

Niagara Falls was Hidden by Factories Before it Became a Park

Thomas V. Welch, Niagara's Unsung Hero, Led Campaign to "Free Niagara"

No single individual has had more of an impact on shaping our area than Thomas Vincent Welch, a 19th Century public servant and visionary. Welch spearheaded the "Free Niagara" movement — an effort to have the state purchase private property around Niagara Falls and make it into a park that everyone could enjoy.

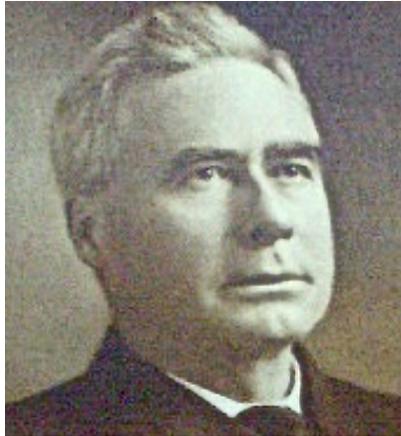
Welch's mission was not easily accomplished. Powerful interests were opposed to the state acquiring any land around the falls. Moreover, many officials in Albany were against the idea of spending \$1.5 million of state funds to purchase the property (\$37 million in today's dollars).

But a cunning political strategy by Welch and his supporters, combined with a Herculean three-year effort, overcame the opposition and the dream of removing the factories, fences and barriers around the falls became a reality. Today, people from all over the world can walk into the Niagara Falls park for free and enjoy the beautiful natural surroundings.

Active in civic affairs, Welch was the first president of the Memorial Hospital Association and also served as Trustee of Niagara University.

Welch wrote a short book documenting his efforts, along with scores of other supporters, entitled, "How Niagara Was Made Free."

It would be fitting to see a statue of Thomas Welch in the park that he helped create. History should never forget the contribution this local citizen made to the entire world.



Thomas V. Welch

Thomas Vincent Welch Timeline

1850: Welch is born in Camillus, NY, near Syracuse. Soon after, his parents move the family to Niagara Falls.

1876: At age 25, he is elected Supervisor of the Town of Niagara and two years later becomes Chairman of the County Board of Supervisors.

1882: Welch is elected to the State Assembly and begins to work and lobby the legislature and Governor to make Niagara Falls a public park, free for anyone to visit. The governor, Alonzo Cornell, is against the idea and says seeing Niagara Falls is a "luxury" and "why shouldn't the public pay to see them?"

1883: Newly elected governor Grover Cleveland (later President) announces his support for the Free Niagara movement. Welch organizes a huge letter writing campaign from citizens across the state to promote the idea.

1885: The Free Niagara movement is victorious when legislation is passed in Albany to create the Niagara Reservation, NY's first state park. Welch was the unanimous choice to become the first Superintendent of the Niagara State Park.

1902: Welch is presented a sterling silver cup by the park commissioners in appreciation for his many years of service. Today, the whereabouts of the cup is a mystery.



1903: Welch dies of typhoid fever, at age 53. He is recognized as the "best known and best loved citizen" of Niagara Falls. He is initially buried in Niagara Falls but his remains were moved to a family plot in the Gate of Heaven Cemetery in Lewiston in 1936. He had no children.

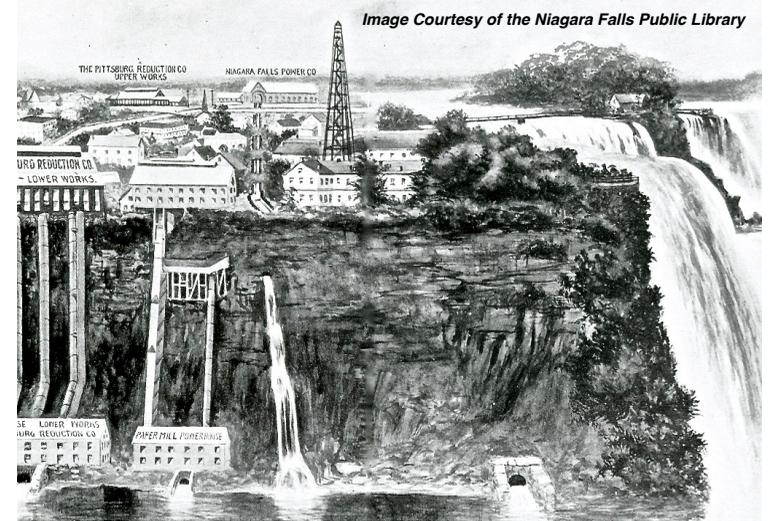


Image Courtesy of the Niagara Falls Public Library

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Local Mills and Factories Charged Fees to See Falls in Mid-1800s

Before Niagara Falls became a park, it was surrounded by mills and industries that crowded the shoreline. The mills charged a fee to allow visitors to walk between the buildings on narrow sidewalks to view the falls from the American side. Efforts to preserve and protect the natural beauty of the falls began in 1879, but it wasn't until Thomas Welch got involved in 1882 that things started to change in Albany in favor of opening Niagara Falls to the public.



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