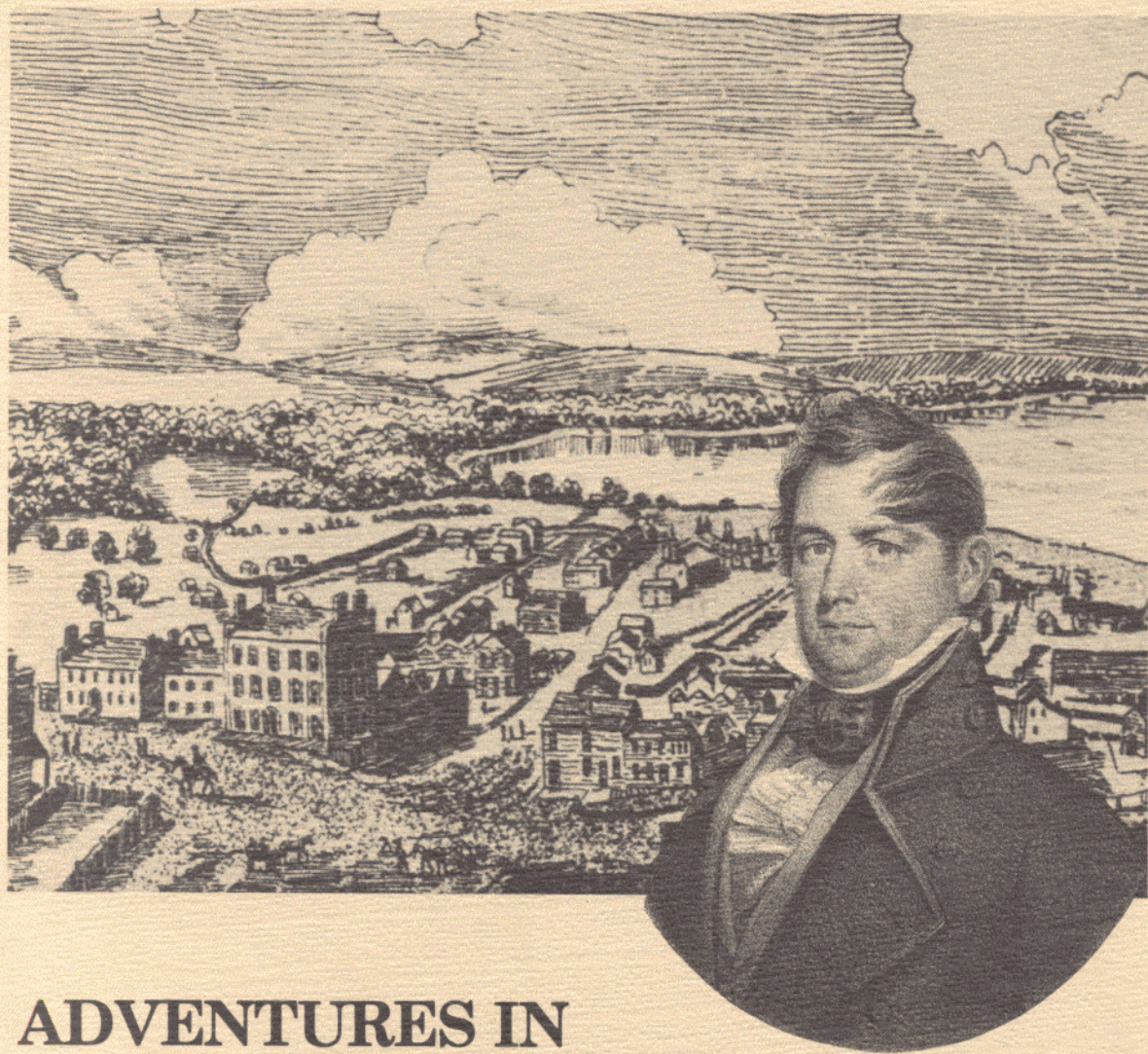


# PETER B. PORTER AND THE BUFFALO — BLACK ROCK RIVALRY

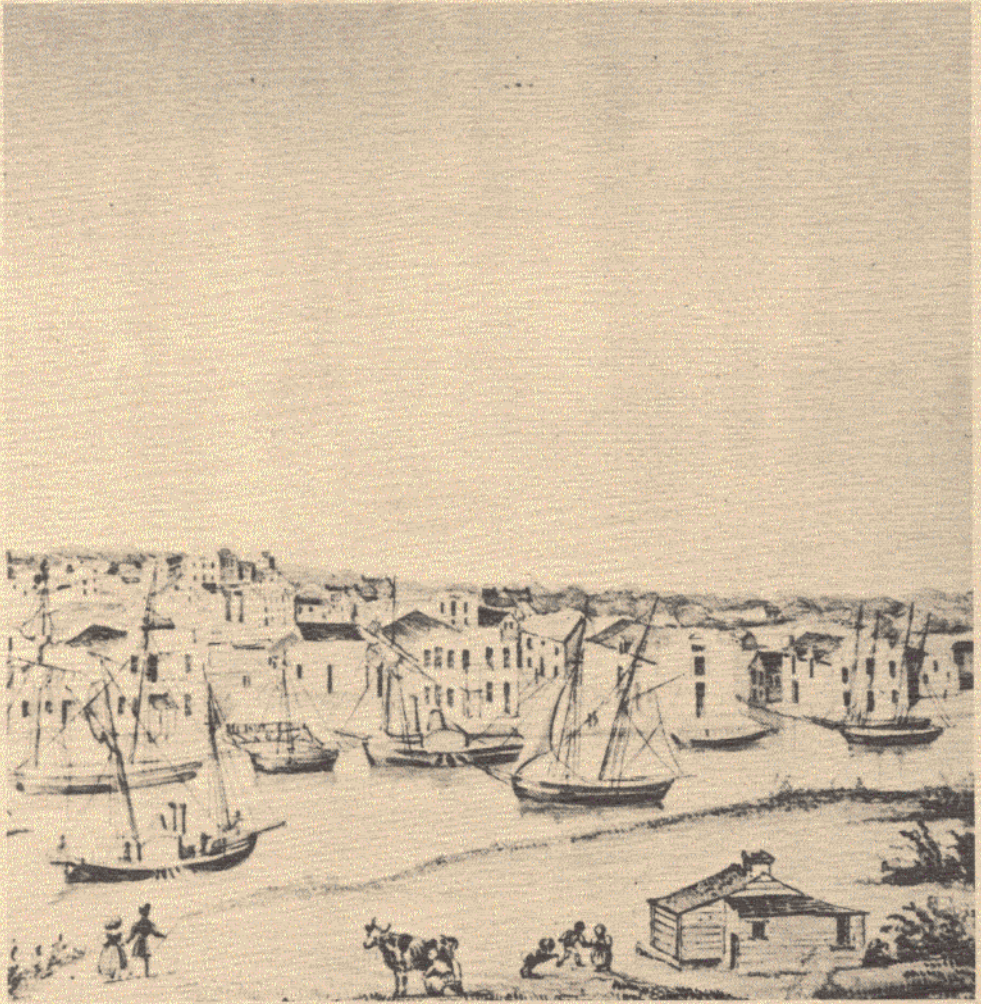
By Joseph A. Grande



ADVENTURES IN  
WESTERN NEW YORK  
HISTORY

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*Buffalo on Lake Erie.*





*Buffalo Harbor, 1811. A view of the Lake and Ft. Erie from Buffalo Creek.*

**PETER B. PORTER AND THE  
BUFFALO BLACK-ROCK RIVALRY**  
by Joseph A. Grande

The history of western New York is filled with tales of adventure, accomplishment, and controversy. One such tale involved the bitter rivalry early in the 1800s between two small villages, Buffalo and Black Rock. Buffalo, located at the eastern end of Lake Erie at the mouth of Buffalo Creek, and Black Rock, two miles north on the Niagara River just beyond today's Peace Bridge, competed fiercely to become the center of urban and commercial development on the Niagara Frontier, then still a wilderness.

The rivalry began even before the two villages had been founded. By 1800, millions of acres in western New York belonged to the Holland Land Company, a corporation owned by six Dutch banks. The Holland Company had purchased over five million acres of land in the United States between 1792 and 1794. Most of it was located in the area from the Genesee River to Lake Erie including the present site of Buffalo. To supervise the American operation, a respected Italian-born Amsterdam businessman, Paul Busti, was sent to the Company's Philadelphia headquarters where he cooperated with Pennsylvanian Joseph Ellicott who directed land surveys in western New York. The ruggedly-build six-foot-three Ellicott had already earned a reputation as an expert surveyor, a reputation reenforced by the efficient and speedy completion of the Holland survey.



Joseph Ellicott.

