

Introduction

Lost Pages

Ralph Waldo Emerson:
The Value of What Has Been Lost

(1803–1882)

On his third visit to Niagara Falls in 1863, Ralph Waldo Emerson admired its “immense plenty.” Today, this visit represents all that might have been lost.

The prominent American essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson made it a point to visit Niagara Falls while on speaking tours to neighboring cities beginning in the 1850s. When he arrived for his third time at the Falls on January 4, 1863, he was inspired anew for, “its immense plenty.” “The vast quantity of water that pours over it in five minutes suggests the huge continent from which it draws its supplies,” he wrote in a letter to his daughter.¹ North America—and more likely in Emerson’s view, America—symbolically lent Niagara Falls its vast power, even if, in 1863, it was a nation divided.

The start of 1863 was promising. President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on the first of that new year. To celebrate, Emerson read his “Boston Hymn” to a New England audience: “To-day unbind the captive, / So only are ye unbound,” he declared. The call was clear: “unchain the slave:” so that “Free be his heart and hand henceforth / As wind and wandering wave.”² American freedom should mean freedom for all.

After delivering his poem, Emerson left for a western lecture tour. As print production and literacy increased in the nineteenth century, a reading public emerged, one interested in learning but typically without access to formal education. Popular lectures often filled this gap. Taking a short break from his lecture tour, Emerson stopped off at Niagara Falls, touring the American side. He signed his name in the Bath Island Register (now Green Island), where he likely paid a toll to cross the bridge to Goat Island to take in the views. (See figure 2.) Emerson's reference to that "vast quantity of water" suggests that the Falls were not fully frozen at the

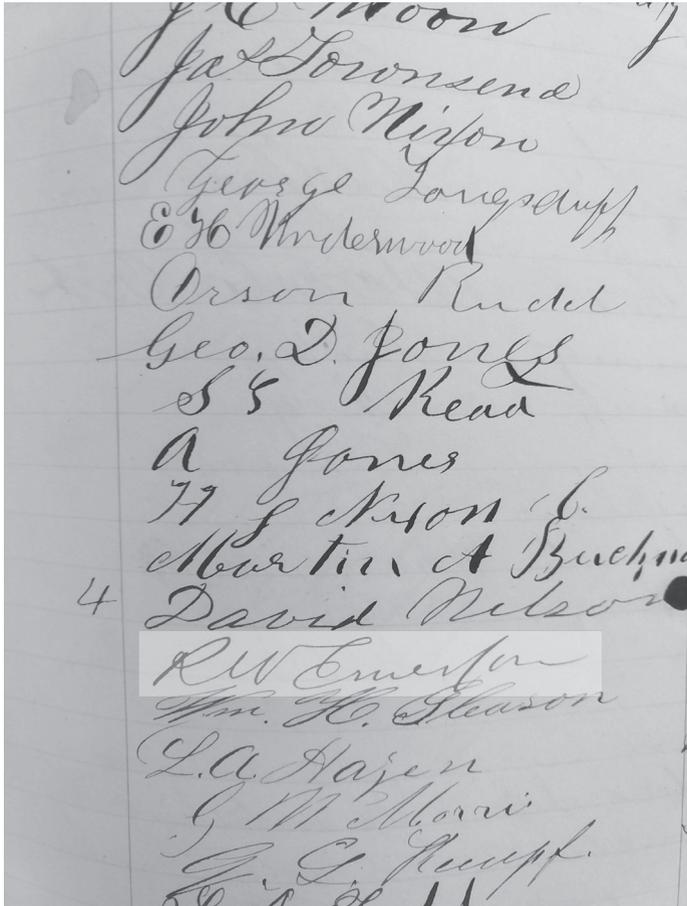


Figure 2. Ralph Waldo Emerson's signature on January 4, 1863. Bath Island Register, August 6, 1862 to August 8, 1863. Niagara Falls Public Library.

time of his early January visit. Still, winter travel from New England to Western New York may not have been without hazard and a good night's rest was in order. Emerson checked into the American House hotel, "the only hotel open in winter," and had gone to bed early.

