

Introduction

There is yet another and very important channel. . . . I mean the Welland Canal, cut across the Isthmus of Niagara in Upper Canada, which by uniting Lake Erie with Lake Ontario, affords a communication between the western lakes and the seas, either through the St. Lawrence, or by the Oswego Canal to Syracuse, and thence by the Grand Canal to the port of New York.

—Captain Basil Hall, *Travels in North America*¹

Captain Basil Hall was a renowned British naval officer and classic travel writer who visited North America in 1827 and 1828. During this time, Hall journeyed extensively throughout the continent, carefully recording his impressions of the advances in land and water transportation that heralded the ensuing canal age. As a captain of the Royal Navy who had spent nearly half of his life in service to the British Empire, Hall was fascinated with developments in transportation in the United States and Canada, and their impact on the age-old question of competition and commercial rivalry. After several weeks inspecting the Erie and Welland Canals, Hall offered some surprising observations on these rival transportation systems in North America. “At first sight,” he wrote, “it may seem that the Welland Canal, by offering superior advantages, will draw away from New York a portion of the rich produce of the state of Ohio, of Upper Canada, and of the other boundless fertile regions which form the shores of the higher lakes, yet there seems little doubt that the actual production of materials requiring transport will increase still faster . . . and that ere long additional canals,

besides these two, will be found necessary.” Hall concluded that “the upper countries alluded to will derive considerable advantages from having a free choice of markets, as they may now proceed either to New York by the Erie Canal, or by the Welland Canal, down the river St. Lawrence, according as the market of New York or that of Montreal shall happen to be the most favourable, or the means of transport cheapest.”²

Hall’s emphasis on the complementarities between the New York and Welland canal systems contrasts with much scholarly and popular writing about these canals and the larger stories around them—Canadian-American commercial competition, national rivalry, and westward expansion and market development generally. Whether in historiography or popular understanding, the story of the competing Canadian-American canal systems, and their broader narratives, seems a pivotal, settled, and almost legendary story with a clear message. The classical account begins with New York City-led economic expansion and America’s vulnerable military position along the New York frontier during the War of 1812. Seeking a leg up in the competition for the lucrative trade of the Midwest, and fearing another war with Great Britain and Canada, New York State built an interior canal to Lake Erie that bypassed British territory altogether. An alternative “Lake Ontario route” called for a canal around Niagara Falls that would have connected Lakes Erie and Ontario, and then linked the Oswego to the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers. But it was feared that once trade reached Lake Ontario, it would be lost to the St. Lawrence and Montreal market. By opting for the direct route between Lake Erie and the Hudson, Niagara Falls was deliberately left as a major barrier between Montreal and the interior.³ However, according to the same settled story, Canada swiftly responded to the Erie Canal by building the Welland ship canal between Lakes Ontario and Erie—a vital component in the St. Lawrence–Great Lakes water system that allowed Canadians to compete more effectively for the western trade, while also creating a market between the disparate provinces.⁴ Again, the United States went on the offensive by undertaking massive improvements to the New York canal system, but the introduction of the railroad, combined with the Panic of 1837 and continuing improvements to the St. Lawrence–Welland seaway, diminished the Erie Canal’s importance. Much canal scholarship continues to echo this conventional account.⁵

This classic understanding of Canadian-American national rivalry and competition has been seemingly confirmed by twentieth-century developments. The successful Welland Canal became an integral part of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1954, but the Erie Canal sank into oblivion. Buffalo’s

once vibrant position as a leading commercial port on Lake Erie was made obsolete following the enlargement and improvement of the Welland system.⁶ Even today, as New York State focuses on revitalizing the Erie Canal through tourism and recreation, the Welland Canal continues to serve as a viable part of the seaway, allowing large lake vessels and supertankers to navigate in and out of the continent.