Consequently, Busti offered Ellicott a contract to direct land sales as resident agent in western New York; and on November 1, 1800, the Pennsylvanian began a new career. He moved quickly to the Niagara Frontier where he settled at the present site of Buffalo in December. He and Busti agreed that a town should be laid out on Lake Erie at the mouth of Buffalo Creek where several dozen settlers already lived. Ellicott wanted to call the town New Amsterdam but never got his wish because the inhabitants persisted in calling it first "Buffalo Creek" and later simply Buffalo.

Much more dangerous to Ellicott's wishes was news of a scheme for a new town a short distance north at Black Rock, the site of what was described as a "safe and commodius" natural harbor. The chief schemer in the Black Rock project was an ambitious young Yankee from Connecticut, Peter Buell Porter. Porter had moved west after graduating from Yale College and Litchfield Law School and had settled in the pioneer town community at Canandaigua in the Finger Lakes region of New York. There he first practiced law and then purchased land near the shores of the Niagara River. Soon he joined with his brother Augustus and Benjamin Barton to found Porter, Barton and Company. That trading firm received from New York State a monopoly of the transportation business on the portage around Niagara Falls, and it handled much of the trade on the upper Great Lakes.

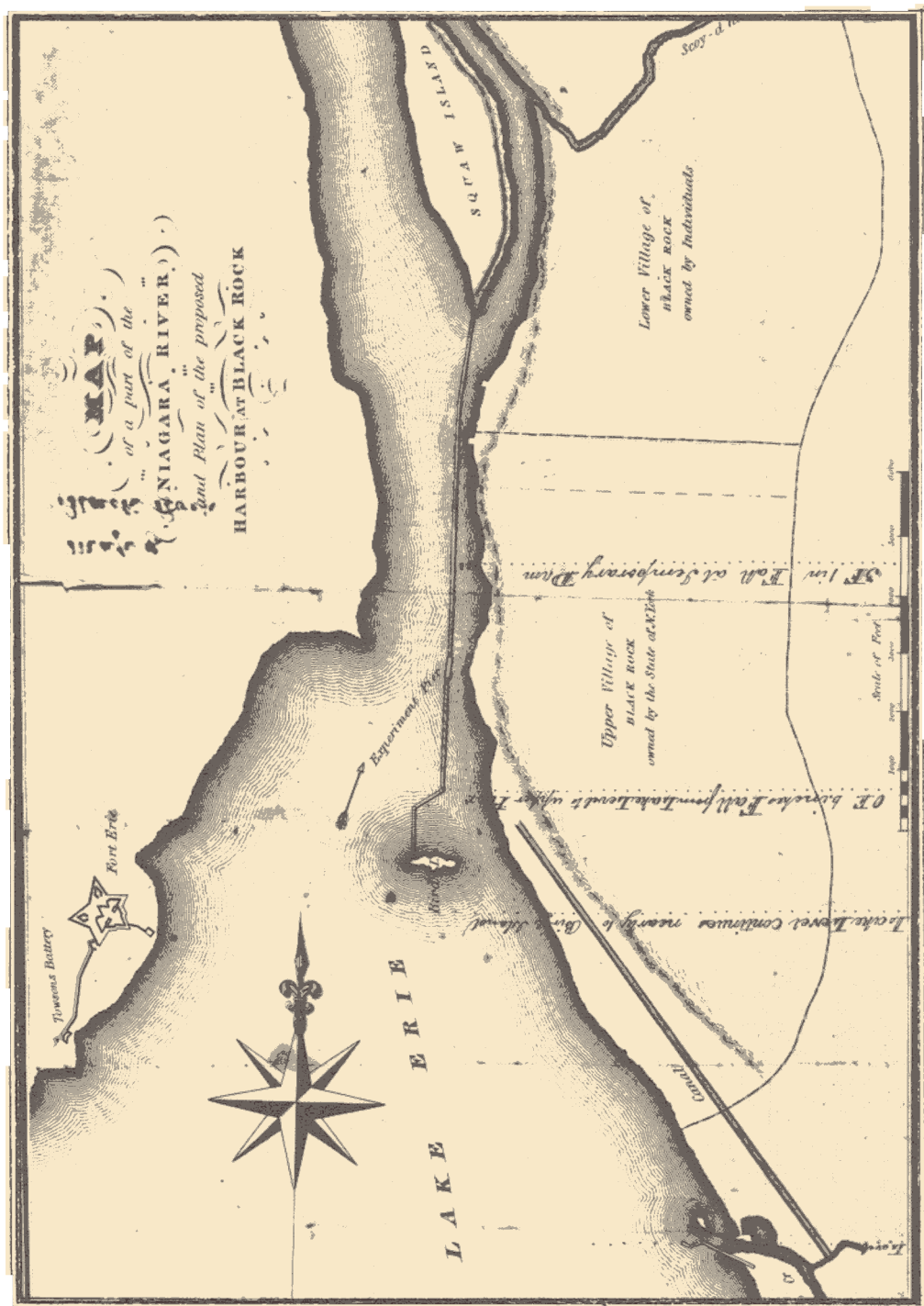
Porter followed his business and legal activities by venturing into politics, to no one's surprise. The tall, handsome New Englander was a fine orator with a commanding personality. In 1797, he was appointed Clerk of Ontario County, a region embracing part of central and all of western New York. A few years later, the voters sent him to the State Assembly where he heeded Ellicott's pleas to promote road construction into the Niagara Frontier. Ellicott, however, rejected Porter's offer to buy large tracts of land from the Holland Land Company. Instead, Porter and his friends purchased state lands along the Niagara River in the vicinity of Black Rock. There they planned to build warehouses and other trading facilities as well as lay out a town site.



