

"Everything Here is New But the Forests": Englishman Thomas Woodcock Travels to Niagara on the Erie Canal, 1836.

Engraver Thomas Woodcock was born in Manchester, England in 1805 and emigrated to the United States in 1830. In 1836 he took a trip to Niagara Falls, traveling north from Manhattan up the Hudson river and west on the Erie Canal. Niagara Falls was a favorite destination for tourists in the 1830s, made possible in part by the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. The trip was popularized by authors like Basil Hall, whose 1829 *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and '28* Woodcock mentions several times here. Woodcock's narrative is noteworthy less for his appreciation of the natural wonders of the falls than for his shrewd appraisal of business practices in western New York. This selection from his private journal begins on the Erie Canal with his trip from Schenectady to Utica by packet boat.

The Bridges on the Canal are very low, particularly the old ones, indeed they are so low as to scarcely allow the baggage to clear, and in some cases actually rubbing against it. every Bridge makes us bend double if seated on anything, and in many cases you have to lie on your back. the Man at the helm gives the Word to the Passengers. "Bridge" " very low Bridge" "the lowest in the Canal" as the case may be. some serious accidents have happened for want of caution. a young English Woman met with her death a short time since, she having fallen asleep with her head upon a box had her head crushed to pieces. such things however do not often occur, and in general it affords amusement to the passengers who soon imitate the cry, and vary it with a command, such as "All Jackson men bow down." after such commands we find few Aristocrats...The Canal was within sight of the Mohawk River, in some cases only the towing path being between, the wall rising from the Channel of the river and being elevated 20 or 30 feet. This is the Valley of the Mohawk. so narrow is it in some places that there seems scarcely room for the River the Road and the Canal which pass through it. the scenery is not unlike that of the Valley of the Wye in Derbyshire. the land is perfectly flat and of a fine alluvial soil, said to be the richest in the State. it is held almost exclusively by persons of German extraction who preserve the language and customs of their ancestors. this level region is called the German Flats, and is so famous for its fertility that nothing can induce the Germans to sell. it is valued at \$200 per acre, though the uplands can be bought for \$40. these Germans are enemies to all improvement, are very industrious, but not very cleanly in their habits. in the broad parts of the Valley there are some Dutch Villages which have a very neat appearance. at Frankfort 10 miles from Utica we commence on the long level which is 69 _ miles without a lock. we arrived in Utica about _ 8 O'clock AM. I had resolved to stay at this place and visit Trenton falls, but owing to the unfavorable state of the Weather I concluded to proceed. our Boat went close alongside the Packet for Rochester, so we had only to step out of one onto the other, which as soon as we had done she immediately sailed. we paid \$6.50 each the distance being 160 Miles. our living was first rate. we passed through Utica, which seemed to be a large and important place. we could see five Rows of Brick Stores, and the place had an appearance of prosperity....after passing through various

settlements with high sounding names of Indian and Classical origin we arrived at Syracuse, famous for its Salt Manufactories. the vats for the evaporation of the Water from the Salt by the suns rays may be seen on both sides of the Canal on the Western extremity of the village. light wooden roofs are kept ready to slide over these vats in bad weather, and the salt is taken out once in two or three days. *Salina* is about 1 _ Miles from Syracuse, and as its name indicates, is a Salt establishment. the mode of evaporation here is that of boiling. Liverpool is about 6 Miles distant on the edge of the Lake (which is about 6 Miles long and 2 broad). these and other villages are solely employed in the Manufacture of Salt. there is a canal here that runs to Oswego on Lake Ontario, which had I have known at the time, I would have taken as the best route to the "falls" as I should then have touched at Toronto the Capital of U.C. We then pass through Palmyra, and over the Grand Embankment 72 feet high and extending 2 Miles. we at length arrived at Rochester at Eleven O Clock P.M. and went immediately to the Clinton Hotel where we staid for the Night. this City is elevated 500 feet above the Hudson River, from which place it is distant 270 Miles. it was first settled in 1812, and in 1827 contained 10,818 Inhabitants. the Genesee River runs through the City, the Canal being carried over by means of an aquaduct. it consists of ten arches of stone. the water rushes under with fearful rapidity, so much as to force itself up the battlements of the bridge. the water power is estimated at 38,400 horses. the whole river supplies 20,000 cubic feet a Minute; and the combined height of the falls of Rochester and Carthage is 280 feet. the water of course is so rapid as to prevent navigation. After getting breakfast we proceeded to the Village of Brighton in order to find out David Miller an acquaintance of G Woodward's. it is situated about 3 Miles from the City. when we arrived there we found he had removed 30 or 4 Miles to the Northward, and accordingly shaped our course that way. after taking the wrong road for about 2 Miles, we had to retrace our Steps. proceeding in our right course we soon got into the Woods, which are now for the first time thought worth the time to subdue. everything here is *new* but the Forests, log houses of all grades from the Whitewashed, neatly fenced in, to the black looking, mud-surrounded hovel. the roads are of the kind called corderoy consisting of logs of Wood rolled together. I have for the first time observed the practise of Girdling that is cutting the bark all around the tree so as to prevent the rising of the sap. Capt Basil Hall calls them the Banquos of the Forest.* I have seen few large trees. in that I have been disappointed, but here they certainly attain their full growth. but they are so closely packed together that they cannot send out side shoots but run towering up to a great height. when left standing by themselves the wind soon blows them down. it is also next to impossible to pass through these woods, on account of the vast quantities of decayed matter. the trees of former Generations lie in vast heaps in all the stages of decomposition. you may observe the prostrate trunk of some deceased Monarch that is apparantly sound, but if you but step upon it, it crumbles to dust. the rays of the sun cannot penetrate these recesses, consequently there is no grass or underwood. it is only in the thinly wooded country that cattle can find pasture. still when this land is cleared, it yields enormous crops. We at length reached the house of David Miller, for house it was, and the only one near, the rest being merely log huts. on making enquiries at the door we lear[n]ed that he had that Morning gone to the State of Michigan, to see his Father who was

lying dangerously ill. we found his daughter at home who desired us to walk in and be seated. without asking us any questions she proceeded to get us some refreshments ready, and very soon placed them on the table. this from a girl not over 13 years of age, was what I should not have suspected. I found her to be very intelligent. it seems she was left the sole housekeeper, with a small child to take care of. we had some of the best bread served up that I ever tasted, and on asking whether it was not mixed up with milk instead of water, found that was the case, and a young Man her Uncle, who afterwards came in told me he never saw any other kind. it seems that Miller sold his other farm for \$30 per acre. it was on the banks of the canal, but had not a good house. he bought the present farm 2 years ago for \$37 with an excellent House upon it worth \$500. it consists of 51 acres. it was partially improved. he has cut down more since and has got a crop upon it. he now considers it worth with the crop as it now stands \$62. this land you must bear in mind though called cleared has an immense number of stumps upon it which will take years to eradicate. a person of the name of Pipkin has bought 200 acres of beautiful really clear land, with a Mansion upon it, for \$200 per acre. a person opposite him bought 4 acres with an house upon it for which he paid \$300 per acre. this land he told me had been worked for 20 years without putting anything upon it. Returned to Rochester in the Afternoon, took a survey of the flour Mills, which are fine stone Building of an immense size. at 5 O Clock went on board the Canal Boat. the distance to Buffaloe is 93 Miles, 63 of which is on a level. the fare was \$3.50 but owing to opposition is now reduced to \$1.50. night soon coming on prevented me from seeing much of the Country. the next morning we found ourselves in the Neighbourhood of Lockport. at this place there are five double locks of excellent workmanship which elevate us 60 feet. we are therefore 560 above the Hudson and have attained the same elevation as the "falls" from which place we are only distant about 12 Miles. The following inscription I copied from the stone work on entering the lock. *Erie Canal*— "Let posterity be excited to perpetuate our free Institutions, and to make still greater efforts, than their Ancestors, to promote *Public Prosperity* by the recollection that these works of Internal Improvement were achieved by the spirit and perseverance of Republican Freemen." after going through the deep cutting immediately following the locks we arrive at Pendleton, the Entrance to the Tonawanda creek, which I think is very unwisely used for navigation their being a strong current after Rains which must greatly impede the Boats that are coming up. this Creek is used for 12 Miles. we then arrive at Tonawanda, and obtain the first glimpse of Canada and the Niagara River which now is only seperated from the Canal by an embankment. we here only see one half of the River, Grand Island being in the centre. this Island is about 12 Miles long and is covered with Oak timber. a Boston Company have Steam Saw Mills erected for the purpose of sawing it up into plank. two Ships was on this Island that Major Noah of New York wished to collect the scattered tribes of Israel. We next arrive at Black Rock, from which place we can distinctly see the buildings on the Canada Side. one large Building had written upon it in large letters "Cloth Establishment." the reason is obvious. John Bull can sell Cloth to his Brother Jonathan Free of duty. consequently he crosses the river for his clothes. Jonathan in turn accomodates John by letting him have his tea duty free. at past 2 O Clock we arrived at Buffaloe, and proceeded to the Mansion House where