At 3:00 a.m., shouts of "Fire!" sounded alarm through the house. The sense of panic that ensued is conveyed in the breathless, rushed way Emerson recites the night's events to his daughter Edith, even from the safety of the Eagle Hotel in Rochester, New York three days later:

I put on my clothes or some of them, & gathered up my properties as many & as fast as I could in the dark, & got down stairs through a cloud of smoke & cinders, and found women clothed in blankets & barefooted in the hall & in the street, & great distress everywhere. The house was burned out thoroughly, before all our eyes, & nothing left but the four walls. All the furniture, & quantities of clothing, & much money of the guests & of the proprietor, were lost. I had left my baggage at the Suspension Bridge, & had with me only my black-bag; but contrived to lose my ticket from Buffalo to Chicago, and some brushes, &c. no insurance.³

The local newspaper, the *Niagara Gazette* reported that the fire "spread with such fearful rapidity to the main building that the halls and rooms were filled with smoke before any general alarm was given."⁴ Though Emerson's experience was briefly cited in American newspapers over the subsequent week, none would convey the enormity of his survival. (See figure 3.)

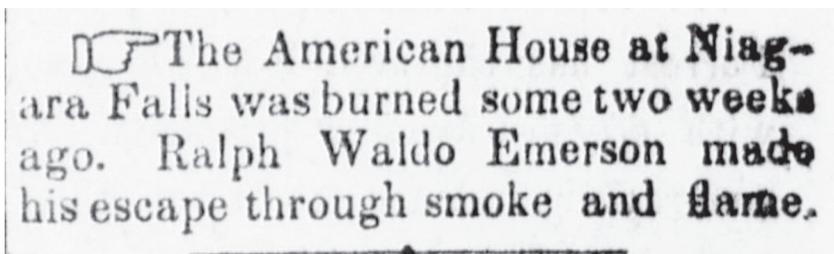


Figure 3. "The American House," *Winchester Daily Bulletin*, Winchester, Tennessee, February 10, 1863, image 1. Image provided by the University of Tennessee, Chronicling America.

Upon his escape, Emerson walked two miles to the Niagara Suspension Bridge.⁵ With good fortune, he ran into the superintendent of the Michigan Central Railroad, whom Emerson knew from Concord, Massachusetts, and, “as if posted at the bridge by special act of providence, he insisted on giving Emerson a pass from Detroit to Chicago, thus saving him a large part of the expense of replacing the lost ticket.”⁶

It might be said that the proverbial third time had worked its charm for Emerson—and for Niagara Falls, which did not earn the dubious distinction of causing the death of one of the most renowned nineteenth-century American literary celebrities.⁷ Emerson survived. But, his and others’ losses were notable. Of the American Hotel, as Emerson put it, there was “nothing left.”

Recovery

Not surprisingly, the headlines that dominated the Wednesday morning, January 7, 1863 edition of the *Niagara Gazette* were the national and local news stories cited above: “Proclamation by the President of the United States of America” and, in “Local and Vicinity News,” the “Burning of the American Hotel.”⁸ Emerson is not mentioned, however, and so he and Niagara Falls went their separate ways in the historical archives.

What *is* surprising is that Emerson, who wrote about the importance of nature to the mind and spirit, did not publish work explicitly on Niagara Falls. But others did. Many others. The Falls tested the powers of description. From the sublime to the satirical, writers observed the landscape in all its facets, from the awe inspiring to the disappointing. Among the most notable visitors who continue to garner attention today are Anthony Trollope, Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Oscar Wilde, and Mark Twain. Little has been written, however, of less “sublime” moments famous writers encountered—like Emerson’s hotel fire—which nevertheless add richness to the region’s sense of place.

Since the early nineteenth century, writers went to the Falls as tourists and as travelers. Most went to make a living by writing travel essays. A rising middle class with the money and leisure to travel could do so more easily thanks to evolving technologies of mobility—the stagecoach, canal, steamboat, and railroad. Innovations in printing and papermaking contributed to increases in print material and in literacy rates. Guidebooks and periodicals that printed travel essays proliferated. Landscape

tourism was on the rise, and Niagara Falls was an obvious draw, with its picturesque views and promise of sublime experiences.

Sometimes writers stayed only a day or two, long enough to note their impressions in a “letter” to be published in daily newspapers. Others immersed themselves for a week or longer to try to capture the spirit of the place, what Oscar Wilde referred to as the “feeling of sublimity”—of awe and transcendence—the many guidebooks and other travel writers promised. It might be said that Niagara made writers of tourists and tourists of writers.⁹ But not all who came to Niagara were so privileged.

The Niagara River and its surrounding lands were long a site and source of livelihood, travel, and trade for indigenous people before and after settler wars and international borders carved up traditional territories. For fugitive slaves, the border was both a place of promise and peril. A site of conflict and of peace, the Falls have long been a symbol of cultural and personal significance for indigenous, refugees and for pilgrims from of all walks of life.