Peter B. Porter.

News of the Black Rock project aroused Paul Busti to order all possible efforts be made to frustrate it. Ellicott responded by urging the Holland Company to buy several thousand acres of state land at Black Rock to sabotage Porter's scheme, but he had no success. The best he could get was authority to lend money to any person who would purchase land between the sites of Buffalo and Black Rock for the same purpose. When it became obvious a town would be laid out at Black Rock, Busti emphasized the need to push Buffalo's interests by the use of political influence in Albany and an aggressive advertising campaign to attract settlers.

Porter was equally determined to ensure the success of the Black Rock settlement where his trading company made large investments. He enjoyed considerable influence in Albany, and with his election to Congress in 1808, it expanded to Washington. In the House of Representatives, he quickly won attention as a spokesman for the people of the American frontier which made it easier to act on behalf of Black Rock where he took up residence in 1810.



Map of a part of the Niagara River and plan of the proposed harbor at Black Rock, 182.

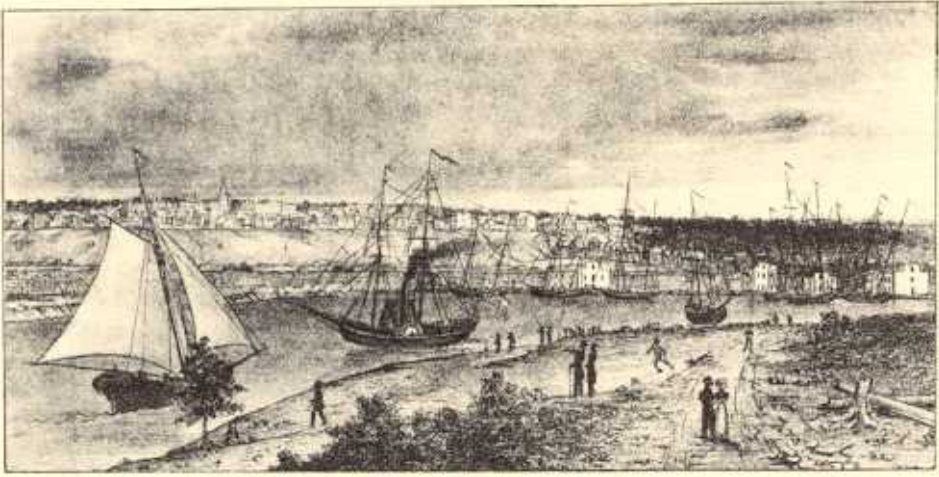
Shortly after arriving in Washington, Congressman Porter acted to relocate the customs houses on the Niagara Frontier, then found at Buffalo and Fort Niagara. His proposal would have placed them at Black Rock and Lewiston where Porter, Barton and Company had erected trading facilities. This effort brought him into conflict with another influential western New Yorker, Erastus Granger, the Collector of Customs. A Granger relative had served in the Cabinet under former President Thomas Jefferson whom the collector could claim as a personal friend.

The conflict ignited when Porter engineered passage of a resolution in the House of Representatives to study the possible move of the customs houses to Black Rock and Lewiston. Personal interests aside, he could argue with merit that most of the trade going west went through Black Rock, and most of the ships arriving at the eastern end of Lake Erie docked in its harbor. In addition, most of the goods arriving in Western New York below the Falls were unloaded at Lewiston rather than Fort Niagara. It must have been a nuisance for Porter, Barton and Company to obtain entry and clearance papers at Buffalo and Fort Niagara.

Customs Collector Granger had no objections to making Lewiston the port of entry below the Falls. On the other hand, he strongly opposed moving the port of entry above the Falls from Buffalo to Black Rock. News of Porter's resolution in the House of Representatives caused Granger to complain of the congressman's "highly improper" actions and to assure Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin that he, Granger, had no private motives or personal interests in opposing the proposed changes. He could conduct his duties at Black Rock as easily as at Buffalo. He could not, however, neglect his duty by remaining silent because he saw no reason for the relocation.

According to Granger, Buffalo had a good harbor where ships often unloaded, and it was the seat of Niagara County which then included both present-day Erie and Niagara Counties. It was also a fast-growing community with forty-three families and counted among its inhabitants a number of young merchants and professional men. Most of the importations from Canada were made by Buffalonians. On the other hand, Black Rock's harbor was of limited use because of rapids in the Niagara River just off the shore. Large tracts of state land around it remained to be divided for sale, and the settlement itself had only four families, a tavern, a store owned by Porter, Barton and Company, and a ferry house serving travelers crossing the river to Canada.





*Buffalo from the Light House.*

Rather than make a politically sensitive decision, Congress gave President James Madison responsibility to determine the location of western New York's customs houses. The President did his best to settle the difficult matter by the appearance of a compromise. A proclamation on March 16, 1811, placed the port of entry at Black Rock "from the first day of April to the first day of December in every year" and at Buffalo "for the residue of each and every. . . year." This action must have been a disappointment to Granger and the leaders at Buffalo. Madison had in effect placed the customs house above the Falls at Black Rock during the shipping season and moved it to Buffalo only during the winter months. Porter's prestige had been exerted well at the highest levels of government on behalf of his new home town.

