

## WHEN THE MOUNTAIN BECAME THE ESCARPMENT

The Niagara Escarpment hasn't always been known by that name. Early in the 19th century it was often referred to as the Mountain, and of course it is still called that in Hamilton and Grimsby today. We in eastern Niagara have largely forgotten the name, though it survives in the City of Thorold's motto "Where the Ships Climb the Mountain."

So when did the name Niagara Escarpment first come into use? And what about the area's other "Niagara" names, like Niagara Falls, Niagara River and Niagara Peninsula? When did these first appear? I don't pretend to have definitive answers — there are too many sources I have not seen — but I can suggest some preliminary conclusions.

The name Niagara is definitely of native origin, though there is no agreement about its meaning. Some say it is derived from a Mohawk or Neutral word meaning "at the neck joining the head to the body" (the head and body being the two lakes), but others suggest meanings such as "point of land cut in two," or the less likely "thundering waters" and "resounding with great noise."

Whatever the meaning, the first record of the name is found on old maps, this with reference to the waterfall itself. On Champlain's map of 1632 the waterfall is marked but not named, but on Sanson's map of 1656 it is labelled Ongiara Sault. Maps by Bressani in 1657 and de Creux in 1660 use the same spelling, Ongiara, which is just one of forty or so variants of the name Niagara that have been recorded. Not until the 1680s do we encounter the modern spelling, as in Saut de Niagara on Coronelli's magnificent map of 1688.



A portion of Coronelli's map of 1688. Note Saut de Niagara and the multiple names for the Great Lakes.

But Coronelli was not the first to put "Niagara" on the map. That distinction belongs to Father Louis Hennepin, the Recollect priest who was the first European to describe Niagara Falls from personal observation. In his *Description de la Louisiane*, published in 1683, five years after his visit, he speaks of "le grand Sault de Niagara," and labels it thus on the accompanying map. This is the form that prevails thereafter, and it is the spelling used for Fort de Niagara, established by the French at the mouth of the river in 1726. The English followed suit, though on many early maps (e.g. Moll 1715, Mitchell 1782) they use the name Great Fall of Niagara rather than Niagara Falls.

In his *Description* Hennepin also refers to "la belle Riviere de Niagara," so the name Niagara River is clearly as old as the name Niagara Falls. However, the first mention of the river name (in the form Onguiaahra) comes even earlier, in Jesuit Father Lalement's *Relation* for 1641. Other early writers, like Sulpician missionary Galinée in 1670, simply refer to it as part of the St. Lawrence.

Strictly speaking, of course, the Niagara River isn't a river at all, but a strait — a narrow channel linking two larger water bodies. Unlike most straits, however, Niagara has rapidly flowing water, and in that respect behaves very much like a river. And that is what the vast majority of writers and mapmakers call it. But references to the Strait of Niagara are not uncommon, both in older sources and in modern writing. The *Preliminary Articles of Peace* signed by Sir William Johnson and the Seneca in 1764 contains the earliest example I have found.

If the Niagara River is a geographical impostor, it's not the only one. Another is the Niagara Peninsula. Technically this is an isthmus, a strip of land linking two larger pieces of land — the opposite of a strait if you will. It is only the Niagara River that creates the illusion of a peninsula, that is a piece of land projecting into an ocean or a lake.

References to the Isthmus of Niagara are very rare. Indeed, I know of only two, one in an article titled "Bandana on Colonial Undertakings" in *Blackwood's Magazine* for 1826, and the other a map headed "Sketch of the Isthmus or Belt of Niagara" by Bonnycastle in 1827. The two earliest references to Niagara Peninsula come a year later: a "Map of the Niagara Peninsula showing ... the Welland Canal" drawn by George Keefer of Thorold, and a "Statement to Stockholders Resident in England" by the Welland Canal Company. Other examples are found in later Company documents.

The fact that these early references to the Peninsula all involve the Welland Canal is no coincidence. Prior to the 1820s there was no peninsula as such — it was simply not recognized as a geographical feature. In the extensive body of documents relating to the War of 1812, for example, there are plenty of references to Niagara, Niagara District, Niagara Falls, Niagara Frontier, Niagara River, and so on, but nothing about the Niagara Peninsula. Three things changed this: first, the establishment of the international boundary along the Niagara River, which created a political peninsula if not a geographical one; second, the War of 1812, which served to accentuate the divide; and third, construction of the Welland Canal, which focussed attention on what William Hamilton Merritt called “the country between Lakes Erie and Ontario” and led to its emergence as an entity in its own right.

The last and youngest of the four “Niagara” names is Niagara Escarpment, which does not appear until the mid-19th century. Prior to this, the escarpment was usually called a mountain, hill or ridge, and less commonly a terrace, ledge, rampart, precipice, slope, declivity or heights (sometimes Queenston heights), or some combination of these terms, such as mountain ridge. Some observers got really carried away. In 1744 Jesuit Charlevoix wrote in his *Journal d'un Voyage ... dans l'Amerique Septentrionale* of “a frightful mountain, that hides itself in the clouds, on which the Titans might attempt to scale the heavens!” Others were more restrained. Thus Daniel Hazen, in the field notes for his 1788 survey of Grantham Township, speaks simply of “the mountain.”

Smith in his 1799 *Short Topographical Description of Upper Canada* calls it Mount Dorchester, a westward extension of the name already used for the heights in Stamford Township, while Parsons in his 1835 *Guide to Travelers* refers to it aptly as “the Slope which occasions the Falls.” To Merritt and the others who built the Welland Canal in the 1820s the escarpment was still a mountain, and on early 19th century maps it is labelled Limestone Ridge, Great Northern Slope,

High Ridge, Great Ridge, Mountain Ridge, and even Branch of the Alleghenys.

Now the thing that distinguishes an escarpment from other “elevated” features is that it has a steep slope on one side only, which means that terms like hill, mountain and ridge are arguably less than ideal. Lord Selkirk put his finger on the problem in this 1803 entry in his *Diary*: “Queenstown is a beautiful situation at the foot of the Mountain which divides the high plains of Lake Erie from the level of Ontario — it is a mountain only on one side — & falls very imperceptibly on the other.” He was searching for the word escarpment. Why didn't he use it?

The answer is that the word did not exist, at least not in the geographical sense. It is derived from the French military term *escarpe*, meaning a steep bank forming the exterior surface of a fortification. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, escarpment was first used as a geographical term in 1815, in Bakewell's *Introductory Geology*. By the 1840s our mountain was being called an escarpment, and the first known reference to Niagara Escarpment comes in the 1850 *Report of Progress* of the Geological Survey of Canada (it was also sometimes called the Middle Silurian Scarp, in recognition of the geological formation that underlies it).

Adoption of the name was not immediate. Thus the English geologist Charles Lyell, in his 1855 *Travels in North America*, uses the words Niagara and escarpment, but never puts the two together! And I know of no map that names the Niagara Escarpment prior to Munro's map of 1872 showing the proposed line for the Third Welland Canal, though it may well be labelled as such on earlier maps in the geological literature.

**Principal Sources** (apart from those cited in the text): Dow, *Anthology and Bibliography of Niagara Falls*; historical maps in Brock University Map Library; *Third Report of the Select Committee ... into the Management of the Welland Canal*; Cruikshank, *Documentary History of the Campaign upon the Niagara Frontier*; Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations*.