and of studying these courses and their results.

When the arrangements by which visitors were conducted were yet simple; when there were few carriages, and these little used; when a visit to the Falls was a series of expeditions, and in each expedition hours were occupied in wandering slowly among the trees, going from place to place, with many intervals of rest, there was not only a much greater degree of enjoyment, there was a different kind of enjoyment from any now generally obtained. People then were loth to leave the place; many lingered on from day to day after they had prepared to go, revisiting ground they had gone over before, turning and returning; and when they went away it was with grateful hearts and grateful words.

The change from this to what is described in the second section of the Commissioner's report has been gradual and, while something must be attributed to modern ease of travel, a greater influx of visitors and to habits of quicker movement and greater restlessness; much must also be referred to the fact that visitors are so much more constrained to be guided and instructed, to be led and stopped, to be "put through," and so little left to natural and healthy individual intuitions.

The aim to make money by the showman's methods; the idea that Niagara is a spectacular and sensational exhibition, of which rope-walking, diving, brass bands, fire-works and various "side-shows" are appropriate accompaniments, is so presented to the visitor that he is forced to yield to it, and see and feel little else than that prescribed to him.

But all the time there are some who, because of better information and opportunities, and as the result of previous training, get the better of this difficulty, and to these the old charm remains. Take as an illustration, the experience of the writer of the following passage. It is that of a man who has traveled extensively for the express purpose of observing scenery and comparing the value,

as determined by the influence on the imagination, of different types of scenery. It is recorded in a little book (*Alpine Flowers*, By William Robinson, F. L. S. London: John Murray, 1875) which treats more especially of the scenery of the Alps and of what are designated "nature's gardens" among them.

But says the author:

"The noblest of nature's gardens that I have yet seen is that of the surroundings and neighborhood of the Falls of Niagara. Grand as are the colossal Falls, the Rapids and the course of the river for a considerable distance above and below possess more interest and beauty.

"As the river courses far below the Falls, confined between vast walls of rock—the clear water of a peculiar light-greenish hue, and white here and there with circlets of yet unsoothed foam—the effect is startlingly beautiful, quite apart from the Falls. The high cliffs are crested with woods; the ruins of the great rock walls forming wide, irregular banks between them and the water, are also beautifully clothed with woods to the river's edge, often so far below that you sometimes look from the upper brink down on the top of tall pines that seem diminished in size. The wild vines scramble among the trees; many shrubs and flowers seam the high rocks; in moist spots, here and there a sharp eye may detect many flowered tufts of the beautiful fringed *Gentian*, strange to European eyes; and beyond all, and at the upper end of the wood-embowered deep river bed, a portion of the crowning glory of the scene—the Falls—a vast cliff of illuminated foam, with a zone towards its upper edge as of green molten glass. Above the Falls the scene is quite different. A wide and peaceful river carrying the surplus waters of an inland sea, till it gradually finds itself in the coils of the rapids, and is soon lashed into such a turmoil as we might expect if a dozen unpolluted Shannons or Seines were running a race together. A river no more, but a sea unreined. By walking about a mile above the Falls on the Canadian shore this effect is

finely seen, the breadth of the river helping to carry out the illusion. As the great waste of water descends from its dark gray and smooth bed and falls whitening into foam, it seems as if tide after tide were gale-heaped one on another on a sea strand. The islands just above the Falls enable one to stand in the midst of these rapids, where they rush by lashed into passionate haste; now boiling over some hidden swellings in the rocky bed, or dashing over greater but yet hidden obstructions with such force that the crest of the uplifted mass is dashed about as freely as a white charger's mane; now darkly falling into a cavity several yards below that level of the surrounding water, and, when unobstructed, surging by in countless eddies to the mist-crested Falls below; and so rapidly that the driftwood dashes on swift as swallow on the wing. Undisturbed in their peaceful shadiness, garlanded with wild vine and wild flowers, the islands stand in the midst of all this fierce commotion of waters--below, the vast ever-mining Falls; above, a complication of torrents that seem fitted to wear away iron shore; yet there they stand, safe as if the spirit of beauty had in mercy exempted them from decay. Several islets are so small that it is really remarkable how they support vegetation; one, looking no bigger than a washing-tub, not only holds its own in the very thick of the torrents just above the Falls, but actually bears a small forest, including one stricken and half cast-down pine. Most fortunate is it that these beautifully verdant islands and islets occur just above the Falls, adding immeasurably to the effect of the scene."