If the interests of Black Rock and Buffalo conflicted on the customs house matter, they were in harmony during the War of 1812 which ravaged the Niagara Frontier. British seizure of American ships and sailors to prevent trade with Europe during the Napoleonic Wars had tried American patience for many years. So had their supposed incitement of the Indians against settlers on America's western frontier. A new generation of leaders, mostly born after the War for Independence, refused to tolerate further insults to the nation's honor. This new leadership in Congress included such men as Henry Clay of Kentucky, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, and Peter B. Porter of New York.

As war clouds gathered, Congressman Porter worried about the security of the Niagara Frontier across the river from British Canada. He responded to complaints about the lack of defense preparations at home by voting for

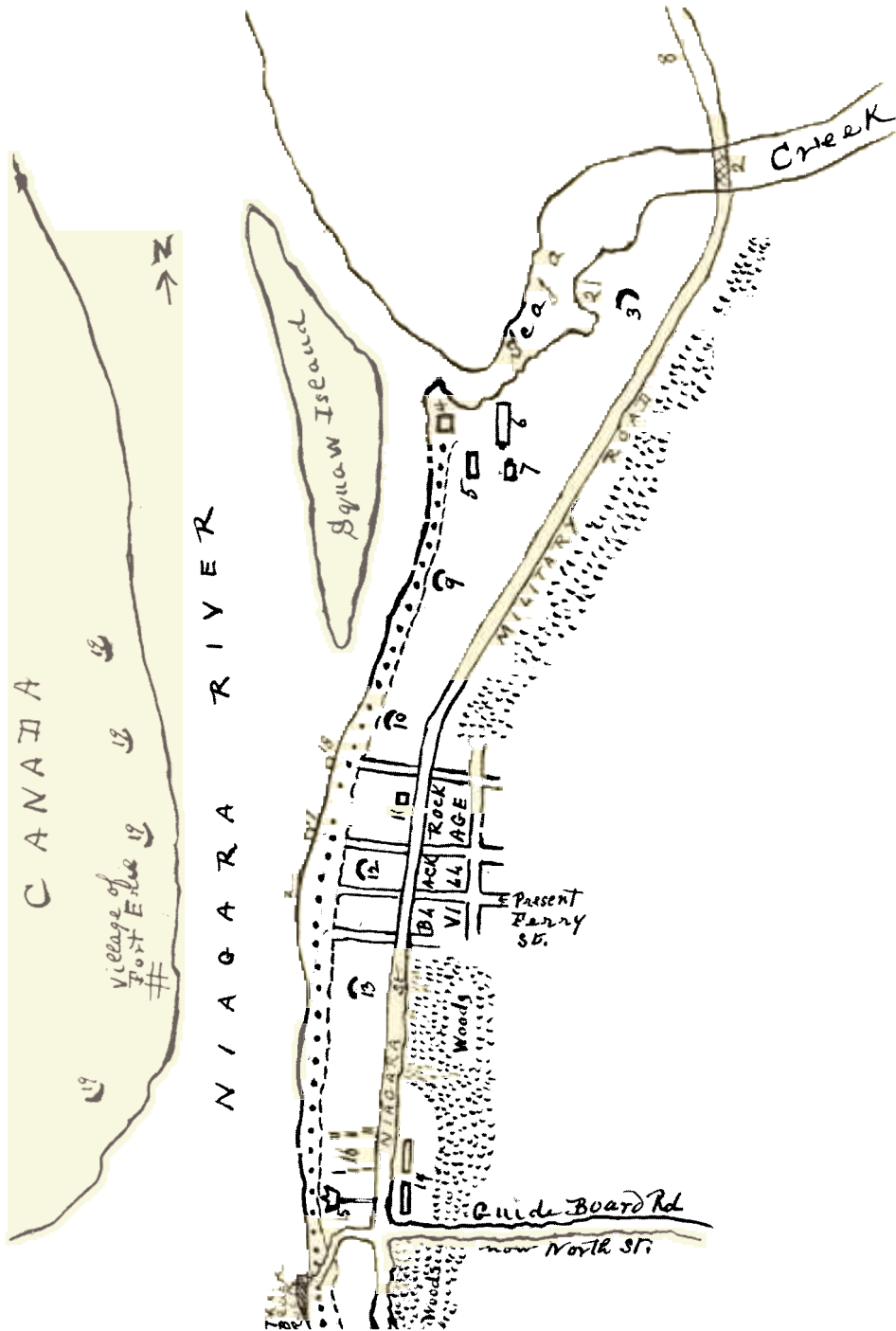


increased military spending and demanding the passage of laws to strengthen the nation's defense so the people of western New York could "support with their persons and their property. . . the just rights of this country." He warned that, if the American people allowed continued British violations of American rights, they might expect to see the English "not only capturing our property at sea, but treading upon our necks in the streets of our cities." It is not hard to see why Porter was labeled a "War Hawk" by his enemies as were his allies, Clay and Calhoun. Nor is it surprising that, following Clay's election as Speaker of the House of Representatives, Porter was appointed chairman of the important Foreign Affairs Committee.

The pace of congressional action on expanding the army and calling for volunteers from the state militia did not meet Porter's expectation. An effective fighting force would be an absolute necessity to defend the nation's borders and to seize Canada. That prize should be taken in compensation for British seizures of American ships and seamen. The job might be easier than expected because many Americans had settled in Upper Canada, now the Province of Ontario, between Buffalo and Detroit. Black Rock's "War Hawk" was certainly not pleased by Congress's hesitance in building a naval force on the Great Lakes, a force vital to any successful invasion of Canada. As debate on the military build-up dragged on, he grew more and more impatient out of fear the British might attack American territory, perhaps the Niagara Frontier, before the completion of defense preparations.

Porter did not wait for a formal declaration of war to return home to assist in those preparations. On the floor of Congress, he had pledged to take part "not only in the *pleasures* . . . but in all the *dangers* of the *revelry*." Thus he left Washington in mid-April to serve as Quartermaster General of the New York militia, and he declined to campaign for reelection to the House of Representatives. A member of the militia since 1796, he now directed arrangements for supplies, equipment, transportation, and housing for 13,000 militiamen called into federal service to defend the New York-Canadian border. He scurried from Black Rock to Albany and then to Washington buying food, clothing, and building materials.