Of all the borderland regions in North America, Niagara's location has been central in shaping the conventional story of conflict and rivalry between the Canadian and American transportation systems and their broader narratives. The Niagara River and Falls forms a natural barrier between the two peoples, and since 1783 Canadians and Americans found themselves on opposite sides of an international border that created the newly established British province of Upper Canada and the American Republic (fig. 1.1). As the *water gateway* to the West, the Niagara River and Falls held strategic value for both countries. As one historian observed "in the long-range commercial strategy of New York State" the Niagara barrier played a vital role in the Erie Canal's building. The threat posed to national security during the War of 1812, and the questionable loyalty of many upstate New Yorkers who took advantage of Canadian markets during the protracted conflict, helped persuade the New York legislators that the Niagara River must remain a barrier because "they could circumvent it by means of the Erie Canal, whereas Montreal could not."⁷ In Canada, the Welland Canal's location has similarly been viewed as a direct response to America's propinquity along the Niagara frontier during the 1812 imbroglio. "The memory of this conflict," wrote one Canadian source, ruled against a canal at Niagara. Instead, in this same view, the Welland was deliberately built some considerable distance from the American frontier.⁸ Canada's Niagara peninsula, which pointed "like a spear at the heart of the American union," became a symbol for the contested canal age in this region.⁹

It was also at Niagara that North America's three most important canals—the Erie, Oswego, and Welland—connected and converged, making travel more accessible and opening the region to commerce, tourism, and improvement in general on a grand scale. Yet, the Niagara tourist industry, like the canals, has similarly been described in terms of competing national ideologies and interests. The story of this attraction, and tourism generally, has been seen through the lens of the natural wonder of the Falls itself, and the natural border it marks between the United States and Canada. For Elizabeth McKinsey, the power manifested in Niagara Falls becomes an icon of American prowess and patriotism. Patrick McGreevy, who has

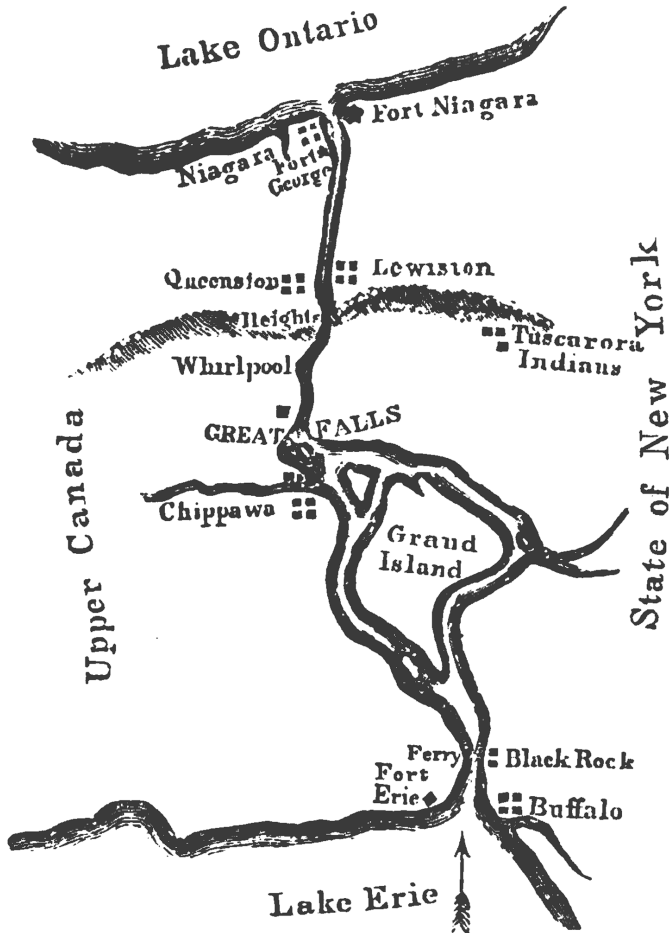


Figure 1.1. **The Niagara Borderland.** John M. Duncan, *Travels Through Parts of the United States and Canada in 1818 and 1819*. Courtesy of the New York Public Library.

written extensively on Niagara Falls, argues in his thought-provoking article “The End of America: The Beginning of Canada”(1988) that the Falls have different meanings for the United States and Canada which can only be understood “in relation to two very different ideologies of nationalism.”¹⁰ Just as nation-centered history has shaped much writing on the canal age, scholars have discussed the tourist industry as distinctive and separate United States and Canadian stories.

