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THE VILLAGE OF BUFFALO—1800 TO 1832  
by Wilma Laux

**B**UFFALO today is a city of 42.67 square miles, hemmed in by Lake Erie, the Niagara River, and neighboring towns, but once several communities stood within this large tract.

Near the end of the eighteenth century, a cluster of log houses destined to be the beginning of the city was perched on a bluff, 20 to 25 feet above meandering Buffalo Creek. Below, an uninhabitable, mosquito-ridden marsh stretched for a quarter of a mile or more between Lake Erie and the foot of the cliff.

Two miles down the Niagara, farther north along an escarpment, was a scattering of dwellings beside a ferry landing. This spot was called Upper Black Rock because of an unusual triangular outcrop of dark stone jutting into the river to form a natural harbor and wharf. Eventually the settlement grew along the river for two miles or so until it joined Lower Black Rock, another small grouping of cabins. A ferry carried passengers across the Niagara to the flourishing village of Fort Erie which had been established by the British before the Revolutionary War.

Between Buffalo and Black Rock a squatter's town existed from 1812 to 1825. This was Sandytown consisting of a few huts nestled among sand dunes near the foot of the present Porter Avenue. This small town looked out over the swift stretch of the river marked on early maps as the "little rapids."

Four miles east of the mouth of Buffalo Creek was the first large community within the boundaries of the present city, the Indian village known as the Buffalo Creek settlement. It was set up in 1790 by the British to provide for a large group of homeless Seneca refugees. They had been driven from central New York by John Sullivan and James Clinton, two of George Washington's generals.

Strangely enough, this area seems not to have held permanent Indian settlements. Earliest records show that when two Jesuit missionaries from France came to the Niagara region in 1640, the land on both sides of the river was hunting territory for the Neutres or Neutrals, the Hurons, the Eries, and the Iroquois League of Five Nations.

When La Salle made his second trip into the region in 1678 to explore and to build a fur-trading vessel, he had to deal with the Senecas who had become masters by destroying those other tribes who would not join the Iroquois Confederacy. The Senecas allowed him to lay the keel of the *Griffon* beside the Niagara River, on the east bank just south of Cayuga Creek. The hull was lowered into the water and the



*View of Lake and Fort Erie from Buffalo Creek — engraved by John Black, 1811.*

ship towed up river to the mouth of Scajaquada Creek in the shelter of Bird and Squaw Islands. Here, on August 7, 1679, sail was set and the *Griffon* passed into Lake Erie, the first vessel to sail upon the lake.

The French tried for years to gain a foothold in the Niagara area. Until the elder Joncaire persuaded his adopted Seneca brothers to allow the French to build a "stone trading post" at the mouth of the Niagara, they had no success. This Joncaire built a trading post and a home beside the lower landing in present-day Lewiston. In 1758 his son Daniel, known as Chabert Joncaire, was sent to "la Rivière aux Chevaux," the French name for Buffalo Creek. Here he established a small trading post which would give the French a forwarding place for men and supplies between Fort Niagara and Presque Isle, the present city of Erie, Pennsylvania. It was the first settlement by Europeans within the boundaries of the present city of Buffalo. The British capture of Fort Niagara the next year, 1759, brought an end to the frontier's French history.

Immediately after the Treaty of Paris of 1763 concluding the colonial wars, the British explored the Niagara River carefully to locate good landing and forwarding sites. Joncaire's post was evidently not to their liking, since Fort Erie on the western shore of the river was chosen for a settlement. The Indians at Buffalo Creek found this fort a more convenient source of supplies than Fort Niagara, although there was still much traveling on the old portage trail between the two places.

In spite of the punishing Clinton and Sullivan campaign, Indian raids continued on American pioneer families. The first white women to live in Buffalo were two captives from Pennsylvania who came here with their captors. Rebecca Gilbert and her brother Benjamin had been adopted by Old Smoke, a Seneca Chief. Elizabeth Peart, their sister-in-law, was taken into another family. None stayed here long, for by 1782 all three had been reunited with their families, but not without a

struggle. The captors of the Gilbert children had even gone so far in trying to hide them as to move to another location near the stream known today as Smoke's Creek.

Some well-known Senecas were residents of the Buffalo Creek reserve. Farmer's Brother lived just outside the future village of Buffalo on the creek at Farmer's Point. Red Jacket lived a mile or two beyond, within the Indian village near what is now Indian Church Road. John O'Bail, or Cornplanter, was a frequent visitor from his own grant on the Allegheny River in Pennsylvania. Both Red Jacket and Farmer's Brother were buried in the village burying ground, as was Mary Jemison — a white woman who lived long among the Indians. She spent the last of her 93 years on Buffalo Creek. She and the others now have their last resting places elsewhere and only a historical marker at Seneca and Buffum Streets shows the site of this old cemetery.