When Congress declared war on Great Britain in mid-June, alarm among the people of the Niagara Frontier had subsided with the arrival of thousands of militia. Now complaints were heard about the lack of training and discipline of these men and the need for regular army troops. By the fall, 2,000 regulars had joined the 6,000 militia force, but they were concentrated near Lake Ontario, leaving Black Rock and Buffalo exposed to attack. As a result, General Porter raised and took command of 400 volunteers from western New York to protect the two villages.



*Site identification on page 9*



The citizens of these villages had their first taste of war on July 11, 1813, when a force of 400 British Redcoats crossed the Niagara River near Black Rock in the middle of the night to destroy naval supplies and other equipment in the area. The American defenders were easily dispersed, and the invaders set fire to the navy yard, the barracks, a blockhouse, and a small ship. As the British officers approached the front door of Porter's residence, the surprised General was forced to flee on foot out the back door southward to rally a force to repel the enemy intruders. He arrived at Buffalo on a borrowed horse and gathered an army of 300 militia, regulars, and Indians that quickly marched to Black Rock. At seven o'clock the same morning, Porter's army launched a "bold, vigorous and united attack" driving the British back across the river.

*Peter A. Porter wrote the following information on the map that he made.*

#### Black Rock, in July 1813

1. Old resting Place for Portage boats, where British Landed
2. Bridge over Scajaquada Creek
3. Battery
4. Block House
5. U.S. Store House
6. Barracks
7. Officers House
8. Where Guard was maintained
9. Sailors Battery
10. Swifts Battery
11. Gen. Peter B. Porter's House
12. Dudley's Battery
13. Gibson's Battery
14. Fort Tompkins Barracks
15. Fort Tompkins
16. Site of Battle of Buffalo
17. Porter Barton & Co.
18. Store House
19. Batteries, former British held by U.S.
20. Whence Perry's Vessels were hauled up to Lake Erie
21. US Navy Yard where those Vessels were made over into Gun Boats Winter 1812-1813
22. Where the defeated British embarked in escape
  - - - - High Bank
  - . . . . Road to Buffalo along beach



Commodore Perry's fleet brought General Harrison's troops to Buffalo Creek, October 24, 1813.

As the year 1813 passed, Porter found military inaction along the Niagara Frontier frustrating. Consequently, he united with "a considerable number of inhabitants, tired of games . . . that have been playing upon this river. . ." and led a force of 400 men into Canada to retaliate for the Black Rock raid. His appeals for more regular troops to defend Buffalo and Black Rock got results when a new American commander, General George McClure, ordered the distribution of more men along the Niagara River above the Falls. However, that general's actions in evacuating Canadian soil taken earlier in the year around Fort George near Lake Ontario brought dire consequences to the people on the American side of the river. As he retreated, McClure burned the Canadian village of Newark, now Niagara-on-the-Lake, allegedly to deprive the British army of shelter. Some 150 homes were put to the torch leaving the helpless inhabitants, mostly women and children, out in the mid-December bitter cold and snow.

News of the burning of Newark caused a storm of protest even on the American side of the river and a subsequent disavowal by the federal government. It also hastened the advance of a large British army which quickly struck across the border. Fort Niagara was conquered on December 19, and shortly after, the villages of Lewiston and Manchester, now Niagara Falls, were destroyed. The citizens of Black Rock and Buffalo waited in terror for the arrival of the vengeful Redcoats, but their fears subsided when the enemy returned to Canadian soil. This move, however, was only temporary,



for early in the morning of December 30, over 1,000 British troops crossed the Niagara, landing at the foot of what is now Amherst Street. One division of the invaders marched to Black Rock where an American force of 600, which had rushed to the village's defense, was routed. After putting Black Rock to the torch, the entire British army turned toward the open road to Buffalo.

There panic spread rapidly as defeated militiamen passed through the streets fleeing from the advancing Redcoats. Most settlers soon joined the flight eastward, and when the British arrived, the village was nearly deserted. Enemy soldiers then proceeded up and down the streets setting fire to the buildings. By the night of January 1, 1814, the entire settlement was a smoldering mass of ashes except for the home of Mrs. Gamaliel St. John, a blacksmith shop on Seneca Street, and a small stone jail on Washington Street near Eagle. Having taken vengeance for the burning of Newark, the British army returned to Canada.

General Porter had been absent from the Niagara Frontier during the British devastation. Orders from President Madison had taken him to Albany and Washington on military matters. As his fellow citizens at Black Rock and



Burning of Buffalo, Dec. 30, 1813.

Buffalo returned to rebuild their homes, he recruited a new brigade of western and central New York militia volunteers and Indians who joined a high-spirited and well-trained army of 4,000 ready to carry the war back to Canada. A new American invasion began with the easy capture of Fort Erie on July 3, 1814, but attempts to capture Fort George failed because naval support on Lake Ontario never arrived, and the enemy threw large detachments of fresh troops into the battle. When the British then moved to besiege Fort Erie, menacing Buffalo and Black Rock, they were checked in part by the "admirable conduct" of Porter's volunteers and by their "signal success" in dealing "a vastly disproportionate injury on the enemy." A frustrated British army withdrew to Burlington Heights in September ending the danger to the two villages.

By the winter of 1814, war had come to a halt in the Niagara country. The American army withdrew completely from Canadian soil, and British forces were too weak for anything but defense. Rumors of peace were already in the air soon to be confirmed by news that the Treaty of Ghent had been signed ending the War of 1812.

Black Rock's citizen-soldier, "having no idea of adopting permanently the profession of arms," returned to civilian life to resume his business and political pursuits. The people of western New York had reelected him to Congress in 1814 while he was still on active military duty. Even Buffalo's friend, Joseph Ellicott, now operating out of the Holland Company office in Batavia, admitted his old adversary could represent the Niagara Frontier as ably as any man in New York State. This good will spilled over into efforts to win government compensation for property losses suffered during the war, efforts involving both Porter and Ellicott.

New York State recognized the hardships recently experienced by its citizens along the Niagara when the legislature appropriated \$40,000 and created a commission, including Joseph Ellicott, to distribute the funds among "indigent sufferers." Washington similarly took note of distress on the Niagara Frontier arising out of the British invasion. Shortly after returning to Congress, Porter introduced a petition from the inhabitants of Niagara County asking compensation for property destroyed by the British invaders. In addition, the General honored the gallantry of his militia volunteers by urging a study of the possibility of granting federal pensions to militiamen seriously wounded while serving their country. Congress enacted a relief bill in April 1815, allowing people whose homes had been destroyed to file claims with the federal government, and in the following year, it authorized claims for buildings other than homes.



