

History of Lower Niagara River Region

The Lower Niagara River Region is historically significant for many reasons, but primarily for:

- Its geography and its relation to Niagara Falls in the early commercial development of the Great Lakes region
- Its role in the War of 1812 and
- Its position as the last stop of the Underground Railroad for escaping slaves who were seeking freedom in Canada

Lewiston was the birthplace of the world famous Niagara Falls about 12,000 years ago, near the present location of Artpark. Since then, the power of Niagara Falls has eroded south through seven miles of solid rock. You can see the path the Falls has taken by following the Niagara Gorge route which begins in Lewiston. During the 1600s and 1700s, when the French and British traders settled the area, Lewiston was instrumental in the development of the Great Lakes region because it was the first drop-off point for shipped goods and materials on the Niagara River to be routed around the Falls and then transported to spots south and west.

Just a few miles north of Lewiston in Youngstown, the French erected a permanent fortification at Old Fort Niagara in 1726, known today as the "French Castle." The British gained control of the Fort in 1759 during the French & Indian War and held the post throughout the American Revolution, but were forced, by treaty, to yield it to the United States in 1796. Youngstown was one of the first settlements to grow outside of Fort Niagara in the late 1700s.

During the War of 1812, Lewiston was the staging area when the United States invaded Canada. On December 13, 1813, a large troop of British soldiers landed in both Lewiston and at Fort Niagara. At the conclusion of the attack, Fort Niagara had been recaptured by the British and many residents, including children had been killed and every building but one in Lewiston had been burned to the ground. Hustler's Tavern was the only building left standing. Some say it was because the British officers remembered too many good times there sipping a "cocktail" - a drink that the owner Catherine Hustler is credited with inventing. Fort Niagara was returned to the United States in 1815 at the end of the War of 1812. This was Fort Niagara's last armed conflict, and it thereafter served as a peaceful border post.

Before 1825 and the opening of the Erie Canal, Lewiston was called the "Gateway to the West" and was more populated than the nearby City of Buffalo. It was the social center of the Niagara Frontier and was home to the finest hotel west of Albany, which still stands today and is known as the Frontier House.

Lewiston was the final stop on the Underground Railroad for escaping slaves from the south seeking freedom in Canada during the early to mid-1800's. Lewiston's citizens were staunch supporters of the anti-slavery movement and many volunteered to help smuggle thousands of slaves across the international border to the west. Lewiston's "station master" Josiah Tryon, a local tailor hid and guided the slaves at the First Presbyterian Church on Fifth Street, the Episcopal Church on Plain Street (now the Lewiston Museum) and at "the house of seven cellars" on the river, now a private residence.

Many of the homes and buildings constructed in the 1800s still stand proudly in Lewiston. While in office, President Carter deemed the village of Lewiston, "the most historical square mile in America." For those wishing to learn more about the rich history of the Lower Niagara River Region, historical walking tours are available, as well as haunted history tours in September and October.