After the Revolutionary War, the British still had garrisons at Fort Niagara, Lewiston, and Fort Schlosser as well as at Fort Erie, so the Indians were completely under their control. The United States had to set about changing the situation.

In order to secure Iroquois co-operation and to make arrangements for the purchase of their lands, the United States Government made a treaty with the Six Nations in 1784 at Fort Stanwix. New York State reserved a "mile strip" along the Niagara. This was a much reduced



*Joseph Ellicott surveying Buffalo in 1804  
from Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society diorama.*

portion of the forfeit that had been paid by the Senecas for their massacre in 1763, at Devil's Hole. They had slaughtered travelers and soldiers passing along the old Niagara portage. This treaty also laid aside certain specified areas which were reserved for Indian habitation and opened the rest of the area for white settlement.

An early map shows ten small parcels of land retained by the Senecas around their villages and a large tract extending east from the mouth of Buffalo Creek. The rest of Western New York was bought by a group of Dutch investors, the Holland Land Company. Joseph Ellicott, a Pennsylvanian, was engaged to develop these immense holdings. He laid out roads, townships, and between 1801 and 1804, the village of Buffalo. His first surveying here was to lay out a transit line about half-way across the vast, forested Holland Purchase extending from Lake Ontario to Pennsylvania. This provided a point from which to measure the property accurately and to survey roads.

When Ellicott first reached Buffalo Creek in 1797, he found a small group of settlers already there. A tract two miles square in the Indian land at the mouth of Buffalo Creek had been given to Captain William Johnston by his wife's Seneca relatives. He, his wife, and their small son had been living since about 1789 in a log house north of what is now Exchange Street and east of Washington Street, the first permanent settlers of Buffalo. Johnston permitted Cornelius Winney, a Hudson Valley trader, to build a log hut on his land on the banks of Little Buffalo Creek near what is now Washington and Quay Streets. Johnston's half-brother Captain Powell, who lived just north of the village of Fort Erie, had supplied Winney with money to set up a trading post that would be near the Seneca village on Buffalo Creek and would intercept some of Fort Erie's trade. Joseph Hodge, a Negro, soon had a cabin and trading store near Winney's and also sold liquor, probably after Winney returned to the Canadian side about 1797 when the British at last left the east side of the Niagara.

Another early settler was Martin Middaugh, a cooper, who, with his daughter Jane and son-in-law Ezekiel Lane, came to Buffalo after having tried unsuccessfully to settle in Lewiston and in Chippawa, Ontario. Both places had many Tory refugees, known in Canada as United Empire Loyalists, who did not find Lane, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, a welcome neighbor. This family lived in a double log house on some of Johnston's property south of Exchange Street and just west of Washington.

Two log taverns were mentioned by travelers who passed in 1795, but they were so unfurnished that the visitors had to sleep on the floor in their cloaks and milk had to be brought from Fort Erie. John Palmer, an Indian trader as well as an innkeeper, had come across the river

the year before and built his tavern at the foot of the Indian trail which is now Main Street. He returned to Fort Erie as soon as the Holland Land Company survey was made. Mr. Skinner had built the second one at the edge of the Terrace.

In 1797 the Ransom family arrived. Asa Ransom was a jeweler who made gold beads and silver trinkets for the Indians. His daughter, Sophia, was born the next year, the first child born in Buffalo. The following year the family moved to Clarence Hollow. Here they took up cheap land offered by the Holland Land Company to anyone who would agree to keep a tavern on sites laid out at ten-mile intervals from Buffalo Creek eastward. The

Ransoms built a two-story house of hewn logs with two main rooms at either end of a broad hallway. Joseph Ellicott stayed with them often.

When Ellicott saw the cluster of log homes on his first visit, he realized that Johnston's holdings were located where a commercial waterfront might someday be expected to grow. He cannily persuaded Johnston to arrange with the Senecas to include Johnston's property in the sale of lands to the Holland Land Company. In exchange, Johnston was promised several pieces of property in various parts of the village Ellicott hoped to lay out. This gave Johnston the first recognized deed issued by the company.

The year before, a Canadian fur trader, Sylvanus Mabee, opened a store north of the present Exchange Street on the west side of the muddy, brush-lined Indian trail then called the Batavia Road. At the same time came William Robbins who was a skilled blacksmith. John Crow operated such a popular tavern on the southwest corner of Washington and Crow (Exchange) Streets that he had to add a frame section to the original log structure. He sold his business to Joseph Landon in 1806 and obtained a license to operate a ferry across Buffalo Creek.