The people of western New York busied themselves appraising losses and gathering facts to support their claims. Like other "Niagara sufferers," Porter carefully estimated losses which included his home, a barn, and a slaughterhouse. He also concerned himself with the personal losses of his business partners as well as those of Porter, Barton and Company. In the decade which followed, he continued to use his influence as the claims issue got bogged down over conflicting interpretations of the law. He went to Washington to recruit powerful friends like Henry Clay to prevent passage of new legislation making it more difficult for the "Niagara sufferers" to collect claims. He cooperated with old adversaries from Buffalo to present Congress with petitions recounting the services and hardships of the people of western New York. Unfortunately, their claims remained unsettled for many years. Some were still before Congress as late as the 1840s.

Cooperation between Black Rock and Buffalo also characterized a campaign to improve the poor transportation network on the Niagara Frontier. The extension of roads from the east to Lake Erie received universal acclaim. The War Department was urged to use federal troops to repair and improve roads between Fort Niagara and Black Rock damaged during the recent war. Proposals calling on the federal government to build a road from the "Buffalo frontier" to Washington won wide support for several reasons. The road would foster trade between the federal capital, the Atlantic coast, and the Great Lakes region, and it would shorten the mail route between Buffalo and Washington. It would promote a sense of unity by lessening sectional bias between the North and South and would certainly be more than worth the expense because of consequent improved communications, whether for political, business, or military purposes.

The purposes and objectives of the leaders of Black Rock and Buffalo come into conflict on other issues despite the cooperative efforts cited previously. Peter B. Porter "was" Black Rock with his heavy commercial and real estate investments in the village. As already seen, he did not hesitate to advocate its interests out of civic pride and loyalty as well as personal benefit. Add to this the dreams and hopes of a new Buffalo emerging from the ashes of war, and one can understand the bitter tone of a rivalry reflected in heated speeches, sarcastic newspaper editorials, and frequent pamphlet wars. The controversy grew more intense because Buffalo's leaders — businessman Samuel Wilkeson, lawyer Albert Tracy, editor David Day, and Customs Collector Oliver H. Forward — allied themselves with Governor DeWitt Clinton while Porter and his friends belonged to the anti-Clinton political faction.

Conflict broke out when attempts were made to oust Forward from the customs office. He had settled in Buffalo in 1809 to serve as assistant to his



Oliver Forward.

brother-in-law, Erastus Granger. Eventually he was appointed Collector of Customs and elected to the village's Board of Trustees. In 1817, charges were made accusing him of smuggling and profiteering on goods seized in the course of his duties. Rumor had it that Porter had made the charges to bring about Forward's removal. When Porter carried evidence in support of the accusations to Washington, Forward begged his accuser to withhold it from the government until he could send information proving his innocence. A distressed collector pleaded that local quarrels not be allowed to spread outside western New York.

General Porter, by now a boundary commissioner under provisions of the Treaty of Ghent, recommended to Treasury Secretary William H. Crawford that the accused be given a fair chance to clear his name. To do this, Forward filed a series of legal suits which lingered in the courts, according to Porter, because of the collector's own actions. Crawford then ordered a full investigation and, no doubt to Forward's disgust, appointed Augustus Porter, the General's brother, to direct it. Though Augustus preferred a confidential



inquiry, the angered Collector of Customs denounced it publicly as an “inquisition” by a “secret tribunal.” The findings of the inquiry were sent to Washington after confusing testimony by a long parade of witnesses, and early in 1822, Forward lost his office amid new charges of postal fraud. The appointment of a Porter ally to the customs position did nothing to calm the conflict.

Handbills and newspapers originating in Buffalo strongly denounced Porter calling him a corruptionist for using improper means to obtain a trade monopoly around Niagara Falls for Porter, Barton and Company. According to his enemies at Buffalo, he was also a man of “avaricious ambition” who used a “wicked zeal” against anyone opposing his interests. Furthermore, he was a member of an “odious aristocracy” that held in contempt the intelligence of the people it wished to rule. For good measure, Day and Forward made, and later retracted, accusations claiming Porter and his troops plundered private property during their raid into Canada in 1813. Perhaps it was only natural that so prominent a person as the soldier-politician from Black Rock should provide a target for attack by the village fathers of Buffalo and, as a consequence, should spend a good deal of time defending himself.

Buffalo's village fathers especially opposed Porter's ideas on a canal system to join the Atlantic Ocean with the Great Lakes. They did agree with his call for federal money to construct this “object of the first consequence” to connect the population and manufacturing centers of the east with the food-producing west. His efforts in this direction while in Congress led to



View of Buffalo, 1825.



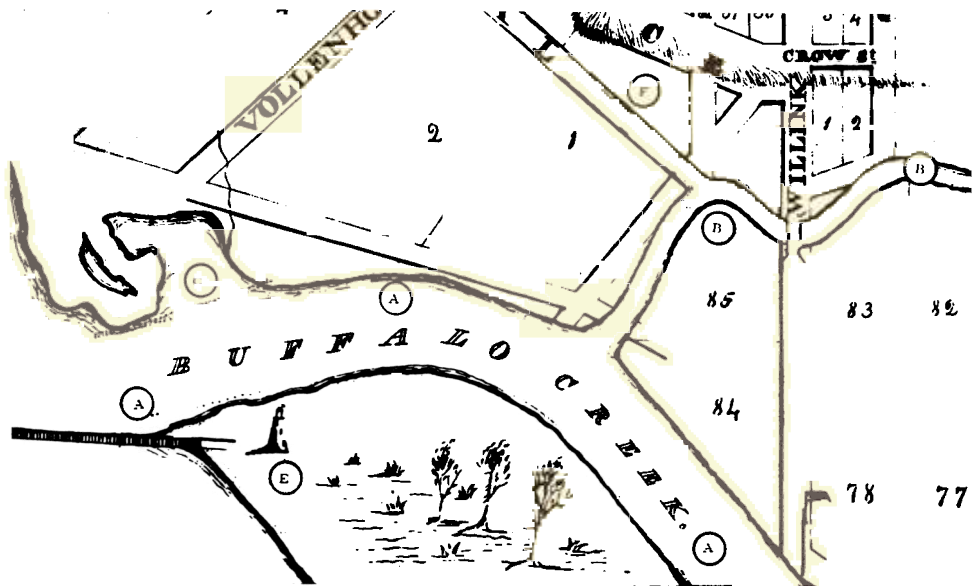
Dewitt Clinton.

appointment as a member of the Canal Commission created by the New York legislature in 1810 to study possible canal routes and methods of financing. The campaign to build an Atlantic-Lakes canal did not get very far prior to the War of 1812 because of the danger of armed conflict and because President Madison had doubts about using federal money for a project to be located solely in New York State.