This book tells a different story—one that examines the canal age from a borderland and transnational perspective. Despite the existence of the international boundary line and the ongoing geopolitical contest between the United States and Great Britain for control of the continental interior, Canadians and Americans embarked on a remarkable series of canal projects and other cross-border improvements driven not simply by continental rivalries and routings, but by the life, commerce, and connectivity of the Niagara region. Uninhibited by the international border, residents in upstate New York and Upper Canada built roads, bridges, postal and ferry services, and water transport systems that allowed for easier access to and around the Falls, while also creating an interlocking, interconnected transportation network in the Niagara–Great Lakes Basin. Personal and familial ties forged by the late loyalists, the existence of an early cross-lake trade, and the potential to develop commerce and tourism in the region contributed to the porosity of the border. By the War of 1812, and even during and after, lucrative commercial and cultural connections continued to be forged across the border.¹¹ This book's title, *Overcoming Niagara*, refers to the many ways in which Canadians and Americans mutually sought to overcome natural and artificial barriers, building an integrated, interlocking canal system that strengthened the borderland economy while also propelling westward expansion, market development, tourism, and progress generally.

A major premise of this book is that north-south transportation and communication linkages in the Niagara–Great Lakes region suggest little relationship between the international boundary line and the broader geopolitical interests of the United States and Great Britain.¹² Nowhere was this more evident than during the building of the Erie Canal. Despite the broader narrative of Canadian-American commercial competition and rivalry, Upper Canada contributed to, and benefited from the Erie Canal in untold ways. Indeed, the historic debate over the Lake Ontario route's challenge to the Erie Canal's route revolved far less around a United States–Canada or New York–Montreal rivalry, than around the claim that the lake route might strengthen commercial ties with Canada while also sending substantial trade to the New York market. Many American merchants and shippers were awakened to the profitable, if illegal trade with Canada during the embargo and War of 1812 and in the postwar era became keen champions of the Lake Ontario route and closer Canadian connections. Even Erie Canal founder De Witt Clinton, who inspected both routes in 1810 as Canal Commissioner, spoke favorably of the Lake Ontario channel's capacity to bring economic and personal benefits to both sides of the border. No

matter where a person stood on the Erie Canal, or on which side of the boundary they resided, the advantages of maintaining close ties between the neighboring countries were rarely disputed.

While conventional histories emphasize the Erie Canal's role in creating a canal boom throughout the United States, little attention is given to the American channel's influence in sparking enthusiasm, and making possible, the construction of the Welland Canal in neighboring Canada.¹³ The Welland Canal projectors looked to the United States for support in their undertaking, knowing that the Erie Canal was almost completed, and that surplus laborers, engineers, contractors, technology, and capital would be available to assist in the upper province. Considered in its North American context, the Welland Canal (which unlike the Erie barge canal promised to serve large Great Lakes vessels) was welcomed as alleviating some of the early frustrations and delays being reported on the American channel, while at the same time opening a potentially more competitive and efficient means of moving American goods in and out of the interior. Conversely, the Welland Canal provided a major conduit through which Canadian goods could be transhipped to New York, thanks to the Erie and soon to open Oswego Canal. Whether destined for the Montreal or New York markets, the Welland Canal promised to facilitate trade on both sides of the border. It was this compatibility and interconnectivity that Captain Basil Hall spoke of in the quote opening this introduction where he described the New York and Welland Canal system in terms of a "a generous and legitimate rivalry."