It was customary for the United States Government to supply a blacksmith to each Indian community to keep their agricultural tools repaired. Shortly before Buffalo was surveyed, David Reese came and



*General Peter Porter  
portrait in Buffalo and Erie County  
Historical Society.*

# Buffalo Gazette.

BY S. H. AND H. A. SALISBURY.

BUFFALO :

TUESDAY, AUGUST 11, 1812.

## From Detroit.

Judge Porter of Schlosser, arrived in this village last evening, directly from Detroit, to whose politeness we are indebted for the following *Important Information* :

That when he left Detroit the 29th ult. Gen. HULL was strongly fortified in Canada, nearly opposite Detroit—his *whole* force was about 3000—his intention was not to act offensively till he should have received reinforcements from the Governors of Kentucky and Ohio, to whom he had sent *expresses* for 2000 soldiers, and which were daily expected.

Judge Porter farther stated, that information was received at Detroit, that about

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Newspaper — from collections of  
Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

set up a forge on the south side of Seneca Street near Washington. In 1808 he bought land across the street where he operated "Ye Sign of Ye Broad Axe" until he sold out in 1825. This was one of the three structures left standing when the village was burned in 1813.

Joseph Ellicott had much difficulty in convincing the directors of the Holland Land Company to let him lay out a town site where he saw so many possibilities. It was not until late in 1802 that permission came. One of Ellicott's fears was that the state would open up its "mile strip" to settlers and that a town would start at the Black Rock ferry landing.

Buffalo's first doctor, Cyrenius Chapin, had to wait four years between the time of his first visit to Buffalo and the time the survey was completed to buy a lot. He and his family spent two years in Fort Erie until their home was built in 1805. Meanwhile he took care of patients on both sides of the river.

The first frame house in the village was built in 1804 by Louis Le Couteux on Exchange Street opposite Crow's Tavern. This well-educated Frenchman, an escaped emigré from the French Revolution, used a front room for a drugstore. He also assisted Ellicott as the local land agent.

Erastus Granger was sent to become Indian Commissioner of the Six Nations. In 1805 he was made postmaster of the "District of Buffaloe Creek" and had the first post office in a corner of the tavern. Mail came once every two weeks until 1809, when it came weekly. He built at Pearl and the Terrace, then acquired a huge tract outside the village. This later became Forest Lawn Cemetery.

Joseph Ellicott found the settlers in his new village to be a stubborn lot. He wished to give a more dignified name to the place than "Buffaloe Creek" and tried "New Amsterdam" in honor of his Dutch employers, but this the townsfolk would not have. A few years later he had a greater disagreement with the village board. Ellicott had retained for himself a hundred-acre reserve extending back from Main Street between Swan and Eagle Streets. He planned to build a fine home in the middle of a



five street intersection where he could have a good view of everything that went on in the village. Unfortunately, the citizens decided that the principal street should run straight through this reserve. In the midst of the argument, Ellicott moved to Batavia with the remark: "I intend to do all I can for Batavia because the Almighty will look after Buffalo."

By 1806, the place began to look like a permanent settlement. There were 16 dwellings, eight on Main Street, three on the Terrace, three on Seneca, and two on Cayuga. Serving the townfolk were two stores, three smithies, two taverns, and a drugstore. The first school was erected for \$157.37½ on the southwest corner of Pearl and Swan in 1808. A "grammar" school was opened in 1810 or 1811 in the courthouse built when the village became the county seat for Niagara County. The courthouse also furnished a meeting place for the "Congregational and Presbyterian Church" which was organized in 1812. Just to the south stood a sturdy stone jail.

The latter two county buildings were erected by the Holland Land Company at the order of the state legislature. Augustus Porter of Niagara Falls was the first judge and Erastus Granger was his assistant. Asa Ransom became sheriff and Louis Le Couteulx, the county clerk.

With a local population of almost 500, the Salisbury brothers, Smith and Hezekiah, published the first newspaper, the weekly *Buffalo Gazette*. These editors poked so much fun at putting the final "e" on the village name that eventually the custom of spelling it "Buffaloe" was discontinued.

About this time, the rivalry between Black Rock and Buffalo began. Upper Black Rock was just a ferry house and a tavern below the bluff and a store run by Benjamin Barton and Peter B. Porter, a lawyer and the younger brother of the county judge. Three families, two of them Negro, were the only others near the "rock." Less than a mile downstream at Lower Black Rock were two or three other families. In 1805 a law was passed allowing the "mile strip" along the Niagara rapids to be sold. Here, at the mouth of Scajaquada Creek, was a sheltered harbor where the *Griffon* had been completed.

