

## *Part One*



## *Study Purpose and Background*



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A system of stairways and platforms leads visitors to the Cave of the Winds

### Project History

In 2001, Senator Charles E. Schumer and Congressman John J. LaFalce asked the National Park Service to explore alternative strategies for potential NPS partnership involvement in the area of Niagara Falls, New York, with state and local representatives.

An NPS reconnaissance team visited the area on March 19 and 20, 2001. The team met with district office staff of Senator Schumer and Congressman LaFalce, representatives of the City of Niagara Falls and Niagara County, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, faculty of the University of Buffalo, staff of area state legislators, and local organizations.

The reconnaissance team completed their assessment in July 2001. At the time, the team did not undertake a full study of the Niagara Region. Rather, the reconnaissance report explored whether further study was warranted to consider an NPS role in the region.

The reconnaissance report identified a number of possible approaches, including NPS technical assistance and federal designation of a heritage area. The reconnaissance report recommended that a congressionally authorized study be undertaken to seek broad public input and determine the feasibility of alternatives.

### Legislation

In October 2002, Public Law 107-256 the “Niagara Falls National Heritage Area Study Act,” directed the Secretary of the Interior to conduct a study of the feasibility of establishing a Niagara Falls National Heritage Area. The study legislation defines the study area as “the lands in Niagara County, New York, along and in the vicinity of the Niagara River.” The study legislation also identifies national heritage area criteria to be employed by the National Park Service in conducting the study and requires consultation with state and local agencies.





Observation Tower at Niagara Falls State Park

Finally, the study legislation requires that a report be submitted to Congress no later than three fiscal years after the date upon which funds are made available to complete the study. The complete text of Public Law 107-256 may be found in Appendix A.

The following National Park Service Interim National Heritage Criteria are used by the National Park Service in evaluating study areas for such a designation:

1. The area has an assemblage of natural, historic, or cultural resources that together represent distinctive aspects of American heritage worthy of recognition, conservation, interpretation, and continuing use, and are best managed as such an assemblage, through partnerships among public and private entities, and by combining diverse and sometimes noncontiguous resources and active communities.
2. The area reflects traditions, customs, beliefs, and folk life that are a valuable part of the nation's story.
3. The area provides outstanding opportunities to conserve natural, cultural, historic, and/or scenic features.
4. The area provides outstanding recreational and educational opportunities.

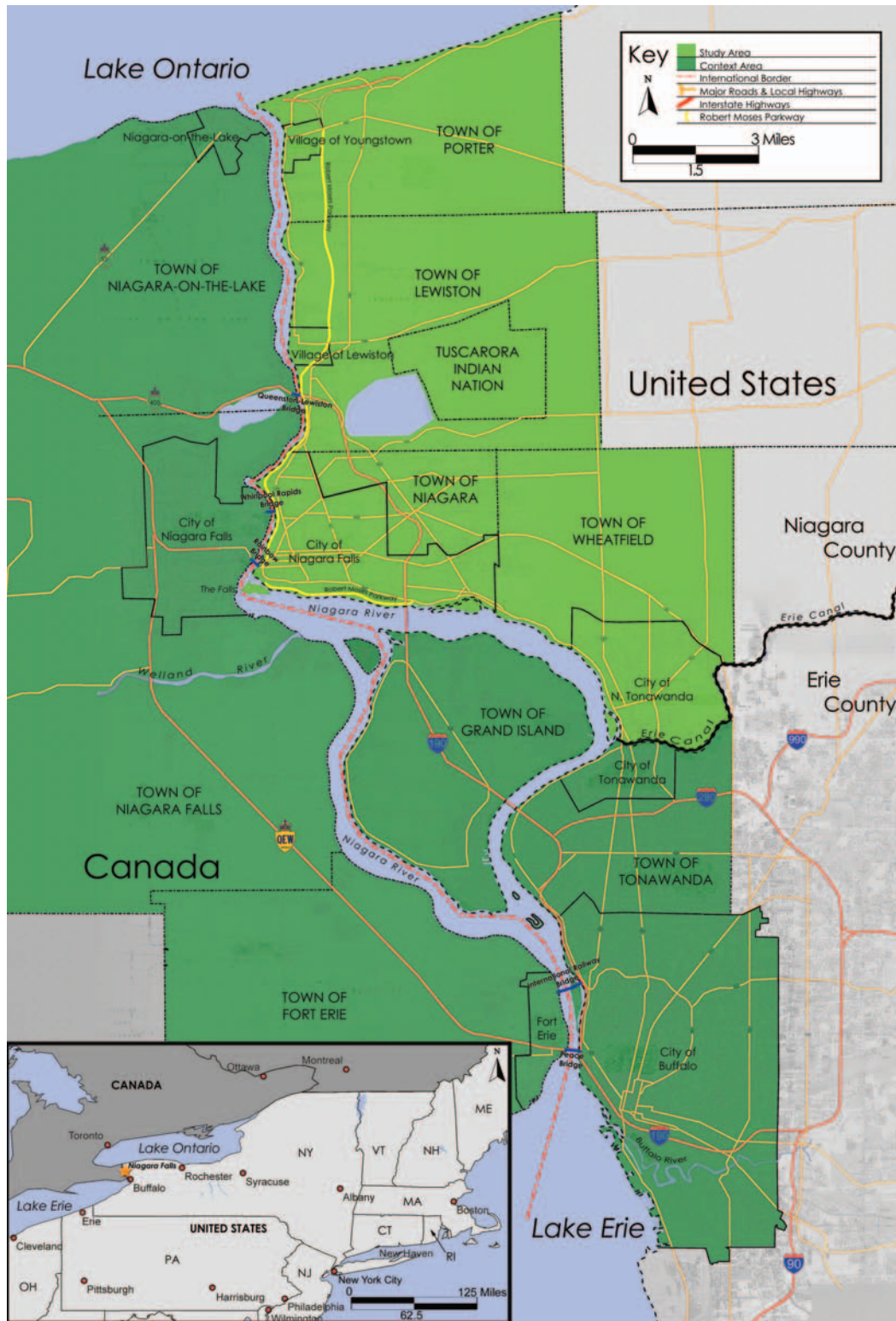
5. The area includes resources that are important to the identified theme or themes of the area and retain a degree of integrity capable of supporting interpretation.
6. Residents, business interests, nonprofit organizations, and governments within the proposed area that are involved in the planning, have developed a conceptual financial plan that outlines the roles for all participants including the federal government, and have demonstrated support for designation of the area.
7. The proposed management entity and units of government supporting the designation are willing
8. The proposal is consistent with continued economic activity in the area.
9. A conceptual boundary map has been reviewed by the public; and
10. The management entity proposed to plan and implement the project is described.

## Study Process

### *Establishing the Study Area*

The study legislation defines the study area as “lands in Niagara County, New York, along and in the vicinity of the Niagara River.” In compliance with the legislation, the study team considers this to be the primary study area. The central resources associated with this area are Niagara Falls and its associated rapids, the Niagara River Gorge, the Lower Niagara River (Lower Niagara River is below the Falls and the Upper Niagara River is above the Falls), and the cultural, historic, and scenic resources that are directly associated with those central resources. The primary study area encompasses the Cities of Niagara Falls and North Tonawanda; the Towns of Porter, Lewiston, Niagara, and Wheatfield; and the Villages of Lewiston and Youngstown.

The Niagara River demarcates the international boundary between the United States and Canada. Significant portions of the Niagara River and Gorge as well as Horseshoe Falls lie within Canada, while the American Falls lie within the United States. In addition, Canada possesses many cultural, historic, and scenic resources that complement or complete stories that are present on the U.S. side.



Future federal funding, of course, could not be used to assist Canadian resources since they would be outside of any potential heritage area boundary.

The primary study area received the greatest amount of emphasis in terms of resource inventory and evaluation and would be central to any proposed federal designation. The associated resources found in the context area were considered in relation to the resources and themes identified for the primary study area. Opportunities to build new or expand upon existing links between the context and primary study areas were explored in the course of developing management alternatives.

### Resource Inventory and Assessment

As part of its reconnaissance, the study team surveyed known cultural, historical, natural, recreational, and scenic resources throughout both the primary study area and the context area. While not exhaustive, the resource inventory yielded sufficient information to make findings regarding criterion 1. The team relied heavily on secondary sources such as the National Register of Historic Places, inventories completed by the New York Power Authority as part of the Niagara Power Project Relicensing process, state and regional tourism guides and brochures, and the Western New York Regional Information Network—an online resource sponsored by the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth at the University of Buffalo. Similar resources were consulted to identify resources in Canada. The team evaluated the region's resources as defined through the inventory against the relevant criteria for national heritage areas. Part Two of this report contains a description of the region's resources and their evaluation.

### Defining Thematic Framework

As an initial step in the study process, the team developed a thematic framework reflective of the cultural and natural resources represented in the area. In developing themes, the study team considered suggestions received during public meetings and work previously completed by the binational forum convened by the Urban Design Project at the University of Buffalo and the Waterfront Regeneration Trust of Toronto in their Rethinking the

*Niagara Falls is an internationally renowned natural resource and tourist attraction with a binational and international audience.*

Niagara Frontier series. Based on a reconnaissance-level survey of regional resources, the team identified the themes that were the most cohesive, pervasive, and distinctive in relation to the identified resources. As described in Part Two, the four themes identified by the team are meant to be broad and comprehensive so that they are able to embrace a wide range of pertinent stories.

### Defining Management Alternatives

Based on substantial public input and the outcome of the resource inventory and assessment, the study team developed a range of management alternatives that would meet the requirements of the national heritage area criteria as well as the needs and conditions defined by local stakeholders. While legislation directs us to consider whether or not the area is eligible for federal designation as a national heritage area, the study team also considered other management concepts to determine if they could address those needs and meet those conditions. A complete description of the management alternatives appears in Part Three of this report.

### Public Participation

During the course of the study, the team identified key audiences and employed a number of different strategies to reach out to and involve them, including public meetings, newsletters, project website, correspondence, phone contacts, and meetings with individuals as well as small groups of stakeholders. Early in the process, the study team recognized that there were numerous regional initiatives that were directly related to preserving and promot-



ing the region's resources. As a result, the study team contracted with the Urban Design Project at the University of Buffalo, a well-established regional planning group that was associated with many of these efforts. The Urban Design Project worked with the National Park Service to develop and implement a public involvement strategy for the study that would be inclusive and coordinated to ensure there would be no duplication of effort. The State Historic Preservation Office, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and the local federally recognized tribes—the Seneca Nation, the Tuscarora Nation, and the Tonawanda Tribe of Seneca—were consulted and will continue to be consulted during the study process.

### *Transmittal of Study to Congress*

Upon completion of the study process, the final study report will be transmitted by the Secretary of the Interior to Congress. The Secretary's recommendations regarding national heritage area designation will accompany the report to Congress. After that, it is the role of Congress to decide whether or not to act upon any of the Secretary's recommendations. An act of Congress is required to designate a national heritage area or any other ongoing NPS role in the region not already authorized by other statutes.

## **Planning Context**

Niagara Falls is an internationally renowned natural resource and tourist attraction with a binational and international audience. The Niagara River touches communities on both sides of the U.S./Canadian border. At present, the U.S. side of the river is the subject of a major hydropower relicensing effort that is being overseen by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and involves a large group of participating agencies and interest groups. The relicensing discussions are resulting in the provision of additional financial resources to support public conservation and recreation projects in the study area. The Niagara River also has a large recreational constituency. A number of locally based organizations from both sides of the Niagara River Gorge have been working on access and waterfront revitalization initiatives.

In addition, there are a number of American Indian tribes with contemporary as well as historic interests in the region including the Seneca Nation, the Tuscarora Nation, and the Tonawanda Band of Seneca. Should a National Heritage Area be designated in the region, representation of Native American interests on the management entity and participation in the development of a heritage area plan will be critical to fully incorporating this valuable component of the region's heritage.

A number of these agencies, organizations, and initiatives are described in greater detail below:

### *New York State Parks—Niagara System*

As defined by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), the Niagara Region embraces both Erie and Niagara Counties and includes 14 state park units. Eight of these state parks and historic sites are located within the primary study area, and four of them include segments of the Niagara Gorge Trail – approximately 14.5 miles (23.3 kilometers) of hiking and walking trails along the rim and the floor of the Gorge. An asterisk (\*) denotes a state park offering Niagara Gorge Trail access. The state parks include:

- Niagara Falls State Park (until recently, referred to as Niagara Falls Reservation)\*
- Whirlpool State Park\*
- DeVeaux Woods State Park
- Devil's Hole State Park\*
- Reservoir State Park
- Earl W. Brydges ArtPark State Park\*
- Joseph Davis State Park
- Fort Niagara State Park and State Historic Site

The Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation manages Niagara Falls, Devil's Hole, Whirlpool, Reservoir, and DeVeaux Woods State Parks as a single administrative unit, while the rest are administered as individual units. In general, these state park units were acquired at different times for different purposes. A more complete description of New York state parks located within the primary study area may be found in Appendix B.

The state of New York has recently invested \$44 million in capital improvements for parks in this region, primarily focused on parks associated with the Niagara Gorge Trail and the City of Niagara Falls. OPRHP recently completed a Niagara Gorge Trail Plan to address improving resource conditions and public access.

The state parks and communities along the Niagara River have also significantly benefited from National Park Service-administered Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) assistance. Since 1968, close to \$6 million has been committed to projects at Niagara Falls State Park, other state parks along the river, and in the City of Niagara Falls and the Town of Lewiston. The Niagara Gorge Trail System and the Whirlpool Park improvements were partially financed by LWCF grants totaling \$400,000 in 2000.

### *Robert Moses Parkway*

The parkway is a multi-lane, limited-access highway that follows the Niagara River from the northern end of the Grand Island Bridge to Porter (Youngstown). Though primarily managed by OPRHP, segments of the parkway are owned by the New York Power Authority (NYPA) and the state Department of Transportation (DOT). The roadway superseded pre-existing local access roads and has become the primary means of vehicular access to some of the New York state parks in the region, particularly Niagara Falls State Park and the Niagara Gorge Trail System.

The parkway was built in conjunction with the Niagara Power Project circa 1960 and originally cut through Niagara Falls State Park. It is a limited-access, four-lane highway, and since its development direct public access to the Niagara River/Gorge and parks located along it has been restricted. This has particularly been the case in the City of Niagara Falls. Several citizens' groups have continually lobbied for the removal of the parkway and the restoration of open space. Others have taken a stance in support of the parkway, citing the need to maintain this transportation corridor between the city and the communities to its north.

NYS OPRHP and NYS DOT have worked together

to address a number of the access concerns. Their efforts have included the implementation of a pilot program that has closed two lanes of the parkway to vehicular traffic and has allowed greater pedestrian access to the river/gorge as well as the creation of several at-grade crossings linking the city with the state parks. These changes have not allayed the concerns of the parkway's most outspoken critics and have raised concerns among residents of communities north of the Niagara Power Project who view the parkway as a needed commuter road. In December 2003, NYS DOT and OPRHP released a study evaluating the results of the parkway pilot program. The DOT/OPRHP study findings indicated that the pilot project conversion of the parkway improved public access to the Gorge through the closure of the southbound lanes while the remaining northbound lanes adequately and safely served vehicular traffic. The agencies intend to proceed with the design to formally convert the southbound lanes into a recreationway.

The New York Power Authority is also preparing an analysis of opportunities and constraints relative to the parkway as part of its current relicensing process.

### *Niagara River Greenway*

In 2003, the Greater Buffalo Niagara Regional Transportation Commission (GBNRTC), Friends of the Buffalo Niagara Rivers (FBNR) and the Buffalo Olmsted Park Conservancy joined together to propose a lake-to-lake greenway and trail system. In support of this effort, they submitted a proposal for assistance from the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA). The proposal called for the development of a linear park along the U.S. side of the Niagara River from Buffalo to Fort Niagara in Youngstown. The project's proponents envision a lake-to-lake multiple-use trail linking numerous parks and open space along the Niagara River in the Olmsted tradition. In June 2004, the New York State Legislature passed legislation proposed by Governor George Pataki establishing a Niagara River Greenway Commission, which would coordinate development of the greenway. The commission began conducting business early in 2005. The commission's





The Spanish Aerocar spans the Whirlpool on the Canadian side of the gorge

geographical area of involvement is a narrow corridor directly adjacent to the Niagara River. A more detailed discussion of the commission appears later in this report.

### *Western Erie Canal Heritage Corridor*

The Western Erie Canal Heritage Corridor is part of New York State's system of heritage areas coordinated by OPRHP. The corridor was created by the New York State Legislature in 1999 and includes Erie, Monroe, Niagara, Orleans, and Wayne Counties. The Western Erie Canal Heritage Corridor coincides with portions of the Niagara National Heritage Area study area in Niagara County. An 18-member planning commission was appointed to develop a management plan that will guide its formal establishment. The heritage corridor's management plan is available as a final draft. The plan will be submitted to NYS OPRHP for agency approval in 2005. The New York State Legislature will consider legislation establishing the Western Erie Canal Heritage Corridor as a permanent entity following approval of the plan.

The primary focus of the heritage corridor is on the Erie Canal corridor. Geographically and thematically this state heritage corridor overlaps the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor. Both corridors have taken steps to ensure communication and coordination of efforts.

### *Urban Design Project/University of Buffalo (SUNY)*

The Urban Design Project is a university center devoted to service, teaching, and research in the pursuit of a critical practice of urban design. It was founded in 1990 by Professor Robert G. Shibley and is located in the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of Buffalo, State University of New York.

The Urban Design Project led the "Rethinking the Niagara Frontier" project, a binational effort to stimulate reimagination and collaboration toward making the most of opportunities at hand for the future of the Niagara Region. Dozens of organizations in government, business, education, environment,

philanthropy, and community advocacy have joined with the original proponents, the Waterfront Regeneration Trust of Ontario and the Urban Design Project of the University of Buffalo to explore the possibilities.

The Urban Design Project has released three substantial reports about the Niagara Region including:

#### Rethinking the Niagara Frontier

This volume explores the possibilities of re-defining the Niagara Frontier region of New York State and Ontario, Canada, as a single, binational region centered on the Niagara River

#### Revealing Niagara

This volume presents a citizen vision for heritage and cultural tourism development in the binational Niagara Region.

#### Achieving Niagara's Future

This volume offers an assessment of Niagara Falls' waterfront planning over the last decade and makes recommendations about implementing the most promising proposals.

#### USA Niagara Development Corporation (Empire State)

USA Niagara Development Corporation, a subsidiary of Empire State Development Corporation, was created by the State of New York in January 2001. It is solely dedicated to the support and promotion of economic development initiatives by leveraging private investment and encouraging growth and renewal of the tourism industry in the City of Niagara Falls. The USA Niagara Development Corporation strategy emphasizes a block-by-block approach to revitalizing downtown Niagara Falls. It has redeveloped the Niagara Falls Conference Center in the former Falls Street Faire complex and is planning for the revitalization of Third Street as an entertainment district.

#### Niagara Experience Center

In response to the "Rethinking Niagara" initiative and still earlier proposals by local historian Paul Gromosiak, a number of local advocates developed a proposal for the Niagara Experience Center which would serve as a gateway to the Niagara Region. In support of this local initiative, USA Niagara Development Corporation has helped establish a nonprofit organization that is seeking to develop the Niagara Experience Center, a regional visitor and education center that would introduce visitors to the historic, cultural, and natural stories and attractions in the Niagara Falls area. The nonprofit board envisions the Niagara Experience Center as a unique attraction unto itself as well as a means of introducing visitors to the full history of the Niagara Falls Region. The Niagara Experience Center is in the planning and fund-raising phases.



Niagara Falls Gorge

### *Buffalo Niagara Cultural Tourism Initiative*

The Cultural Tourism Committee of the John R. Oishei Foundation commissioned the Institute for Local Governance and Regional Planning at the University of Buffalo to develop a comprehensive plan for cultural tourism development. The planning process included an inventory of tourism assets and opportunities, a market analysis of current and potential cultural tourism, regional priorities for development, and implementation mechanisms rooted in strong stakeholder participation. The initiative released its final strategy and blueprint for implementation in January 2005.

### *New York Power Authority—Niagara Power Project Relicensing*

The Niagara Power Project is owned and operated by the New York Power Authority (NYPA). Some lands within NYS parks and under the Robert Moses Parkway are owned by NYPA. Its Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) license will expire in August 2007. The five-year relicensing process has begun using an alternate method giving large numbers of stakeholders an opportunity to participate. The number of stakeholders at these meetings has ranged from 80 to 120 representatives of local interests. Numerous federal and state agencies as well as local industry, environmental groups, and advocates for public access and recreation are involved in the process. The National Park Service is represented by staff of the Northeast Region's Boston Office. A relicensing settlement has been proposed. This next license is likely to be issued for a 50-year term.

### *Seneca Niagara Falls Casino*

The Seneca Niagara Falls Casino is located in the former Niagara Falls Convention Center. The Seneca Nation plans to expand present operations and to redevelop a significant portion (over 50 acres) of Niagara Falls' downtown. Development activities include a recently completed parking garage, as well as plans for a new casino, a hotel, restaurants, and other visitor amenities. Under a licensing agreement with the state, a proportion of the casino proceeds are allocated to Niagara County and distributed among the host city and other local and county entities.

### *Binational Niagara Tourism Alliance*

The Binational Niagara Tourism Alliance (BNTA) is a group of arts, cultural, heritage, sports, food, wine, accommodation, events, and tourism partners from both the private and public sectors, who are working together to develop the binational Niagara Region as an international tourism destination in both New York and Ontario. This binational group has recently incorporated on both sides of the border to better meet the needs of its member organizations.

The BNTA sponsors numerous heritage and cultural events on both sides of the Niagara River. It has also provided cross-promotion and trade opportunities for heritage and cultural organizations to showcase their products and operations at cross-border events including an annual conference. One of the events the BNTA sponsors is the annual binational "Doors Open Niagara" event. This is a weekend celebration of heritage and architectural treasures that make up the story of both Niagaras.

### *International Peace Park*

Another binational initiative, spurred by the work of the Urban Design Project and the Waterfront Regeneration Trust, is the concept of an International Peace Park. A steering committee of interested individuals and organizations was initiated by Kerry Mitchell of the Canadian Consulate in Buffalo. The geography under consideration at this time is similar to that being discussed in *Revealing Niagara*—an area that embraces all of Niagara and Erie Counties on the American side and from the Niagara River between Fort Erie and Niagara-on-the-Lake to Hamilton, Ontario, on the Canadian side. The group has created an initial draft of "First Principles for The International Niagara Peace Park." The principles articulate broad goals and objectives addressing the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the Niagara Region, promotion of sustainable economic development, peaceful and creative binational cooperation, and education and research. The group is presently in the process of building a coalition to support the initiative



### *Niagara Parks Commission, Ontario, Canada*

The Niagara Parks Commission is a self-financed Crown agency of the Ontario Ministry of Tourism. The Commission maintains 4,000 acres (1,619 hectares) of park and recreational facilities along the length of the Niagara River from Fort Erie to Niagara-on-the-Lake in the north. Facilities include natural areas, recreational facilities, an aerial cable car ride, numerous formal gardens, both historic and contemporary, historic sites, and golf courses, as well as restaurants and shops. The Commission receives no public funding and relies heavily on entrance and user fees as well as revenue from numerous shops and restaurants under its management, land rent and water diversion fees from Ontario Hydro, other power producers, and other shoreline property owners. A more complete description of Niagara Parks Commission facilities appears in Appendix C.

### **The Potential for Heritage Tourism**

David L. Herzberg's essay, "The Niagara Frontier: Border Zone or Middle Ground?," in "Rethinking the Niagara Frontier" (2001), observed that the experience of visiting Niagara Falls would benefit from making stronger connections to the heritage of the entire region: "Relying solely on the (carefully staged) drama of the falling water itself, little effort has been made to place the cataract in the context of a broader narrative that could sustain a visitor's experience beyond the 20 minutes that it mesmerizes the average tourist. ... In the Falls it boasts one of the world's largest tourist draws, but the region is so under-represented and poorly presented that visitors are there and gone...too quickly to influence the economy as they could."

According to the research of Hunter Interests Inc., presented in the "Niagara Experience Center Feasibility Study" (2002), tourism has slowly been declining on the New York side of the Falls over the last 10 years. The report found: "Much of this

decline could be attributed to the current condition on the U.S. side, which is characterized by a tired and aging infrastructure, vacant properties, lower tier amenities, and a generally run-down appearance. Under these circumstances, the justification exists for investment in new attractions and infrastructure as a way of maintaining Niagara Falls' existing tourism market share, and otherwise recapturing that which has been lost."

The recent strategic plans of the Niagara Tourism and Convention Corporation (NTTC) and USA Niagara recognize the need to develop new visitor activities and marketing programs for niche markets. The region seems poised to upgrade the quality of the visitor experience and utilize its many natural, cultural, and historical assets as part of its economic development strategy. The NTTC strategic plan calls for branding the region "Niagara, USA," with the theme line "New York's Natural Wonderland." Besides proposing various marketing approaches, NTCC calls for beautifying the region and its entry points.

According to tourism consultant Robert Bentley, the North American economy is evolving from a "service" economy to an "experience" economy. Experiences are being formulated as distinct economic offerings, as services are being commodified (Robert Bentley, "Valuing Experience: Selling Authenticity; The Experience Economy and Tourism Products," presentation at First International Heritage Development Conference, Pittsburgh, PA, June 8–11, 2003). People are looking for individualized experiences, as affluence stimulates desires for more meaningful leisure time. The tourism industry is shifting from catering to groups to serving "fully independent travelers." Businesses and nonprofit organizations are creating travel "experiences" because guests will pay for them. Heritage tourism sites and national heritage areas are ideal for providing the in-depth authentic experiences that travelers are seeking.