Bracing Breezes and Winsome Waterways: Exploring Ontario’s Spas, Springs, and Resorts of the 1800s and Early 1900s

A revised and expanded version of a presentation originally prepared by Dr. Marsha Ann Tate, Tate Research & Training Services, for the 2010 Pennsylvania Canadian Studies Consortium Meeting held at Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania.
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“Not more regularly does the warm summer season recur, than, to the American public, does the desire ... to get away from home; to throw everything aside, if only for a day or two, and go off somewhere. And what a blessed comfort it is to shake off the dust of the city, to leave behind and forget for the nonce its hot pavements and dusty walls, ...”
“and hurry away to some of the cool, leafy nooks nestling somewhere far away among the mountains, or on the shore of some one of the many inland lakes, which like jewels, bestud our Northern landscape.”
“And year by year, we Americans are indeed coming to be more and more a summer pleasure-seeking people. The increasing facilities for travel, the establishment of numerous attractive resorts at every point where nature has offered a mingling of accessible and picturesque, and the enhanced appreciation of the value of an annual period of relaxation in the popular mind...”
Lake George, New York

Image reproduced from the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division catalog
Atlantic City, New Jersey, 1905

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“And so it is, that when the breath of June steals in through the casement, the clerk jumps down from his high stool, the teacher closes her books, the editor throws down his quill, the merchant forgets his ledger...and each, packing up his or her valise, draws a long breath, heaves a sigh...and exclaims...

I must go on a summer excursion somewhere.”
And so they must. But there comes up, first of all, that all-important and, if must be confessed, very pertinent inquiry—

WHERE SHALL I GO?

Although the preceding paragraphs originally appeared in the 1875 *Lehigh Valley Railroad Tourist’s Guide to Summer Resorts*, they perfectly capture the spirit of today’s presentation, which provides a brief overview of several famous tourist destinations in Ontario that were frequented by Pennsylvanians during the 1800s and early 1900s. The presentation also addresses some of the practical aspects associated with planning and carrying out summertime journeys from Pennsylvania to these Canadian locales during this time period. The presentation is part of a larger project that involves the preparation of an inventory of spas, springs, and resorts in Canada and the United States that were frequented by tourists during the 1800s and early 1900s.
This map shows the location of the four Ontario destinations that are the focus of today’s presentation, namely: a) Niagara Falls, b) Crystal Beach, c) Lake Muskoka, and d) Cobourg.
VACATION PLANNING

Image reproduced from the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division catalog.
Pennsylvanians relied upon a variety of informal and formal sources to help them plan their summertime getaways. Beyond word-of-mouth references from family and friends, they could consult an array of excursion and tourist guides published by railroad companies and others. Annual railway excursion guides, such as the aforementioned 1875 *Lehigh Valley Railroad Tourist’s Guide to Summer Resorts*, provided a comprehensive listing of excursions offered by the railroad and its allied railway and steamship lines for the season in question. As a rule, the guides also included descriptions, and occasionally, black-and-white illustrations, of cities, towns and other points of interest located along each of the railroad’s excursion routes.

The second example, *The Dominion of Canada with Newfoundland and an Excursion to Alaska* is a 1907 handbook for travelers published by Karl Baedeker, a well-known German publishing house that specialized in tourist guidebooks. Moreover, as the title page indicates, this particular handbook was published simultaneously in Europe and the United States.
Railway excursion guides, which in some instances, spanned several hundred pages, also frequently featured advertisements for hotels, steamships, and a variety of other goods and services, with ads often appearing in the front, back, and other selected sections of the publications.
In addition to guides and handbooks, the virtues of various Canadian destinations were touted in pamphlets, articles and advertisements in newspapers and magazines, as well as in public lectures.
From time to time, publications and lectures emphasized sundry adventurous aspects associated with a particular mode of transportation, excursion route, or destination. For example, potential travelers on the Richelieu & Ontario Navigation Company’s St. Lawrence steamship route were afforded the tantalizing prospect of shooting the St. Lawrence River’s Lachine Rapids or, alternately, the thrill of crossing the great International Suspension Bridge at Niagara Falls by rail.
Excursion prices varied significantly, with the costs of individual tickets determined, in part, by:

• The mode(s) of transportation selected
• The route selected
• The total distance travelled
• The class of accommodations
• Whether the excursion was to a single destination or instead, involved multiple stopovers

Excurions and other pleasure-related travel largely remained within the purview of wealthy and upper middle class Pennsylvanians. However, from time to time, lower middle class and working class families were also able to enjoy brief summertime getaways to Canada, thanks predominantly to two factors. First, professional, fraternal, and religious organizations frequently sponsored excursions for their members in conjunction with the groups’ annual meetings or, alternatively, as stand alone activities. Second, the Lehigh Valley Railroad and other sundry railways that operated within Pennsylvania commonly issued passes to their employees which, in turn, allowed the employees and their dependents to travel anywhere on their respective employers’ rail lines at little or no cost.
Selected Ticket Prices
Philadelphia—Niagara Falls Excursions
1875 Season

“Excursion p 1.--Philadelphia to Niagara Falls and return to Philadelphia: via North Penna. R. R. to Bethlehem; Lehigh Valley R.R. to Waverly, and Erie Railway to Niagara Falls; returning by same route as going…. $17.50.”

“Excursion p 135.--Philadelphia to Niagara Falls and return to Philadelphia: via North Penna. R. R. to Bethlehem; Lehigh Valley R.R. to Waverly; Erie Railway to Elmira; Nor. Cent. R. W. to Watkins’ [Glen] and back to Elmira; Erie Railway to Niagara Falls; returning via Erie Railway to Buffalo; Lake Shore & Mich. So. R. R. to Cleveland; Cleve- & Pittsburg R.R. to Pittsburg; Penna. R.R. to Philadelphia...route as going…. $25.75.”

For the 1875 season, Philadelphia to Niagara Falls excursions, as quoted by the Erie Railway in connection with the Lehigh Valley and North Pennsylvania Railroads, ranged in price from $17.50 to $25.75 per person.

- **Least expensive option (direct to Niagara Falls):** “Excursion p 1.--Philadelphia to Niagara Falls and return to Philadelphia: via North Penna. R. R. to Bethlehem; Lehigh Valley R.R. to Waverly, and Erie Railway to Niagara Falls; returning by same route as going…. $17.50.”

- **Most expensive option (included stopovers at Watkins Glen, New York; Cleveland, Ohio; and Niagara Falls):** “Excursion p 135.--Philadelphia to Niagara Falls and return to Philadelphia: via North Penna. R. R. to Bethlehem; Lehigh Valley R.R. to Waverly; Erie Railway to Elmira; Nor. Cent. R. W. to Watkins’ [Glen] and back to Elmira; Erie Railway to Niagara Falls; returning via Erie Railway to Buffalo; Lake Shore & Mich. So. R. R. to Cleveland; Cleve- & Pittsburg R.R. to Pittsburg; Penna. R.R. to Philadelphia...route as going…. $25.75.”

According to the *1875 Tourists’ Guide*, excursion tickets were valid during the “Pleasure Season,” June 1st to November 1st and were granted “all the privileges of First-Class tickets.” Moreover, the guide notes that “tickets passing over Lake Ontario and River St. Lawrence, between Toronto and Montreal, include meals” whereas tickets “between Montreal and Quebec” “are for passage only” (Marsha Ann Tate, Ph.D.)
THE JOURNEY TO ONTARIO