They did not agree with the General's views on the appropriate canal route. The five canal commissioners traveled from Albany to Lake Erie in 1811 to study the route question first hand. Mayor DeWitt Clinton of New York City proposed digging a canal in a straight line from the Hudson River to Lake Erie, but General Porter preferred a system with two canals, one joining the Hudson with Lake Ontario, and one around Niagara Falls joining Lakes Erie and Ontario. The Buffalo leaders and their ally, Joseph Ellicott, favored Clinton's ideas though, by 1814, it appeared the Canal Commission might adopt Porter's suggestions. The respected statesman and canal advocate, former Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin, endorsed those suggestions, and a close Porter ally, Daniel D. Tompkins, occupied the governor's chair at Albany. Clinton and Ellicott believed Tompkins knew little about the subject but, because of the General's influence, would recommend the Ontario route. The New York mayor expressed frustration at his inability to correct "Porter's heresy." Though General Porter was inflexible, Clinton presumed he would not be a dangerous opponent "in a case so clear."

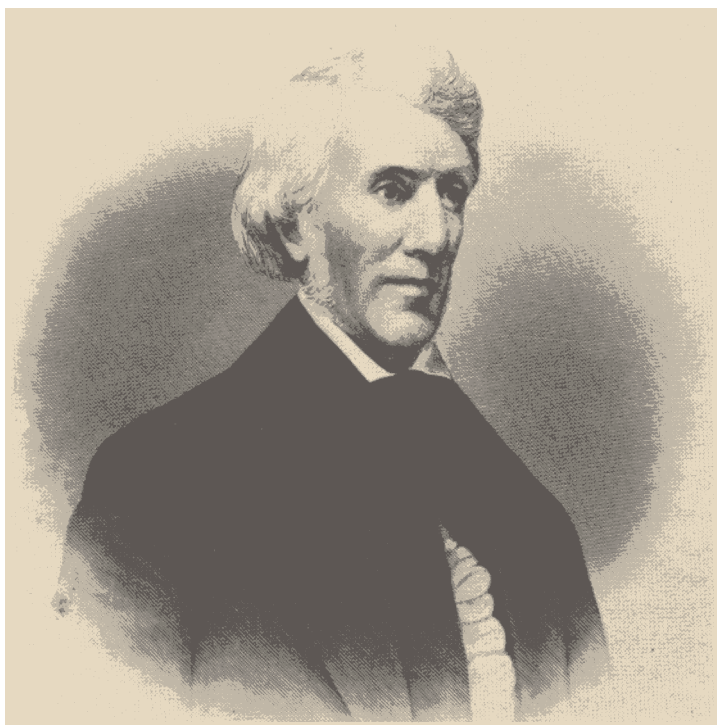
In the spring of 1816 when efforts began to reorganize and expand the size of the Canal Commission, Ellicott hoped Porter would not be reappointed since he had accepted the office of boundary commissioner to clarify the disputed sections of the United States-Canadian border. This hope was granted when Ellicott himself replaced the Black Rock leader as western New York's representative on the commission. A year later, the legislature authorized construction of a canal with state funds along the route favored by Clinton, recently elected Governor of New York.

The Buffalo-Black Rock rivalry now shifted to the location of a western terminus for the Erie Canal. The leaders of both villages knew all too well that whichever community won that prize would become the urban commercial center of western New York. In this struggle, Black Rock enjoyed a number of advantages. It had a good natural harbor which could easily be expanded, and for years it had been the center of east-west trade used even by the merchants at Buffalo. Supplies to such military posts as Fort Wayne, Michilimackinac and Detroit were sent westward from Black Rock where stores, warehouses, and ship yards already existed. Moreover it was located a short distance down the Niagara River from the western end of Lake Erie and would thus escape the effects of turbulent winds and swells coming across the lake from the west. Terminating the canal at Black Rock rather than Buffalo several miles further south would also lower construction costs. Add to these advantages the influence of General Porter and his business associates who undoubtedly understood the healthy impact on their invest-



Buffalo Harbor, 1825





Samuel Wilkeson.

ments in land and trade which would result from locating the canal's western terminus in their village.

Buffalo, two miles south through the woods, also had influential friends and certain advantages. Though there was no natural harbor, a good one could be developed at the mouth of the Buffalo Creek just off the eastern end of Lake Erie. Such a harbor, unlike the one at Black Rock, would be out of range of British canons on the Canadian shore, a fact not to be ignored in light of the recent war with Great Britain. A high water level placed Buffalo in a good position to feed the canal. Fortunately, among its inhabitants was a group of enterprising men — Wilkeson, Forward, businessman Charles Townsend — who were determined to make Buffalo the Erie Canal's western terminus. An alliance with Clinton and Ellicott made their prospects for success good. Ellicott believed a terminus harbor could be built at Buffalo at little expense, and he must have been aware of the increased land values and sales for the Holland Company which might result. Clinton, after an inspection tour of the Niagara Frontier in 1816, accurately predicted, "Buffalo is to be the point of beginning (of the Erie Canal in the west), and in 50 years . . . will be next to New York in wealth and population."

Buffalo's leaders, unconcerned about "stirring the jealousy of the Black Rock partisans," called a village meeting at Pomeroy's Tavern to act on harbor proposals. In April 1818, the New York legislature acted on petitions from the village by authorizing a harbor study. Neither the state nor federal government showed interest in developing the harbor despite positive results from the study, and, consequently, a decision was made to use private money with the assistance of a state loan. Buffalo's Harbor Committee sent Charles Townsend to Albany where a newspaper article, presumably inspired by Black Rock's friends, characterized the Buffalo project as impractical. However, the "selfish views of a few persons" at Black Rock did not prevent the legislature from granting Buffalo a \$12,000 loan when it ordered construction of the western section of the Erie Canal.

Townsend had arrived at Albany to find Porter already there lobbying for state aid to improve his village's harbor. The success of Buffalo's loan request was not matched by favorable state action for Black Rock. To add to Black Rock's woes, an engineer's report to the Canal Commission recommended the western terminus be located at Buffalo. The same report described Black Rock harbor as too vulnerable to British attack, too exposed to ice damage, and too expensive to develop. Though several later reports supported Black Rock, the Canal Commission designated Buffalo as the western terminus in early 1822 on the advice of four out of five of its engineers.

