

History of Niagara Falls

The Formation of Niagara Falls

In geological time, Niagara Falls is quite young. The formation of the falls began at the end of the Ice Age. Large torrents of water were released from the melting ice, draining into what is now the Niagara River. Some 12,000 years ago, the water plunged over the edge of the Niagara Escarpment, a cliff at what is now Lewiston, New York. The force of the water wore away the rock layers and Niagara Falls moved upstream, eventually reaching its present location. Learn more about the formation, geology and history of Niagara Falls. An area 12,300 years in the making, Niagara Falls State park is a natural wonder unlike any other.

The Niagara Falls formation is a slow process that continues today. The annual freezing and thawing of the Niagara River still wears away at the rocks under the surface. Gradual erosion and periodic rockfalls steadily move Niagara Falls farther upstream. However, modern influences have caused the falls to wear away less quickly. Remedial work has been done to preserve the falls and the volume of water has been reduced by diversion for hydroelectric power.

Niagara Falls Discovery

Native Americans living in the Niagara region were most likely the first people to behold the power of Niagara Falls. The first European to document the area was a French priest, Father Louis Hennepin. During a 1678 expedition, he was overwhelmed by the size and significance of Niagara Falls. When he returned to France, Hennepin published an account of his travels in "A New Discovery." The book brought Niagara Falls to the attention of the western world for the first time and inspired further exploration of the region.

The development of the rail system in the 1800s opened Niagara Falls to throngs of visitors and made it a prime destination for travelers from all over the world. In 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte's young brother, Jerome, honeymooned with his American bride at the falls. He is sometimes credited with starting Niagara Falls' honeymoon tradition.

The Power of the Falls

The potential power of Niagara Falls attracted industrialists who worked to harness its force using waterwheels to drive their mills and factories. The world's first large-scale hydroelectric generating station opened in Niagara Falls in 1895. However, the

plant used the direct current (DC) system, which could only transmit electricity 100 yards. Then, in 1896, the famous electrical engineer Nikola Tesla proved that he could transmit electric from Niagara Falls to Buffalo, New York, using his new alternating current induction motor. This was the first long distance commercial use of the AC system of electricity that is used around the world today. The current Niagara Gorge Discovery Center is located above the site of the Schoellkopf Power Station, from which electricity was first sold as a commodity.

Hydroelectricity is one of Niagara Falls' most important products. Together, power plants on both the American and Canadian sides of the falls produce nearly 2.5 million kilowatts of electricity. Under an international treaty, the flow of water over Niagara Falls is reduced during the night to allow more of the water to flow into intakes used for power generation. This plan ensures that the Falls' natural beauty remains unaffected during prime viewing hours.