Image reproduced from the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division catalog.
Pennsylvanians typically started their summertime journeys to Ontario at a local railway station. This illustration gives us a glimpse of a large urban railroad station of the era, in this case, the Pennsylvania Railroad Passenger Terminal in Philadelphia.
Of course, old-time vacationers, like their modern-day counterparts, needed to carry a few essential personal items along on their summertime forays to Canada.
While en route to their Canadian destinations, rail passengers could read, chat, or simply enjoy the scenery.
Beyond rail travel, reaching one's desired destination also often entailed riding on boats such as the Steamer “North King” which plied Lake Ontario between Buffalo, New York and Cobourg, Ontario.
Naturally, both the Canadian and American sides of Niagara Falls enjoyed immense popularity with tourists from Pennsylvania irrespective of their age, ethnicity, or economic standing.
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The Clifton Hotel, Niagara Falls, Ontario, ea. 1900-1915

Image reproduced from the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division catalog
Many visitors to Niagara Falls also enjoyed a ride on the “Maid of the Mist” which afforded them with an up close and personal view of Niagara Falls.
Crystal Beach

Bathers at Crystal Beach, 1911

Image reproduced from Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division catalog
Throughout the summer season, steam ships such as the Americana transported thousands of American visitors from the port of Buffalo, New York, to Crystal Beach daily. Moreover, the Lehigh Valley Railroad and other railways featured excursions from various points in Pennsylvania to Crystal Beach until the mid-to-late 1930s, and perhaps even later. Likewise, for many years, Crystal Beach was a popular venue for annual meetings, conventions, and picnics of various groups.
In addition to Niagara Falls, another nearby Ontario destination, Crystal Beach, attracted a multitude of tourists from Pennsylvania, New York, and elsewhere throughout the United States and Canada during the early 1900s.

In its day, Crystal Beach was known as Buffalo’s Coney Island, owing to the eclectic assortment of activities offered there.
Swimmers and sunbathers enjoying the world’s largest swimming pool, Bay Beach

Crystal Beach’s plethora of pleasures included: a) the world’s largest swimming pool;
b) an amusement park that featured a miniature railroad, roller coaster, and other assorted rides;
c) and athletic events.
In addition, each summer Crystal Beach hosted a variety of special events such as performances by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Musical Ride.
Crystal Beach was promoted via various methods, including on outdoor billboards such as this one in Buffalo, New York.
While Crystal Beach attracted large numbers of middle and working class Pennsylvanians, Pittsburgh’s industrialists and other well-to-do Pennsylvanians tended to favor two other Ontario resorts namely, Lake Muskoka and Cobourg.
The Canadian Pacific Railroad Station at Bala, Muskoka Lakes

During the later decades of the 1800s and into the early 1900s, a number of fashionable hotels and lodges which catered to wealthier tourists were constructed in both Lake Muskoka and Cobourg. Some notable examples of these lodgings included the Royal Muskoka Hotel.
and the Monteith House on Lake Rosseau.
In lieu of staying at hotels or lodges, a number of wealthy Pennsylvanians eventually decided to build private “cottages” on the myriad islands scattered throughout Lake Muskoka and other nearby lakes. The cottages varied vastly in their size and opulence, as these photos shot several years ago illustrate. Moreover, many Muskoka cottages, and even entire islands for that matter, have remained in the same families for over a century.
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Meanwhile, a number of other wealthy Pennsylvanians constructed sizeable summer residences in and around the town of Cobourg. Understandably, the length of Pennsylvanians’ summer sojourns to Ontario varied from a couple of days to three months or longer, in the case of families who established permanent summer residences in Cobourg or elsewhere within the province.
King Street, Cobourg

Image reproduced from Images Canada catalog
Most Pennsylvanians remained at a single location for the duration of their vacations. However, a select yet notable group of vacationers instead elected to engage in “resort hopping” or stopping over at a series of spas, springs, and resorts throughout the summer. For example, some travelers divided their vacation time between Cobourg, Muskoka, and other locales such as Saratoga, New York; Newport, Rhode Island, and elsewhere.
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Bidding Adieu to Summer

Image from Cobourg Public Library collection
As yet another summer began fading into memory, vacationers gradually returned to their respective home towns.
While passing the time over the long winter months, many inevitably once again pondered, “Where shall I go on my vacation next summer?”
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