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EDITOR'S PICK

NIAGARA DISCOVERIES: Eighteen-Mile Creek

Ann Marie Linnabery Niagara Discoveries
May 9, 2020



COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS LIBRARIES / UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN This 1830 map of the Niagara Frontier shows Eighteen-Mile Creek by another name, Willinks Creek. The creek that flows from Olcott south to Lockport is approximately 18 miles from where the Niagara River meets Lake Ontario.



As most people in this area know, Eighteen-Mile Creek, which flows into Lake Ontario at Olcott, received its name from the fact that it is approximately 18 miles from where the Niagara River meets Lake Ontario. In the 18th century, many of these waterways were identified by how far they were from the Niagara River or Fort Niagara (Four-Mile Creek, Twelve-Mile Creek, etc.).

Occasionally, you will find these numbered creeks labeled on early maps with an actual name. This is the case with Eighteen-Mile Creek, but before disclosing a name it was given in the early 19th century, we have to go back even further to the time when this area was occupied by indigenous people.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, there was still extant evidence that the creek had been used by several native nations for hundreds of years. Though there is no certainty, 19th century New York State anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan wrote that the aboriginal name for the creek was "Date-ge-a'-de-ha-na-geh," meaning "two creeks, near together." Whether this referred to the fact that Eighteen Mile Creek splits into two branches just west of what is now Wrights Corners, or it refers to one of the other creeks near Eighteen-Mile (Hopkins, Honeoye or Keg), is unclear.

The first European contact in the area around the creek was by French soldiers from Fort Niagara. They established a small outpost there to keep an eye on British movement on Lake Ontario during the French and Indian War. There is a rumor that when an English ship was spotted on the lake heading toward the fort, the French soldiers quickly abandoned their post but not before burying valuables inside a cannon barrel on the shore of the creek. The cannon has never been found.

In the early 19th century, after the Holland Land Company had acquired more than 3 million acres in western New York, the creek was sometimes called Willink's. A map made as late as 1830 uses that name. Wilhelm Willink was one of the Dutch investors in the Holland Land Company who hoped to profit from the sale of land here. A town named for him was once part of Niagara County, from 1808 to 1821, when Erie County was split off. It was later developed into several towns in the southern part of Erie County and his name all but disappeared except for a short street in West Seneca.

After the land became available for settlement, William Chambers and John Brewer came to Eighteen-Mile Creek in 1807. The following year, Burgoyne Kemp and Peter Hopkins arrived at the creek and James Van Horn came in 1810. The settlement clustered at the mouth of the creek soon became known as "Kempville" and further downstream was "Van Horn's Mills" (now Burt).

In 1811, the United States Army built a road along Lake Ontario east from Fort Niagara to Eighteen-Mile Creek to facilitate the transport of grain to the grist mill at Van Horn's Mills. Another crude road ran south along the east side of the creek to meet the Ridge Road at what is now Wrights Corners.

By the time of the War of 1812, both names were being used to identify the creek. On the morning of December 19th, British soldiers and their Native allies captured Fort Niagara and sent a detachment of soldiers east on the road along Lake Ontario with the ultimate goal of burning Van Horn's Mill to deprive the settlers (and any U.S. soldiers) the means to make flour.

As they marched east, the soldiers burned log cabins in what is now Porter, Wilson and Newfane. When they arrived in Kempville on Christmas Day, they turned south and headed for the mill. Before arriving there, however, they encountered the log home of the Joseph Pease family. Mr. Pease had left to help defend the frontier and Mrs. Pease was left to defend their home. When the British arrived, she begged them not to destroy her home but they only allowed her to remove some personal possessions. She then mentioned the barrels of brandy that were still in the house. The soldiers very dutifully removed the barrels and began to help themselves to the contents. After a while they forgot about burning Mrs. Pease's house and even released her teenage son whom they had taken prisoner. They further allowed the son to remove several barrels of processed flour from the gristmill before they torched it.

With the war ending in 1815, most of the former settlers returned along with many new ones. Eighteen-Mile Creek sprang to life again with numerous mills and businesses using its water for power and transportation.

NEXT WEEK: The industries along Eighteen-Mile Creek.

Ann Marie Linnabery is the assistant director of the History Center of Niagara.

Conversation

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JB

James Boles MAY 15, 2020

Ann Marie: Great article about this important creek. I am waiting for your next article about the many mills powered by the creek. It does get a boost in water power from the canal. I have been trying to find out where 18 mile creek begins Southeast of Lockport before this area was fully settled. There is little history about the creek from the headwaters to the canal before it was put underground. It looks like when the area developed the path of the creek was changed. Jim Boles

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