When Porter became Western New York's Representative to Congress, he entered a resolution to change the customs house from Buffalo to Black Rock. Erastus Granger vigorously protested that Buffalo already had forty-three families, was a county seat, and the usual point of entry from Canada. The "compromise," made in 1811 by Porter's friend, President James Madison, made the entry port Black Rock from April to December and Buffaloe Creek for the balance of the year.

The portage and transfer business of Porter and Barton grew enormously when a complicated scheme for carrying salt from Salina (Syracuse) to Pittsburgh was instituted. Since the roads were only slightly

modified Indian trails, goods were shifted from one means of transportation to another. The wagon, lake boat, ox-cart, rowboat, lake vessel, and river boat were used.

Most of the families in Western New York were nearly self-sufficient. Even those who lived in the villages kept livestock and grew most of their food among the stumps in their yards. Salt, lead, gunpowder, and iron for tools had to be purchased. Small luxuries such as loaf sugar, molasses, tea, white flour, printed calico, new bonnets, and tobacco made life a bit easier and more pleasant in the dark and drafty cabins. Such items had to be bought or bartered. To trade for these goods, the pioneer needed saleable products. Tall white pines could be sold for masts. Heavy white oak timbers were in demand at shipyards. Charcoal, leather, and some surplus grain could be produced on the small farmsteads. Hay made an ideal export crop. There was a demand in England for potash to be used in making soap as well as for fertilizer, and the settlers certainly had wood ashes to boil up in big cauldrons to make this potash. Transportation to market was most vitally needed. No community could progress without this important link.

Talk began in 1807 of building a canal across New York State, and possible routes to Lake Erie were examined. Joseph Ellicott used his influence to have the plan adopted. So did Peter Porter, in spite of the fact that it would mean the end of his portage business if a continuous waterway were to be developed avoiding the falls in the Niagara. However, war interrupted all plans.

President James Madison signed a declaration of war against Great Britain on June 18, 1812. Although the British had withdrawn their garrison from Fort Niagara a few years earlier, the strength of their fortifications at Fort Erie was feared. There also seemed to be more than the usual coming and going between the Senecas on Buffalo Creek and their kinsmen in Ontario.

Congressman Porter was chairman of the important House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee which, in 1811, had sent to the President a recommendation of war although most New Yorkers were against war at this time. When war was declared, Porter resigned his seat and returned home to become quartermaster general of all the New York Volunteers.

Porter had the men under his command establish a line of seven batteries along the Niagara River. A blockhouse and Fort Tompkins were built not far from the present Peace Bridge to protect the harbor. In early October, he sent Lieutenant Jesse D. Elliott to Lower Black Rock to order the building of three vessels in the Black Rock shipyard.

For the first few months of the war, the enemies on either side of the river merely exchanged occasional shots and continued to wonder





*Eagle Tavern, 1830 — painting in Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.*

what the Senecas would do. Supply wagons brought ammunition; companies of infantry and artillery arrived; raw recruits were drilled; soldiers were quartered in almost every house in the villages along the frontier.

Just before dawn on July 11, 1813, a surprise British force of 250 landed below Scajaquada Creek, ransacked the navy yard fortifications, and set afire the barrack of Fort Tompkins. After a hot fight the British were forced to retreat before General Porter's men and thirty Indians under Farmer's Brother.

A Six Nations Council at the Buffalo Creek village decided on July 25 to fight as allies of the United States, to the relief of the local residents. Cornplanter and Farmer's Brother were made colonels. Red Jacket become a second lieutenant. Erastus Granger, their trusted agent, was commissioned a major and made their paymaster. Throughout the autumn, the Indians accompanied General Porter or Dr. Chapin, who was now a colonel, on frequent raids along the Canadian side of the Niagara as far as Fort George, near present Niagara-on-the-Lake.

More good news came in the early fall when Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry defeated the British at Put-in-Bay near Presque Isle in a naval action now called the Battle of Lake Erie. Three of the ships prepared at the Black Rock navy yard took part in the engagement.

In mid-December, a cruel and foolish deed was ordered that horrified both the Americans and the British. The American General George McClure, occupying Fort George, decided to abandon it and to return to Fort Niagara across the river. Against earlier orders, he destroyed the fort and ordered the nearby village of Newark — Niagara-on-the-Lake — to be burned, driving more than 400 people out in the winter weather by demolishing their homes and possessions. A week later the British took their revenge. Fort Niagara and every settlement along the American side of the river was put to the torch.

A landing was made by the British at Black Rock late on December 29. The poorly-trained militia sent to meet them fled in panic. Early the next morning Colonel Chapin ordered the ineffectual little cannon, set up in what is now Niagara Square, to cease firing. He parleyed with the enemy officers to gain time for the few remaining villagers to flee.

