

# Another Look Niagara's Old Stone Chimney

By Christopher Puchalski

Most Western New Yorkers have never heard of Niagara's "Old Stone Chimney," one of the few extant remnants of 18th century French colonial power in Western New York. The chimney is arguably the second-oldest structure in the Great Lakes Region, after the *Maison a Machicoulis*, or "French Castle" at Fort Niagara, being built around 1750 by Daniel-Marie Chabert de Joncaire. It was originally part of a two-story barracks structure near *Fort Petit Niagara* at the southern terminus of the Niagara Portage, the ancient trail circumnavigating Niagara Falls. Daniel's father, Louis-Thomas, had established the first trading post in the Niagara region in 1720 at present-day Lewiston, and the two Joncaire-built posts secured the endpoints of the Portage, where boats could be loaded and unloaded above and below the Falls.

When, in 1759, the British drove the French from the Niagara at the height of the French and Indian War, the French burned *Fort Petit Niagara*. The British, in turn, built Fort Schlosser near the site of the destroyed French fort and Portage. Master John Stedman improved the Portage and oversaw its operation from 1761-1796. In the first effort to preserve and repurpose the old French chimney, Stedman built a house against it, in which he lived during the years of British occupation of the area.

In 1796, the British finally relinquished their control of the region under the terms of Jay's Treaty. Soon after, American brothers Augustus and Peter B. Porter, along with Benjamin Barton,

purchased strategic land holdings along the Niagara and were granted exclusive rights by New York State to operate the Niagara Portage. Augustus lived with his family in the former Stedman house from 1806-1808 while he built his home overlooking Niagara's upper rapids. After he vacated the house, it operated for several years as a tavern. Used to house American officers during the War

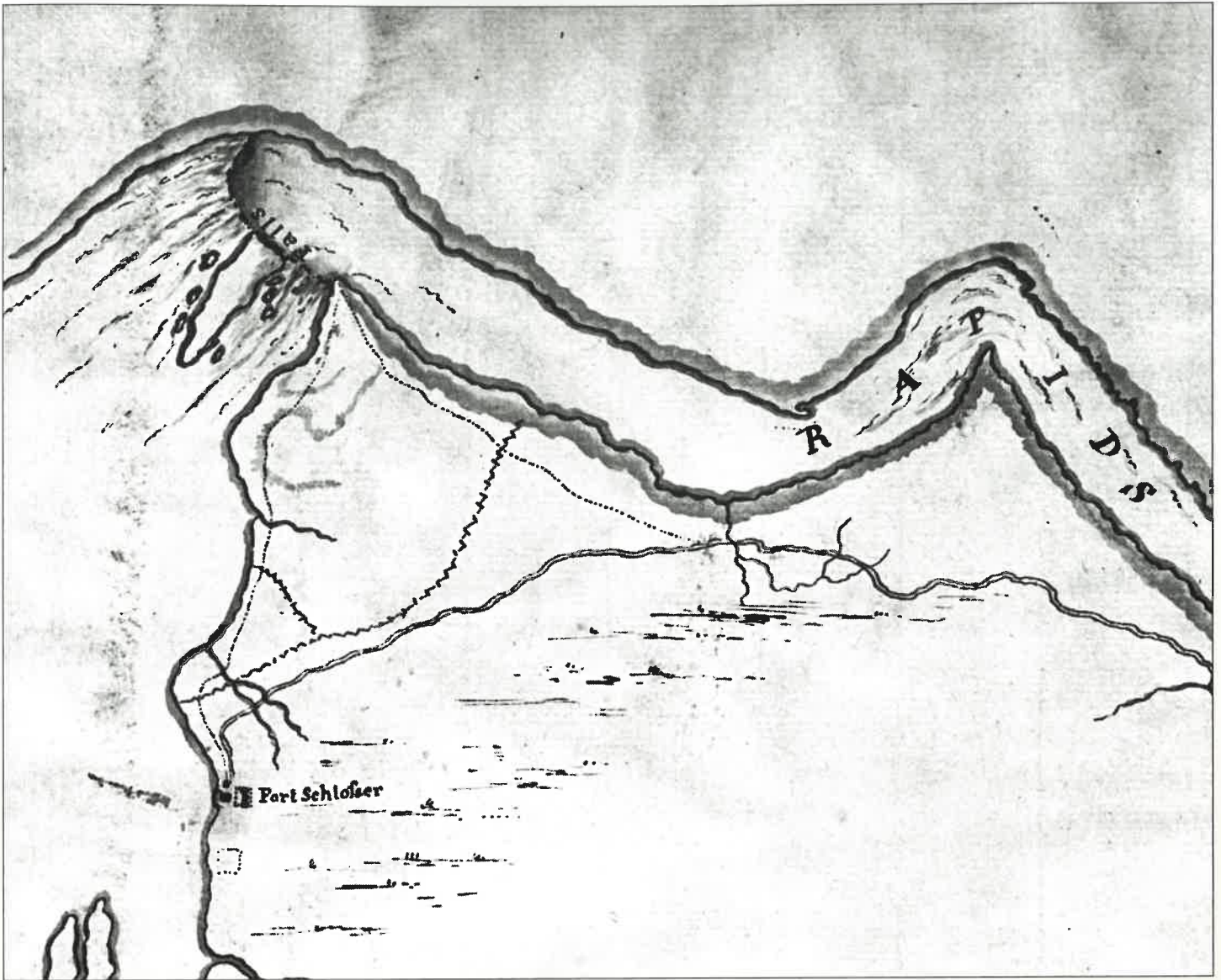
of 1812, the old Stedman house was burned in December 1813 along with most of the Niagara Frontier. Two more houses came to successively be built against the chimney, but decades later it would again stand alone, a solitary fixture on the shores of the Niagara.

The Old Stone Chimney has stood alone for more than half of its lifetime. The effort to preserve it is more than 130



Colonel Peter A. Porter made this sketch of the Old Stone Chimney and one of the 19th century dwellings to which it was attached.

FROM BENSON LOSSING'S *PICTORIAL FIELD-BOOK OF THE WAR OF 1812*, 1868



This detail from a 1788 map by British engineer, Gother Mann, shows Niagara Falls, a portion of the Portage Road and the location of Fort Schlosser (at lower left). Note the dotted outline of the older French fort just below Schlosser. COURTESY LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA

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This rare early photograph of the chimney, ca. 1895, shows the buildings of the Adams Power Plant in the background. The interests of power and industry would jeopardize this artifact for over a century.

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years old, though the argument could be made that it actually dates back over 250 years if one considers Stedman's original repurposing in 1761. In 1880, the Hon. Peter Augustus Porter, grandson of Peter B. Porter, inherited the old Stedman farm, about the same time that the last house erected to incorporate the chimney was torn down. Porter had lived in that house for a couple years during his childhood along with his father, Col. Peter A. Porter, who perished at the Battle of Cold Harbor in 1864. Peter Augustus placed great value on the history of his pioneering family and was in a unique position to preserve the legacy of the Niagara Frontier at an important confluence of American thought and ideology. Following his graduation from Yale, he fixed himself upon the task of amassing the single most comprehensive

library of the history of the Niagara area and, after retiring from public service as a U.S. Congressman, set about writing dozens of articles, books, pamphlets and public speeches that documented the history of the region.

During the late 19th century, plans were made for the final setting for this storied piece of Niagara's history within the newly planned Niagara Reservation, being designed by the firm of Olmsted and Vaux, but political allegiances and the strong influence of industrial fortunes created considerable obstacles. The Olmsted and Vaux plan for the State Reservation at Niagara Falls indicated an elegant riverway, with a gracious point of origin for coaches and buggies with expansive river vistas, to be known as the "Old French Landing." Peter Augustus Porter served on the board of the Niagara



Peter Augustus Porter was keenly aware of his family's role in the history of the Niagara Frontier and worked tirelessly to preserve and protect the Old Stone Chimney.

FROM PETER A. PORTER, *THE NIAGARA REGION IN HISTORY*, 1895

Reservation, and his good friend, Thomas Vincent Welch, was its first superintendent. Other notable board members and financial backers included: J.P. Morgan, William B. Rankine, John Jacob Astor, Edward D. Adams, Thomas Evershed and William K. Vanderbilt. Many of these men also served on the boards of the Niagara Falls Power Company, the Hydraulic Power Company and other companies whose interests lay within their capacity to harness Niagara's unique geography and topography. Preservation of the scenic landscape was a noble pursuit, but the motivation of these titans of industry was less than purely altruistic. Porter protected his financial interests in local businesses, but also diversified his preservation efforts with his own writing and by encouraging artists and songwriters to consider the Old Stone Chimney as a source of inspiration. An engraving by Amos W. Sangster, an oil painting by P.C. Flynn and a song written by Denton, Collier & Co. of Buffalo (words by his friend, T.V. Welch) are examples of collateral in this endeavor.

Peter A. Porter sold the old Stedman farm to the rapidly growing Niagara Falls Power Company in 1890. As it became increasingly apparent that this tangible connection to frontier and colonial history would surely be lost to the electro-indus-



The chimney has been moved several times in its history, as part of efforts to protect this important link to Niagara's early European history. Here a scaffold has been erected around it to allow workers to carefully number and disassemble the chimney for removal to the new Porter Park. The photo clearly shows the encroachment of the Carborundum Company in the 20th century.

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trial age, he arranged for the company to move the chimney. The structure was moved about 150 feet in 1902, though not to the spot Porter had envisioned and Olmsted had partially articulated. In fact, the move only temporarily placed it out of harm's way. Even so, those managing the relocation process took great pains to mark and replace each exterior stone precisely. C. Breckenridge Porter oversaw this move for the Niagara Frontier Historical Society, the organization his father, the Hon. Peter A. Porter, founded in 1898.

The Niagara Frontier Historical Society placed a bronze plaque to "landmark" the Old Stone Chimney in 1915 to great public fanfare. Among the speakers, Frederick Lovelace, the secretary of the Niagara Falls Power Company, publicly asserted "... a sacred trust to preserve inviolate as long as time and the elements will permit what now remains of this old fort, an object of so much of interest and of import to the history of the State of New York." He continued, adding that "the Niagara Falls Power Company takes this opportunity to assure the society that at all times it will cooperate in protecting and preserving this hallowed relic of a glorious past."



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Today, the chimney is nestled against the embankment of an off-ramp to the Robert Moses Parkway, but plans to reconfigure the parkway once again place this irreplaceable artifact at risk. CHRIS PUCHALSKI PHOTOGRAPH, 2013

Unfortunately, the 1902 move did not account for public access needs or the further industrialization of the location. In 1942, the Carborundum Company (which had acquired the former “upper landing” site about 1895) grew rapidly, increasing its footprint many times over. Again, the chimney was in danger of being destroyed, this time by the wartime demand for abrasives produced by the company. Carborundum and Niagara Hudson, successor to the Niagara Falls Power Company, split the considerable cost of moving the Old Stone Chimney. Again, workers carefully marked stone-by-stone the location of each, and reconstructed it exactly. This time, however, a plan was followed to place the structure in an area where the public could access the relic without molestation. It was placed in view of the shores of the Niagara River, and proudly bore its bronze plaque in an appropriately named “Porter Park.”

Today, the Old Stone Chimney remains at Porter Park – or what is left of it. The area has changed so much over the last half century that the chimney now stands in utter obscurity. Porter Park was largely developed during and after the construction of the Niagara Power Project (1957-1962). The collapse of the Schoellkopf Power Plant in 1957 brought the need and opportunity to build a modern power station, one that took full advantage of Niagara’s potential. Construction of the massive Robert Moses Niagara Power Plant caused a complete change of the river’s shoreline from the Grand Island bridges all the way to the upper rapids. Rock and fill from the new tunnels and reservoir created the “reclaimed land” upon which the Robert Moses Parkway was built, and a raised highway berm nestled the Old Stone Chimney in the lee of an exit ramp.

Porter Park was further parceled and paved in 1972 to provide a parking lot for the Moore Business Forms facility at 1011 Buffalo Avenue. With the construction of the parking lot, the Old Stone Chimney – over which had flown the flags of three nations – was fully cut off from public access.

The Moore Business Forms facility ceased operation in 2011, an event that quietly restored some visibility to the old relic. However, the imminent reconfiguration of the Robert Moses Parkway now places the Old Stone Chimney at risk once again.



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Efforts are underway to bring stakeholders to the table and provide for the preservation, public access and interpretation of this important artifact. With these efforts come an opportunity to spur economic development, while preserving the important history of the old Niagara Portage and the many events to which it bore witness. 🏠

For more information on the perils of this regional treasure, like "Revere the Old Stone Chimney" on Facebook or check out the soon-to-be-published website: [www.oldstonechimney.org](http://www.oldstonechimney.org)

Christopher Puchalski is a business strategy project manager and founder of the Niagara Portage Old Guard, a group of area professionals dedicated to economic development along the greater Niagara Frontier. Mr. Puchalski's work in historic preservation includes ongoing cultural advocacy, being a founding board member of the Graycliff Conservancy and contributions to the 5th Edition of *Bricks and Brownstone, a History of the New York Row House* (Rizzoli 2003).

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