To focus on a uniquely *Canadian* or *American* canal age obscures the complex and nuanced history of the transportation era in the Niagara–Great Lakes region. The building of the Canadian and American canal systems was more about promoting cross-border linkages and associations than it was about conflict and rivalry. Nothing underscores the persuasiveness of the borderlands' approach more than the story of the Oswego Canal. A major commercial link in the chain of inland navigation between the United States and Canada, the Oswego Canal was more than a feeder or *lateral* extension of New York's grand Erie Canal.¹⁴ As often described in nation-centered history, the Oswego Canal was designed to offset improvements on the St. Lawrence–Welland connector that threatened to take trade from the American side. By opening a channel linking the Oswego port on Lake Ontario to the Erie Canal at Syracuse, trade would be re-routed back into the Erie Canal system, and America's bid for the West restored.¹⁵ However, when viewed through the borderland and transnational lens, the Oswego Canal looks very different—not only was it a cord binding east and

west, but an international waterway funneling goods through the Welland Canal in transit to both Canadian and American markets. A contemporary American newspaper celebrated the Oswego's development announcing: "Another triumph of human ingenuity and wisdom is achieved. The hitherto insurmountable barrier of the Niagara is overcome and the waters of the Erie may now mingle with those of Ontario, bearing upon their bosoms the bounties of civilization and the gifts of the arts."¹⁶ Meanwhile, across the border in Upper Canada, the Oswego Canal was being heralded as an important inland improvement, permitting American traffic from Lake Ontario and Erie to flow into the Welland Canal, bringing added utility and business to the Canadian system. In the following years, the newly fashioned Oswego-Welland line served as a major thoroughfare for inland merchants, travelers, and commerce on both sides of the international border.¹⁷ As will be demonstrated in detail in chapter 5, the Oswego's building was not simply some strategic move in the larger imperial contest for military and political dominance of the interior so much as a complementary and logical component of the integrated Canada-United States transportation network emerging in this cross-border region.¹⁸

Overcoming Niagara tells the story of how an emerging Canadian-American canal system promoted commerce, market development, tourism, and progress generally in the Niagara-Great Lakes basin. Though it deals with commerce and trade, it is not fundamentally an economic study so much as a broader history of development that traces the many linkages that transcended the border and helped shape a transnational region. While *Overcoming Niagara* shows that a significant cross-border trade occurred in this porous region, trade data on which economic studies depend was not systematically recorded for the period under review. Scholars note for example, that in Upper Canada "no systematic records of exports or imports were kept prior to 1849" and similar problems relate to trade data on the American side.¹⁹ However, as more than one scholar attests, export trades and their related industries do not necessarily or only reflect local regional development and activity.²⁰ Smuggling for example, while not quantifiable, was pervasive and important to the economic health of the borderland community. The existence of "a large clandestine trade in butter and eggs across the Niagara River into Buffalo," and "a notoriously large illicit trade in horses and cattle" indicate a substantial and regular flow of trade back and forth across the border.²¹ As discussed more thoroughly throughout the following pages, during the period of the embargoes, smuggling was such a common practice that "smuggling agents" could be hired to facilitate the

illicit trade.²² In the wake of the transportation revolution, smugglers regularly ran goods to and from the New York and Welland canal systems.²³ While not recordable in terms of volume or tonnage, smuggling was commonplace, and constituted an important measure of cross-border trade.

In addition to smuggling, population movements and settlement patterns provide convincing evidence of cross-border economic activity in the Niagara–Great Lakes borderland region. In his study of the Genesee Valley before the Erie Canal, Neil McNall estimated that sales to “migrants, dependent settlers, and new comers to Upper Canada exceeded the marketing of goods to Albany and down the Susquehanna and St. Lawrence Rivers.” Though primarily interested in Canadian development, Douglas McCalla noted significant cross-border trades between Upper Canada and the adjacent American states for the same period. Following the War of 1812 and the onset of the canal age, a sustained flow of capital, goods, livestock, migrant laborers, technology, and information crisscrossed the border providing further evidence of transnational economic linkages. Local residents engaged in commerce and cross-lake trade, schooners and steamers plied the lakes funneling products in and out of both countries’ canal systems, and “judging by typical cargo manifests, they also carried goods headed for local or regional destinations on both shores.”²⁴ Both countries leading canal visionaries and promoters invested heavily in the idea that economic growth and prosperity would follow north-south transportation and communication lines.

