

## HISTORY OF THE NIAGARA REGION

### EARLY INHABITANTS

The earliest settlers in this area were the Mound Builders, native people who travelled here from the Ohio Valley. They settled in the Niagara region around 100 A.D., and 400 years later had been replaced by ancestors of the Six Nations Confederacy. By 1400 Neutral Indians occupied the area and relied on fishing, hunting and agriculture for their livelihood. It is from their word *ONGHIARA*, describing the waters flowing between Lakes Erie and Ontario, that *NIAGARA* is derived. The Neutrals were defeated by the Iroquois in the 1650's. Later, Mississauga Indians settled on the west (Canadian) bank of the river and Senecas on the east bank.

### EUROPEAN INFLUENCE

Early French explorers reached the region via the water route and soon recognized the usefulness of the Indian portage around the Falls, first for exploration and later for trade with the west. Etienne Brûlé, an interpreter-explorer for Samuel de Champlain, was probably the first European to visit this district, arriving in 1615. Beginning with LaSalle's efforts in 1679, the French constructed several buildings on the east (U.S.) side of the river to serve as links in the lucrative fur trade. One of these is restored as part of Fort Niagara, across the river from Niagara-on-the-Lake.

### TRANSITION TO BRITISH RULE

During the Seven Years War the British engaged in military action against the French at Fort Niagara. Through provisions of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the British took possession of the fort. Sir William Johnson extended British influence in the area by negotiating a settlement with the Indians. According to its terms, the Crown was ceded a strip of land on both sides of the river.

### UNITED EMPIRE LOYALISTS

Forced to flee their homes during and after the Revolutionary War in the American colonies, large numbers of those loyal to the British Crown moved to Fort Niagara. The necessity of providing food for the refugees and soldiers resulted in a proposal for settlement and cultivation of the river's west bank. Colonel John Butler led the movement across the river and provided leadership for the new community, known today as Niagara-on-the-Lake. By 1782, Butler's census reported 84 settlers along the river. In 1785 there were 800 inhabitants of Irish, Scottish, English, German and Dutch descent.

### SETTLEMENT IN NEWARK

The new community grew as the number of Loyalists seeking refuge and land increased. Named capital of the new province of Upper Canada in 1791 and christened *NEWARK* by Governor John Graves Simcoe, it was the site of Parliament's first session in 1792. A Canadian portage route from Chippawa to Queenston enhanced Newark's status as a commercial centre. All subsequent developments related to the town's position as the centre of government, trade, transportation and communication, and its function as a meeting place for Indians and military and legislators.

### CHANGES

By the terms of Jay's Treaty the British relinquished Fort Niagara to American forces in 1796. Subsequently the capital of Upper Canada was moved to York (now Toronto) and Newark again became Niagara. Before leaving, Simcoe began construction of Fort George to replace Fort Niagara as a headquarters and supply depot. Log houses were replaced by frame and brick and by 1810 the town had 500 civilian inhabitants and a garrison of equal strength.

### WAR AND REBUILDING

Proximity to the United States and importance as a commercial centre made Niagara a strategic position during the War of 1812. American troops occupied Fort George from May to December 1813 and upon their retreat burned the town and the fort. The conflict produced heroes such as Isaac Brock and Laura Secord but left the population scattered and the town in ruins. Following the war, reconstruction began. Fort Mississauga, built with bricks salvaged from the town's rubble, was begun in 1814. The Commons was the site for the Indian Council House (1817) and Butler's Barrack's, while a new Court House and Gaol were located at a safer site on Rye Street. Stage lines resumed their trips, shipping continued and local merchants re-established their businesses. By the 1830's Niagara was once again one of the most thriving villages in Upper Canada.

### THE CANAL

A major development in the region was the completion of the first ship canal in 1829 which replaced the overland portage route so critical to Niagara's economy. Its construction was protested without success. The canal was extended and improvements continued into the twentieth century. Niagara had been bypassed and new centres like Port Dalhousie, St. Catharines and Port Colborne grew up along the artificial waterway.