I have spoken of the *distinctive* charms of Niagara scenery. If it were possible to have the same conditions detached from the Falls (which it is not, as I shall show), Niagara would still be a place of singular fascination; possibly to some, upon whom the Falls have a terrifying effect, even more so than it is now.



Goat Island map engraved by Wagner and Debes of Leipzig, Germany, and published in 1904 by Charles Scribner's Sons of New York.

Saying nothing of the infinitely varied beauties of water and spray, and of water-worn rock, I will, for a purpose, mention a few elements which contribute to this distinctive charm.

The eminent English botanist, Sir Joseph Hooker, has said that he found upon Goat Island a greater variety of vegetation within a given space than anywhere in Europe, or east of the Sierras, in America; and the first of American botanists, Dr. Asa Gray, has repeated the statement. I have followed the Appalachian chain almost from end to end, and traveled on horseback, "in search of the picturesque," over four thousand miles of

the most promising parts of the continent without finding elsewhere the same quality of forest beauty which was once abundant about the Falls, and which is still to be observed in those parts of Goat Island where the original growth of trees and shrubs has not been disturbed, and where, from caving banks, trees are not now exposed to excessive dryness at the root.

Nor have I found anywhere else such tender effects of foliage as were once to be seen in the drapery hanging down the wall of rock on the American shore below the Fall, and rolling up the slope below it, or with that still to be seen in a favorable season and under favorable lights, on the Canadian steeps and crags between the Falls and the ferry.

All these distinctive qualities—the great variety of the indigenous perennials and annuals, the rare beauty of the old woods, and the exceeding loveliness of the rock foliage—I believe to be a direct effect of the Falls, and as much a part of its majesty as the mist-cloud and the rainbow.

They are all, as it appears to me, to be explained by the circumstance that at two periods of the year when the northern American forest elsewhere is liable to suffer actual constitutional depressions, that of Niagara is insured against like ills, and thus retains youthful luxuriance to an unusual age.

First, the masses of ice, which, every winter are piled to a great height below the Falls, and the great rushing body of ice-cold water coming from the northern lakes in the spring, prevent at Niagara the hardship under which trees elsewhere often suffer through sudden checks to premature growth; and, second, when droughts elsewhere occur, as they do, every few years, of such severity that trees in full foliage droop and dwindle, and even sometimes cast their leaves, the atmosphere at Niagara is more or less moistened by the constantly evaporating spray of the Falls, and in certain situations frequently bathed by drifting clouds of mist.

Something of the beauty of the hanging foliage below the Falls is also probably due to the fact that the effect of the frozen spray upon it is equivalent to the horticultural process of “shortening in;” compelling a denser and closer growth than is, under other circumstances, natural.

Reference is made at page 9 of the Commissioners’ report to a marvelous effect in scenery above the Falls.

It is that to which the following account by the Duke of Argyle applies:

“The River Niagara, above the Falls, runs in a channel very broad, and very little depressed below the general level of the country. But there is a steep declivity in the bed of the stream for a considerable distance above the precipice, and this constitutes what are called the Rapids. The consequence is that when we stand at any point near the edge of the Falls, and look up the course of the stream, the foaming waters of the Rapids constitute the sky line. No indication of land is visible—nothing to express the fact that we are looking at a river. The crests of the breakers, the leaping and the rushing of the waters, are still seen against the clouds, as they are seen in the ocean, when the ship from which we look is in the trough of the sea. It is impossible to resist the effect on the imagination. It is as if the fountains of the great deep were being broken up, and that a new deluge were coming on the world. The impression is rather increased than diminished, by the perspective of the low wooded banks on either shore, running down to a vanishing point and seeming to be lost in the advancing waters. An apparently shoreless sea tumbling toward one is a very grand and a very awful sight. Forgetting, then, what one knows, and giving oneself to what one only sees, I do not know that there is anything in nature more majestic than the view of the Rapids above the Falls of Niagara.”

FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED