

**Lewiston
History
Mysteries**

June 7, 1956: Schoellkopf Power Station Collapses into Niagara River

With the exception of the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, no single event has had such far reaching consequences to our region than the collapse of the Schoellkopf Hydropower Station

into the Niagara River on June 7, 1956. The disaster set off a chain of events that will be felt for generations.

With tens of thousands of jobs in danger, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Niagara Redevelopment Act in 1957 directing the Federal Power Commission to clear the way for NY Power Authority to redevelop the Niagara River's hydropower potential — power production went from private to public.

By 1961, the new Niagara power project became the largest power producer in the Western World. It took three years, 12,000 workers, working 24/7, to construct the new power plant which provides electricity to millions of residents and thousands of businesses and industries. Today it is the third largest hydropower facility in the US, behind the Grand Coulee and Chief Joseph in Washington State.

The construction of the Niagara Scenic Parkway and the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge coincided with the new power plant. Lewiston's "Plateau" (Artpark Portage Road entrance) was created from the dirt and rock debris from the project.

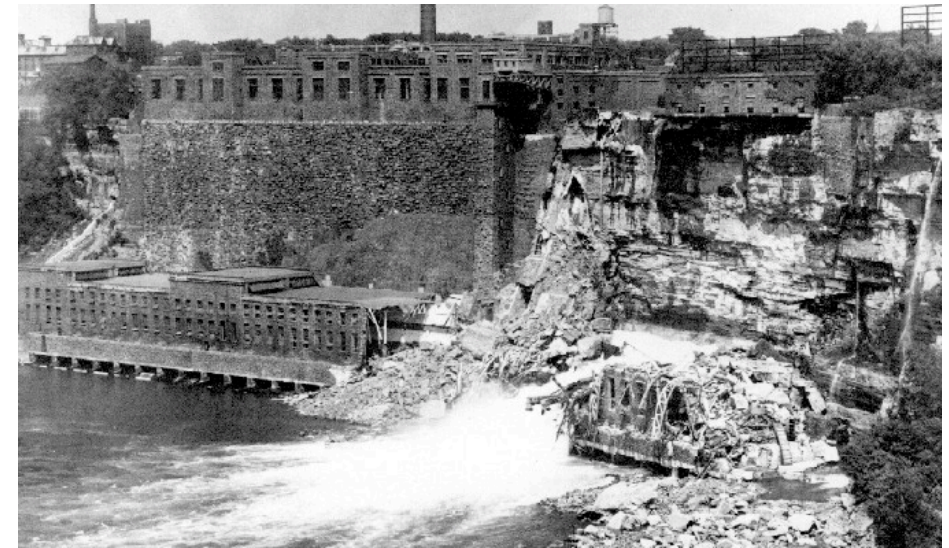
Dozens of Workers Escape Moments Before Rock Slide

It happened at 5:17 pm on a summer afternoon 62 years ago. An eroding gorge wall caused a rock slide which, in turn, fell into the embedded power station. That caused the collapse of the gorge and station into the Niagara River. A total of 41 men escaped the disaster and ran for their lives when their foreman, Richard Draper yelled for them to, "Get out!" Tragically, Draper was the only one who didn't make it. His body was recovered two months later in the Whirlpool.

Workers at the station had been aware of water leakage problems and had been working for months, prior to the collapse, to try to locate and repair the leaks.

Later, Rene Sauvageau, who had worked at the plant, said, "We knew there was a problem but not to that extent. Almost daily, we had more leakage. There was always water coming out of the walls."

At certain times, particularly at low tide, it is possible to see a turbine wheel that fell into the river.



This is what it looked like immediately after the power station collapsed into the Niagara River in 1956. The station was built into the gorge wall, just across the street from today's Aquarium. Remnants of the station can still be seen today. You can take an elevator to the bottom of the gorge where you can view a number of interpretive plaques that explain the collapse and history of the site.

Lewiston Resident, Richard Draper, was Sole Fatality of Collapse

Richard Draper, who was a maintenance foreman at the Schoellkopf Power Station for twelve years, was the sole fatality of the collapse. He was only 39 years old. The family lived on Ridge Road in Lewiston.

Mr. Draper was survived by his wife and three children. Two of his descendants still reside in the area. His son, Lloyd, a retired Niagara-Wheatfield teacher who recently moved to Pletcher Road, and granddaughter, Diana Gardner, who is a clerk at the Lewiston Post Office.

On the 50th anniversary of the tragedy in 2006, a tree and stone memorial honoring Richard Draper were dedicated at the site of the old power station.

A detailed article about the story appeared in the June 2017 Smithsonian Magazine. WGRZ-TV also did an "Unknown Story of WNY" segment.



In this rare family photo, taken in 1942, Richard Draper is holding his oldest child, Lloyd, who was 2 years old at the time. Lloyd still remembers talking to survivors of the collapse when he was a teenager.



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