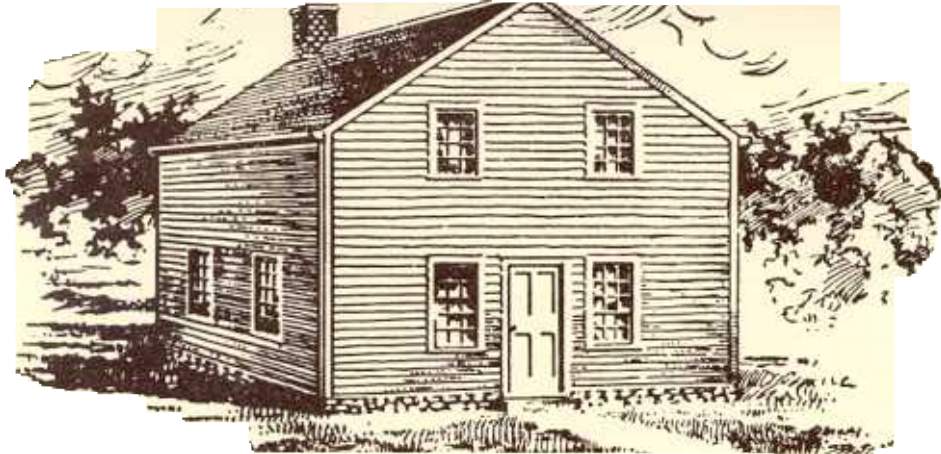
Among those left was the recently widowed Mrs. Gamaliel St. John. She had been trying to run her husband's tavern with the help of a married daughter and her son-in-law, Asaph Bemis. The Bemises had taken the six youngest St. John children, but Mrs. St. John and two older daughters had remained behind to gather their valuables and wait for his second trip. They spent the night filled with fright. Early in the morning as they saw Indians approaching, a British colonel clattered by on horseback, and Mrs. St. John begged him to protect them. He advised her to go to General Riall's headquarters at Niagara and Mohawk Streets where they were given a guard.

By nightfall much of Buffalo was destroyed, but the invaders were not finished. They returned that sad New Year's Day to set fire to everything which remained except Mrs. St. John's cottage, the stone jail, and the blacksmith shop of David Reese.

Such a scene of desolation greeted the eyes of the hungry, freezing survivors who came cautiously out of the woods to see what was left of their property. The three St. John ladies took care of as many as they could. Sarah St. John, dressed as an Indian, grew quite skilled at venturing out at night to catch pigs and chickens and at searching out the vegetables stored in pits beside the ruined homes. Several days of such caution was necessary until all danger from lurking Indians was over. While a few people remained the rest of the winter, most stayed in hospitable places in Hamburg, Batavia, Williamsville, and Harris's Tavern.



*Burning of Buffalo, December 30, 1813.*



*The St. John House, Now 460-470 Main Street  
— Only Dwelling in Buffalo Not Burned in War of 1812.*

Money, food, and warm clothing from all over the state poured into a relief agency set up in Canandaigua to help the stricken frontier. Houses and stores began to go up while people camped nearby in huts and shacks.

On September 17 General Porter led a brilliant attack on the British troops who were besieging a small force of Americans trying to hold recently captured Fort Erie. This rout caused the British to withdraw from the Fort Erie area completely, early in November.

Among those who helped rebuild Buffalo in the spring of 1814 was Samuel Wilkeson, a militiaman of Chautauqua County. He came down the lake by boat bringing the framing, hardware, and other materials needed to build a house and a store. Wilkeson and his bride, Sarah St. John, had not been in their new home long when the citizens asked him to be Justice of the Peace. He was destined to become a mayor of the city and the man responsible for building a better harbor at Buffalo.

New homes rose among the cellar holes and blackened chimneys. By 1815 a visitor noted there were more than a hundred houses in the village. "Many were of frame, several were brick, and a considerable number were large and elegant."

Business was slow in the gradually reviving town, for materials and supplies brought from the east were scarce and costly because of the poor roads. Captains of lake vessels did not like to stop, since a sand bar across the mouth of Buffalo Creek prevented ships from finding a protected anchorage. Ships had to stay offshore at the mercy of winds and currents while cargo was loaded and discharged by means of small boats. In 1818 a lighthouse was erected to warn of these dangers. On the other hand, Black Rock was again busy forwarding freight and building ships.