The same canal sponsors who saw American and Canadian commercial developments as mutually compatible also saw great social and recreational significance in the integrated canal system. Because many canal leaders in upstate New York and Upper Canada were affiliated with the benevolent reform movement that swept through North America during the 1820s and 1830s, social and moral improvement found its way to the hundreds of canal- and boatmen who labored on the international waterways and lakes. Scholars have long recognized the importance of the Erie Canal in fermenting social activism along its eastern and westerly paths, but virtually no attention has been given to the north-south direction of these benevolence societies that made their way through the interlocking New York and Welland canal system.²⁵ The cross-border nature of reform in this region indicates how nation-centered history has obscured the transnational orientation of the reform era that brought improvement to both sides of the boundary line.

Cleaning up North America’s inland canals, rivers, and lakes also aided commerce and tourism at Niagara during the second quarter of the

nineteenth century. Canadian and American canal promoters who profited from the commercial waterways and their moral improvement gave equal attention to the complementary New York and Welland canal systems in promoting tourism in the region, and as a tourist lure themselves. While much scholarly attention has focused on the Erie Canal's importance in creating a tourist boom at Niagara, little focus has been given to the Welland, or for that matter the Oswego Canal, in popularizing a more encompassing Northern Tour that brought swarms of visitors to the region. This perspective on the relation of the canals to the Falls will, in chapter 6, suggest another dimension of *Overcoming Niagara*. While scholars focus on the tourists' contemplation of nature's sublime and picturesque as they approached the Niagara region on an Erie Canal packet, I concentrate on how canals and other internal improvements were attractions *in their own right*, creating as much wonder and awe as did the majestic Cataract itself.²⁶ Indeed, sources suggest that these man-made wonders were as fascinating to visitors as the natural wonder of the Falls, and a big part of the tourist experience. Now, in addition to observing the landscape or popular battlefields and ruins in the wake of the War of 1812, themed tours of the Erie, Oswego, and Welland Canals were added to the tourist's itinerary. Travel and emigrant guides, newspapers, and hotel advertisements all sponsored the trans-border tourist agenda despite later writing framing Canadian and American tourist industries as separate and competing experiences. By emphasizing cooperation and connectivity, rather than conflict and rivalry, it becomes clear how the Canada–United States transportation revolution overcame natural and artificial barriers to propel economic development, and even shaped the nature of tourism and progress in general.

This study focuses centrally on the concerns, interests, and motivations of local politicians, canal leaders, businessmen, and developers—all of whom were crucially involved in the inland canal systems. While government leaders and investors in the more distant metropolises may have been concerned about losing out to the competing St. Lawrence and New York commercial systems, in the Niagara–Great Lakes Basin it was the local shippers, merchants, forwarders, and businessmen who saw benefits in the alternative routes and markets of an integrated, interconnected canal system—regardless of which flag their produce sailed under. Equally important to this study are the thousands of migrant laborers who worked on the interlocking, interconnected canal system, and the concomitant growth of the reform spirit that found its way to both countries through the Erie, Oswego, and Welland lines. Because commerce and transportation were largely male

domains, this study necessarily focuses on their experiences. However, where sources permit, this study acknowledges women, Native peoples, and slaves whose stories are revealed through the efforts of reformers, as well as local canal leaders and promoters who supported progress more generally in the Niagara–Great Lakes borderland region.²⁷

In terms of my approach to this subject, *Overcoming Niagara* follows the story of the canal age in the Niagara–Great Lakes Basin from its early inception in 1792 until the end of the first major phase of canal construction in North America in 1837. Chapter 2 analyzes the development of cross-border transportation and tourism in the vital Niagara region in the years leading up to the War of 1812. Isolated from their respective metropolises, residents from New York and Upper Canada promoted north-south transportation and communication lines resulting in increased commercial, recreational, and personal opportunities across their shared border. As the North American Canal Era unfolded during the first half of the nineteenth century, transnational linkages would develop more tangibly as both countries undertook the building of a vast integrated, interconnected transportation system that promoted westward settlement, expansion, and improvement generally.