we put up. Buffalo is a lake Port. Steam Boats run from here to the far West. a few years ago and this was considered as such, but now nothing short of the Pacific Ocean can be considered such. from the description I had read of this place by Capt. Basil Hall, I had expected to find it a thriving though a small place, and the buildings to be chiefly of wood, but instead of this I found Main Street to be entirely of brick and the Stores really splendid. fine brick buildings were springing up in all directions. at the foot of Main Street there was 17 Brick Stores nearly finished and I was told that they were all ready rented at \$700 a year. how these rents are to be paid I really cannot tell as the Port must be closed 5 Months in the year. the streets were most abominably muddy, they not being paved, a circumstance not to be Wondered at when we find that they cannot speculate in paving stones. I observed that Gentlemen wore their Pantaloon inside their boots to protect them from the mud. this is the place for speculation. the people are all going mad. in the bar rooms of the Hotels plans of intended Towns are stuck up in the same style that play bills are stuck up in Manchester. these plans look very pretty indeed. the lots are laid out quite regular, and everything cut and dried. a parcel of these lots are put up at Auction, terms so much per cent. say 10 at the time of sale 30 per cent in 2 Months the rest on Bond and Mortgage. the buyer gets a title. they are then puffed off in the newspapers and the individuals go round peddling them. sells them for an advance, pockets the difference and speculates again. sensible men agree that these places will not be settled upon during the present Generation but it serves to speculate upon and for all useful purposes land in the Moon would do just as well. in this way Chicago has been got up, but they have managed to build some houses there. it is 1,000 Miles from Buffalo, and lots sell for from \$70 to 250 dollars a foot. that is, if a lot of Ground is 25 feet by 100 or so it would be called 25 feet. now this Buffalo is a most corrupt place as regards money matters. the whole of these fine buildings being build upon Credit, should an alteration in the value of money take place, and it most assuredly will, then these men cannot pay their Mortgages. the Banks will then claim them and as I firmly believe the Banks cannot redeem their paper now how will it be then? there is a person here by the name of Rathbun who they say has built up the place. he is the greatest buildier, the Greatest Stage Contractor in fact he is at the head of everything and I see by the papers has lately offered Niagara Falls for sale for Manufacturing purposes. now this man is admitted on all hands to be unable to pay his debts and yet his notes pass current for money, the people declaring that they dare not let him break as it would ruin the whole place. a law has been passed in this state to prevent the circulation of small notes. ones and twos are at present uncurrent and illegal and 3s after next August, yet *ones* are quite in common circulation and those too of other States, none of which are legal under \$5. to sum up the matter it is a fine place, a splendid pyramid, but it is based on a peg. in looking out from my bed room Window I observed that the chimneys had all stages to support them and on paying attention to the circumstances I found that it was to protect them from the violence of the Gales from the Lake which I am told blow with great violence. the waves from the lake last fall made a complete breach in the canal wall and washed sand onto the bank on the other side. in fact in coming along the canal I saw plenty of evidence of the violence of the Wind in the fact of so many trees lying prostrate the roots completely torn out of the Ground. here I also found great

numbers of emigrants ready to embark for the West. great numbers of poor Germans and also many Wealthy Yankees who having sold excellent farms to the Eastward were going into a Wilderness because the *land* was so very rich. these persons take with them their families, and as the land is *so very* rich and requires so little cultivation, they become a set of idle vagabonds and but one step removed from the Indians. I have however been told that many of these families are actually suffering from want. they are on the land but the land wants clearing and untill that is done they have to buy their food and I am told that pork is selling at 2 shilling per lb. and flour at \$15 per barrel.

* "An American settler can hardly conceive the horror with which a foreigner beholds such numbers of magnificent trees standing around him with their throats cut, the very Banquos of the murdered forest."

Source: Basil Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and '28* (Edinburgh, 1829), v.1, p.71.
Thomas Swann Woodcock, *New York to Niagara, 1836: The Journal of Thomas S. Woodcock*, ed. Deoch Fulton (New York: New York Public Library, 1938), 9–16.