Two rays of hope for better times came in 1817. First, a turnpike from Albany was completed to Buffalo, and the town soon became a stagecoach center. The Eagle Tavern, built in Buffalo in 1816, became widely-known to travelers. It stood across the square from the court-

house and was a three-story, red brick building with a white railing built along the edge of the roof. Huge chimneys reached up from each end of the building indicating that many fireplaces warmed the rooms inside. A large wooden eagle spread its wings over the side central door. Passengers could stand in a small one-room coach office built against the tavern and watch fresh coach horses being hitched up in the large courtyard.

From the days of Ellicott and Le Couteulx it had been dreamed that a waterway would be built to join the Hudson-Mohawk system and Lake Erie. But it was Governor DeWitt Clinton of New York who brought these dreams to completion. In 1817, plans for a canal were finally drawn and actual excavation began on "Clinton's Ditch." The village officials felt prosperity would be assured if this canal came directly to Buffalo. Efforts were made to secure for Buffalo the terminal point of the Erie Canal.

A group of canal commissioners had come west in 1810 to decide upon the routes for this "grand Canal." Among them were DeWitt Clinton, Peter B. Porter of Black Rock, and James Geddes, a skilled surveyor. These men reported that the best place for the western terminus would be at Buffalo Creek if a safe harbor for a large number of boats could be made without too much expense. Nothing larger than a canoe could cross the bar at the creek mouth at the time of the survey. However, no action was taken. For a number of years it seemed that Black Rock, which had strong supporters, would be selected as the terminal point, although the "little rapids" near its harbor proved a hindrance to vessels moving up the river toward Buffalo.

Over the years both communities waited anxiously to hear the verdict. Both set to work to make improvements to attract the favor of the canal commissioners. In 1819 the state legislature was asked to lend \$12,000 to Buffalo to clear its harbor, and was willing to do so if the necessary securities were arranged. However, ready money was scarce. It seemed that the loan would have to be given up until three judges, Samuel Wilkeson, Oliver Forward, and Charles Townsend agreed to guarantee repayment.

An experienced harbor builder, hired to direct the construction, soon proved he had too little care for economy to work on the limited budget at hand. Therefore, Judge Wilkeson put aside his own affairs to superintend the job of improving the harbor. In the early spring of 1820, Wilkeson and a few helpers set out to conquer wind, waves, and currents, little knowing the size of their undertaking.

During the first summer they managed to build 900 feet of pier out into  $7\frac{1}{2}$  feet of water by making a series of cribs from strong timbers and filling them with stones. This pier was to be extended farther into





*Western end of the Erie Canal, 1828.*

the lake to protect the new creek mouth they proposed to make.

At this time, Buffalo Creek ran parallel to Lake Erie for about 1000 feet farther north than it does now, before it entered the lake. Between the two bodies of water was a long sandy spit of land. The harbor builders planned to scrape a channel 300 feet wide across this barrier. They dug only to the water level, expecting that the creek would dig its own mouth the following spring when the melting water rushed into the lake. It was a good plan, but beneath the sand was hard-packed mud and heavy gravel which settled where the new channel was desired.

New plans and a new site had to be tried. Heavy equipment could not be secured, but Wilkeson was working with clever men. With hand-made implements they made a water tight dam that raised the creek about three feet. After the water built up behind the dam, the west end was broken, and the rush of released water removed a section of the sand spit. The trick was tried again and again until the channel was cleared.

All was going too well. Just before the new channel was completed, a violent wind arose, wrecking the dam and almost ruining the equipment. Judge Wilkeson appealed to the citizens, and a number courageously volunteered to try to repair the damage before the creek returned to its original channel. A strong wind from the northeast fortunately lowered the lake level almost three feet. When the flood behind the restored dam was high enough, the torrent was released, scouring out 20,000 cubic feet of gravel. Buffalo now had a 90-foot entrance to its first anchorage in safe waters.

There was great rejoicing even though only vessels drawing five feet of water or less could now use the channel. High hopes were expressed that the flood waters of the next spring would further deepen and widen the entrance so that *Walk-in-the-Water* could enter. The 145-foot *Walk-in-the-Water*, the first steamship on the Great Lakes, was the pride of Black Rock ever since her launching on May 28, 1818. Three years later, on her last trip of the season, a storm arose as she entered Lake Erie. She blew aground and was wrecked.



*Walk in the Water — from Lithograph — 1825, in Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.*

Buffalonians contracted to build a steam brig to be the successor to *Walk-in-the-Water*, underbidding the experienced shipwrights of Black Rock. They set to work and hoped that such a large vessel would be able to get out of Buffalo Creek on schedule. In mid-March ice became jammed between the pier and the shore, causing the creek to form a new bar. A shift of wind drove the ice further up into the creek, wrecking the shipbuilding equipment. The new vessel seemed doomed.