A century ago, the once-commissioner of the State Reservation at Niagara, Charles Mason Dow, undertook a monumental task—to compose a comprehensive bibliography of writings on Niagara Falls. Dow “could not help feeling,” he explains in 1917, “that very few of the millions who make their hurried pilgrimage to the wonder of the western world . . . ever dream how fascinating and old and vast the literature of the Falls is.” Dow’s solution was to compile this vast material in one place, in “a bibliography and anthology of the Falls.” At the very least, he wanted to convey “some slight idea of the great extent of Niagara literature.”¹⁰ In the days before digitization and accessibility to manuscripts and other ephemera, Dow’s bibliography was no small achievement—1,400 pages across two volumes of writing in history, geography, botany, literature, music, and more. The more well-known of these impressions of the Falls continue to be cited in local histories and in tourist guidebooks. Additionally, the newly established Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center near the site of the former Suspension Bridge brings to life the stories of freedom seekers and abolitionists, including Harriet Tubman and the Rev. Josiah Henson, whose narratives are included in this present collection.

Still, the vast *literary* heritage of Niagara Falls remains primarily in the archives. Well-known authors from the nineteenth century who shaped national literatures, and who helped to shape the symbolic landscape of the Falls, neither lived there nor died there.¹¹ Though literary tourism

sites exist along the Niagara frontier,¹² there are no famous writers' homes or gravesites to visit in the region of the Falls. As Emerson's experience highlights, the hotels they stayed in during their day- or weeklong visits burned down or were destroyed to make way for newer structures. No heritage museum exists to collect memories of their travels.

The sites writers visited are transformed too. The protruding Table Rock on the Canadian side of the Falls has long since crumbled into the gorge. Terrapin Tower, a stone observatory once hovering at the brink of Horseshoe Falls on the American side—a site, according to novelist and editor William Dean Howells, “where half the civilized world has inscribed its names, in different styles of character, on the walls”—was blown up and has been replaced by a concrete outcrop and railings.¹³ Biddle Stairs, which led down into the gorge from Goat Island, was destroyed in 1927, two years after an elevator was installed to provide access to the Cave of the Winds.¹⁴ Plastic ponchos rather than the oilskin capes and hats of the past are now donned at Cave of the Winds and Journey behind the Falls, on the *Maid of the Mist* and the *Hornblower*; and so much more.

Nevertheless, the writers included here stood on the brink of the gorge, descended below the Falls, saw and heard that great rush of silver-green water thunder its way over the rocky ledge, and felt the spray from its ancient pools. And though the traces are few, these exist too—signatures in hotel registers, photographs, newspaper articles, and other ephemera that writers saw or touched or wrote, gathered here for the first time.

An Anthology of Anecdotes

After four centuries of writings on the Falls, how does one make the story of Niagara new?¹⁵ Unlike Dow's earlier work, this collection incorporates anecdotes of writers' experiences with a curated anthology of some of the most engaging Anglo-American writing on the Falls from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.¹⁶ Included are previously untold stories, authors not included in other literary histories of the Falls, new takes on well-known material, or tales and texts just too good to exclude.

In researching the many voices included here, through the textures of events and impressions that made their way into journals and archives, old patterns surfaced, themes that travel across historical time and resonate still today: the Falls as restorative, or a business opportunity; the Falls

as freedom, or a border; the Falls a work of art, or an object to be used; the Falls as a place of peace, or of conflict. Similar to Lumley's "types," I have chosen to cluster the authors around these themes, rather than to march them singularly through chronological time. But while I offer ways to approach the material included, neither chapter introductions nor author sketches can fully account for the writers' incredibly rich lives and texts or how these help to shape the meanings and uses that have been made of the Falls.

This book is not meant to provide a definitive literary legacy then, but to begin an archive of stories otherwise lost from the pages of history and to contribute to the cultural heritage of the region. Critiques may be made that the names are too traditional or that there are notable omissions. This book is neither a beginning nor an end to the literary story of Niagara Falls. But hopefully the writers selected are recognizable to a variety of readers, their stories compelling in their own contexts, and their words sympathetic to human experience, demonstrating how individual lives are intertwined with historical unfolding, connected to broader issues and events and yet uniquely particular.

The title of this book is taken from a poem by an unknown hand, however—generally unknown other than locally, that is. Col. Peter A. Porter was a descendent of a military and business family who helped to establish Niagara Falls as a place of commerce and tourism and is celebrated as a Civil War hero in his own right. But while he knew a few prominent writers and artists, and was a poet who could also sketch, he was not himself famous for these talents.¹⁷ Still, his verse remembers a long tradition of those drawn to Niagara's brink, a history Porter understood as meaningful even by the middle of the nineteenth century. What writers "shed from countless quills"—"Niagaras of ink"—are worth revisiting today.