Black Rock's desperate leaders quickly mounted a campaign to reverse the commission's decision calling it hasty and premature, based on "partial information" and misrepresentations by a Buffalo clique. Porter rushed back to Albany where he showed his anger by pressuring for Clinton's removal from the Canal Commission. When flooding damaged Buffalo harbor, the General made sure state legislators were kept informed emphasizing the dangers to shipping from sandbars which frequently built up at the mouth of Buffalo Creek. His earnest efforts paid off on April 6, 1822, when the canal commissioners hedged on their terminus decision by expressing doubts about the stability of the harbor at Buffalo. They still had reservations about Black Rock, but they now recommended financial aid for that village and scheduled a meeting in western New York to settle the controversy once and for all. Shortly thereafter, the legislature granted a \$12,000 loan for expanding Black Rock harbor despite strong opposition from Clinton and his Buffalo allies. Black Rock now stood on an equal financial footing with its rival in competing for the coveted terminus prize.

In June, the Canal Commission met at the Eagle Tavern in Buffalo after enjoying Porter's hospitality at Black Rock. However, no decision was made on the terminus question because the commissioners wanted to allow another

year for harbor expansion and testing the weather effects. Two months later, they ordered digging to begin on a segment of the canal from Buffalo to the dismay of Black Rock's friends. In response, Porter spent much time in Albany guarding against further actions contrary to his village's interests. At home the battle of words in press and pamphlet took on an ugly tone. The General was denounced as a false and hollow selfish opportunist who misrepresented the facts for personal gain. His enemies at Buffalo were not spared. They were called a bunch of "fiend-like" and "foul mouthed" slanderers among whom could be found that "lily-livered and shameless libeler," Oliver Forward. Other references made mention of "the vulgar eyes of the herd in Buffalo."

That "herd" soon received a double jolt when Governor Clinton declined to run for reelection, and the Canal Commission suspended construction of the canal between Buffalo and Black Rock. The Commission agreed to pay \$80,000 for completion of Black Rock's harbor improvement, expecting, it seems, to make it the major junction between the canal and Lake Erie. The struggle now appeared to have ended, and in the words of the *Buffalo Patriot*, ". . . it is of very little use for us to quarrel with the commissioners or our neighbors at Black Rock on account of the decision."

Outraged leaders at Buffalo refused to heed the *Patriot's* advice, and they launched a campaign to complete the canal to their village with private



Black Rock, 1825, by George Caitlin.



money. A mass meeting protested the decision to terminate the canal at Black Rock, and the campaign for private funds raised over \$11,000. Meanwhile, petitions from Buffalo's friends besieged the commission and the legislature at Albany where Clinton and his allies lost no opportunity to push Buffalo's cause. These efforts bore fruit in October 1823, when construction of the Buffalo canal link resumed on state orders, in large measure because of recommendation from canal engineers. Events showed that this action gave Buffalo a final and conclusive victory in the terminus struggle.

Efforts by Porter and his friends to alter the decision were useless, and when they sought revenge by firing Clinton from the Canal Commission, the action backfired making him a hero and returning him to the governor's chair. To make matters worse, Buffalo's press gleefully reported ice and wind damage at Black Rock harbor in the winter of 1824-25, and bills were introduced in the legislature for a canal link from Tonawanda to Buffalo completely bypassing Black Rock. Thus, the controversy lingered on until further damage closed Black Rock harbor and most traders moved to Buffalo.

Buffalo's 2,412 inhabitants enjoyed a joyous year in 1825 with the completion of the Erie Canal. During the excitement generated by the impending canal opening, they and their fellow western New Yorkers had added reason to celebrate. It had been fifty years since the outbreak of the American Revolution, and to observe the anniversary, they extended a warm welcome to the Marquis de Lafayette in thanks for his help in promoting the cause of American independence. The French nobleman was touring the United States at the invitation of Congress and the President, and in the summer of 1825, his journey brought him to western New York enroute to Boston to participate in the June 17th anniversary of Bunker Hill Day.

Lafayette arrived by steamboat in Buffalo's new harbor at noon on June 4th to the greetings of an excited citizenry. A committee of dignitaries, preceded by the village band and two militia detachments, escorted him to the Eagle Tavern, one of the Niagara Frontier's finest hotels, located on the west side of Main Street near Court. An elegant platform had been erected in front of the hotel, and from there, area officials welcomed the famous traveler. Political differences were set aside as Village President Oliver Forward paid tribute to the Marquis's services to America, and Black Rock's Peter B. Porter presented him to the people. A civic dinner held the same evening was followed by a gala ball where the beautiful and charming Letitia Grayson Porter joined her husband at the head of the receiving line to introduce Lafayette to the guests.

Early the next morning, the Frenchman went to Black Rock where he had breakfast at General Porter's residence located near Niagara and West



Marquis de Lafayette.

Ferry Streets. A committee of Black Rock's 1,039 citizens had decorated the courtyard gate with American and French flags and the house's columns with red, white and blue ribbons. After addressing the people, Lafayette boarded a canal boat, the *Seneca Chief*, to travel to Tonawanda enroute to Niagara Falls as he continued his tour eastward.

The Marquis's departure once again shifted the focus to the official opening of the Erie Canal scheduled for October. By that time, local and state leaders had gathered to celebrate the occasion. They boarded canal boats in Buffalo harbor for a symbolic trip to New York City heralding the wedding of the waters of Lake Erie and the Atlantic Ocean. Leading the parade of canal boats was the *Seneca Chief*, again carrying a famous passenger, Governor DeWitt Clinton, who would ceremoniously dump water from Lake Erie into New York harbor. Even Black Rock was represented in the canal parade with a boat, carrying Porter, which joined the procession at the village's harbor to travel up to Tonawanda.

The opening of the Erie Canal launched Buffalo's growth into New York State's second largest city as Clinton had predicted over a decade before. It quickly became a thriving commercial and manufacturing center far surpassing Black Rock. In 1837, Black Rock was dealt yet another blow when General Porter sold his interests there and moved to Niagara Falls where he built a new home overlooking the Great Cataract. His name did not disappear from the Buffalo area however. When a fort was built in the 1840s near the American side of the present-day Peace Bridge, it was named Fort Porter in honor of the businessman-politician-soldier who died in 1844. Nine years after his death, his cherished village of Black Rock was annexed to a thriving, expanding Buffalo, chartered as a city in 1832. Black Rock became but one neighborhood in the city. Yet it remained a unique community with an exciting past, a rich folklore, and, perhaps, dreams of what might have been.



**Peter B. Porter.**



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*Distant view of Black Rock and vicinity.*





*Buffalo 1829.*