Again Wilkeson and others found money to repair the damage to the channel so that the unfinished steamer, the *Superior*, could feel her way cautiously into Lake Erie. It was imperative that she be launched by the contracted date if Buffalo was to gain a reputation as a reliable shipbuilding center. On the appointed day, May 1, 1822, the *Superior*, though still uncompleted, was safely run into the lake then returned to the yard for finishing.

Having proven that Buffalo harbor could float a large steamship without having her run aground, Buffalo had a strong case to lay before the canal commissioners when they returned to the Niagara area. In the summer of 1823, after two weeks investigation of Buffalo and Black Rock harbors and facilities, they decided to establish the Erie Canal's western terminal at Buffalo. All the labor had been well worth the struggle. The canal terminal was to be near where the Little Buffalo Creek joined Buffalo Creek. On August 9, 1823, a band played and a cannon saluted as the first earth was turned. A small parade moved half a mile along the proposed route of the canal toward Black Rock. The Buffalo end of the canal was finally begun.

Never again was it so hard to keep the harbor mouth open. The pier was extended to prevent the channel from filling with sand. New





*Paul Busti-General Agent of the Holland  
Land Company during Original survey of Buffalo.*

York State built a stone breakwall to form the protective Erie Basin, soon after the completion of the canal. When, in 1826, the Federal government took over the work done by the villagers, a new stone lighthouse was soon built at the end of the pier. This is the lighthouse which bearing the date 1833, still stands as a landmark in Buffalo's harbor.

The year 1825 was an exciting one for the citizens of Buffalo. When it was announced that the section of the canal from Buffalo to Tonawanda would be filled with water on May 3, many could not wait for the statewide celebration scheduled for autumn. The *Superior* was chartered and decorated. A large party of excited excursionists left Buffalo harbor and steamed down the Niagara River. Two and one-half hours later, they reached the mouth of Tonawanda Creek and swung around to enter the Erie Canal through the newly built lock.

The *Superior* was greeted at Tonawanda by boats from canal communities as far away as Lockport. Music and refreshments were enjoyed. All the vessels then cast off for Black Rock and reached this village two hours later to the booming of a cannon and the cheers of people. The grand water procession moved a mile farther up the canal past the site of Fort Tompkins, where the old black basalt rock that gave the village its name had stood. It had been blown up during the construction of the canal. The memorable day ended with a grand banquet in Buffalo.

News came at the end of the month that General Lafayette, the Revolutionary War hero, was to come through Buffalo on his homeward journey after triumphantly touring the United States. On June 3,



*Billing from Eagle Tavern, dated 1 October, 1827.*

Buffalo was delighted and anxiously waiting to show the gratitude felt by all Americans to this famous Frenchman.

The *Superior* was decked out again and sent to Dunkirk to meet his coach, which had driven from Erie, Pennsylvania. As the boat approached the village, however, Lake Erie was up to its usual tricks. For two hours windswept waves prevented the ship from entering the Buffalo harbor. The village band tuned up for an extra rehearsal; the militiamen got warm and nervous; and the horses of the cavalry company stamped with restlessness. Finally, however, the waiting crowd could see the vessel steam into the creek. A colorful parade soon was able to move to the top of the Terrace and proceed along Main Street to the Eagle Tavern. Here, in the roadway, stood a gaily decorated platform facing the courthouse with its wide, open green which later was named Lafayette Square in the visitor's honor. Judge Forward greeted the distinguished company then Lafayette spoke to the eager folk who had come from miles around to see and hear him. The celebrations concluded with an elaborate banquet and reception in the Tavern, the finest hotel on the frontier.



*Buffalo Harbor from the Village, 1825*  
*Etching in possession of Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.*

At six o'clock the next morning, the party left for Black Rock where Peter Porter had the honor of taking the nation's guest to his home for breakfast. The citizens welcomed Lafayette then a water parade accompanied the group of guests down the canal to the lock at Tonawanda. A delegation from Niagara County waited with a parade of carriages to escort Lafayette to Niagara Falls.

On October 26, 1825, the long-awaited formal opening ceremonies for the Erie Canal began in Buffalo. The *Seneca Chief* was to be the first vessel to travel the length of the canal. DeWitt Clinton, who had defeated Peter Porter for Governor of the State in the election of 1817, stood on the deck with the Lieutenant Governor, the canal commissioners, and many others who wished to be among the first travelers on this great occasion. Two barrels painted red, white, and blue were placed on board after being filled with Lake Erie water to be poured into the New York Harbor.