The next three chapters analyze North America's most important canals—the Erie, Oswego, and Welland—as cross-border commercial and cultural linkages along the northern borderland. The importance of maintaining close commercial, recreational, and personal ties with Canada as witnessed in the historic debate over the Erie Canal's route is the theme of chapter 3. Chapter 4 demonstrates that the Welland Canal was the logical next step in bringing cross-border commercial and recreational development and expansion to the Niagara–Great Lakes Basin, not a reaction to the threat of the Erie Canal. Chapter 5 continues the theme of Canadian-American cross-border ties as most tangibly embodied in the story of the Oswego Canal as a critical link to Upper Canada through the Welland Canal, bringing business and progress to New York State, while also facilitating greater commercial and recreational ties with the neighboring province. This chapter also focuses on the wave of Canadian and American reformers who zealously carried their message of spiritual and moral improvement through the interconnected New York and Welland canal systems.

The final chapter analyzes the connection between the canal age and tourism at Niagara. After showing how canals and other internal improvements at Niagara gave new shape and meaning to the Northern Tour as a distinctly transnational experience, the chapter culminates in a unique reading of a bizarre tourist spectacle. In 1827, many thousands of spectators

were drawn to Niagara to watch the schooner *Michigan*, with a cargo of live animals on board, go crashing over the stupendous Falls. This bizarre event has long fascinated historians of tourism and spectacle, but on closer inspection, the chapter shows that the whole episode can be read as a surprisingly explicit and even literal comment on the changing commercial and cultural landscape of the region during the height of the North American canal age.

Any study that emphasizes a borderlands approach to the canal age must address the sensitive question of aggressive American expansionism.²⁸ In contrast to conventional history seeing the Erie and its tributary canals as part of a larger political and commercial plan to secure dominance of the continental interior and Canada, I will consider how common interests in promoting transportation, trade, and tourism, and improvement generally had the effect of constraining and reshaping ideas of expansionism in the Niagara–Great Lakes Basin.²⁹ As one scholar observed, “The northern boundary between the secessionist republic and the continuing British Empire” was not a cause of concern or focus of American territorial expansion. Indeed, had the United States coveted the region during the War of 1812, Americans “most directly bound into the hydrography” of the St. Lawrence and broader Great Lakes would have strongly opposed it. Furthermore, the same author concluded, the completion of the Erie, Champlain, and Oswego Canals after 1815 removed the problem of the British stranglehold on the St. Lawrence, thereby defusing “any potential American pressure for redefinition of boundaries or controls relating to this great natural—but naturally limited—trafficway.”³⁰ In a similar vein, another scholar wrote: “Despite the integrative logic of the transportation system and the jingoistic words and covetous glances that some American politicians and businessmen cast toward Canada, it might be quipped that America’s ‘republic of farmers’ did not take the land that lay to their north because, in the main, America’s famers—and their commercial capitalist elites—did not wish to take it (and certainly not at the risk of war with Britain).”³¹ *Overcoming Niagara* considers how the complementary and cooperative nature of the Canada–United States transportation revolution muffled the more distant expansionist tendencies in the porous Niagara–Great Lakes region.

In *Permeable Border*, the aptly titled study of the Great Lakes Basin between 1650 and 1990, co-author John Bukowczyk writes that “the transnational approach has largely been a missing link in understanding the Canada–United States relationship.”³² As a counterpoint to the familiar nation-centered narrative, *Overcoming Niagara* explores the commercial and cultural linkages of the two peoples as they mutually created an interconnected,

interlocking system of navigation in the Great Lakes Basin—a system that overlapped, and at times conflicted, with both countries broader visions of transportation. While government officials and national/colonial leaders dreamed of transportation projects to bolster their commercial and military defenses and bind the distant frontier settlements to their respective metropolises, many merchants, politicians, and business leaders in the Niagara–Great Lakes region were making calculations based on their local interests and needs rather than ideology, political loyalties, or national ambitions. While not immune to the larger continental forces, this study focuses on the local and regional cast of players whose role in promoting cross-border commerce, tourism, expansion, and progress generally redefined and reshaped the meaning and outcome of the North American canal age in this region. The following pages tell the story of how frontier people imagined and created canals and other internal improvements that reshaped the economic, social, and cultural landscape, thereby overcoming Niagara and turning the barrier of the Falls into a symbol of regional cross-border interconnectedness, commonality, and development.