Someone had suggested that cannon be set up along the new waterway so that when the *Seneca Chief* cast off, a 40-pounder could give the signal. The cannoneer at Black Rock touched off his piece when he heard the first report at Buffalo. This began a roar of cannon that continued along the full length of the waterway until it reached the Battery in New York 1 hour and 20 minutes later. The triumphant message was returned the same way within 3 hours.

Because of parades, banquets, balls, and bonfires, the *Seneca Chief* did not reach New York until November 4 and the Vessel returned to Buffalo on November 23. Two days later Samuel Wilkeson was given



*Buffalo, seen from the Lake, 1829.*

the honor of pouring a keg of Atlantic water into the lake which had given him so many troubled hours.

As a result of the construction of the Erie Canal the cost of living tumbled. Goods from Albany which once cost \$100 a ton when hauled across the state by 8-horse freight wagons now cost only \$10 and later fell to \$3 a ton. At these prices the farmers of Western New York could afford to send their grain to the markets of New York or Albany where wheat might bring \$1 a bushel instead of the \$.30 which was the best they could hope for from their own neighbors. Even the postal rates dropped. The rate for a letter from Buffalo to New York was reduced from \$.25 to \$.18 $\frac{3}{4}$ ! There was a great saving in time, also.

For a few years after the opening of the canal, the waterfront at Buffalo was busy handling the gear of hundreds who were moving westward. Comfortable packets brought passengers in half the time taken by coach to Buffalo where lake ships could take them another thousand miles into the heart of the western country. Naturally there was little freight from the West until the farms of the settlers began to be more productive. A 10-year period of high water made the harbor area a splendid exchange point between lake ships and canal barges. Warehouses were built along the wharves to hold products for water transportation or for the many freight wagons which passed through Buffalo.

Turnpikes were important during the winter months when navigation was closed, but they also gave increasing freight and passenger service. By 1830 there were five companies operating daily stages between Buffalo and Albany. The last toll booth on the Batavia Road stood on the present Route 5 near the Getzville Road and collected tolls until 1899.

The surge of transportation and commerce brought local settlers as well. A census taken in January 1825 showed 2,412 inhabitants in Buf-

falo and 1,039 in Black Rock. The 1825 Buffalo was an interesting town. There were 26 dry goods stores, four drug stores, 36 groceries, three hat stores, seven clothing stores, one hardware shop, and six shoe stores. The villager could visit three jewelry shops, three printing establishments, two book shops, eleven "houses of public entertainment," a ropewalk, three taverns, a brewery, a livery stable, eight storehouses, a customhouse, a reading room, a post office, a public library, a Masonic Hall, and a theatre. In the village were the unfinished courthouse, the old stone jail, a market house, as well as a bank, and an insurance office.

In 1825 the Episcopalians had a church, the Presbyterians a meeting house, and the Methodists a chapel. Louis Le Couteux was to give property at the corner of Main and Edward for the first Catholic school and church in 1828. This was the year in which Buffalo High School opened in temporary quarters. In 1825 there were four public schools, a Young Ladies' School, and a Young Gentlemen's Academy. Four weekly newspapers kept the villagers well-informed.

The list of trades and professions represented is also a good clue as to what people were doing in this busy community. There were four clergymen, 17 attorneys, nine doctors, three printers each employing ten men, and two bookbinders. Among the early craftsmen were four goldsmiths, three tin and coppersmiths, seven blacksmiths, two cabinet makers, three wheelwrights and carriage makers, two chair makers, a cooper, three hatters, two tanners and curriers, 19 masons, five boot and shoe manufacturers, and two painters. In the stores one could find four tailors, a tobacco handler, 51 carpenters, three butchers, and a brush maker. Some of these trades employed as many as 35 men.

By the autumn of 1831, the population had grown to nearly 10,000. A committee which included Millard Fillmore, a young lawyer, was appointed to draw up a charter and to recommend to the state legislature that an Act of Incorporation should be passed. The charter making Buffalo a city was granted in 1832 and gave the boundaries as these: Porter Avenue on the northwest, North Street on the north, Jefferson Avenue on the east, and the harbor and lake on the south and southwest. This enclosed approximately 4½ square miles.

Mr. Porter summed up the newly formed city in these words:

Bustle is a general feature of this thriving town. Travelers arrive every day, from all quarters, and depart for the falls, the lake, the canal, Canada, and Pennsylvania, etc. Indians of the Seneca and Tuscarora tribes are seen strolling through the streets. Peddlers, soldiers, wagons, boats, and rafts form a part of the busy scene, while bugles which blow almost every hour from the packets and stages contribute to enliven it.





*Ebenezer Johnson — First Mayor of the City of Buffalo, 1832  
by A. Little, in Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.*

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