

OVERVIEW

Grand Island, an island the size of Manhattan, lies at the heart of the Niagara River nestled between the United States and Canada. The Island contains quiet neighborhoods, a town center full of small businesses, lots of green space, and two waterfront State Parks. Many great blue herons and other wildlife live in and around the many acres of wetlands and forests. Grand Island is currently home to about 22,000 residents, but it started out much smaller. Throughout Grand Island's history, it has hosted Native American hunting parties, colonial soldiers, logging settlements, and fashionable resorts.

NATIVE AMERICANS

In the early 1600s French explorers discovered members of the Neutral Nation of American Indians — known as the Attawandaron — living on a large island in the middle of the Niagara River. Most of the Attawandaron were either killed by or absorbed into the Seneca Nation by 1651.

The Senecas used *Ga-we-not*, meaning Great Island, as a hunting and fishing preserve. Game — including, sturgeon, geese, wolves, and bear — was plentiful on and around the island. Artifacts and bones have been found near Fix and East River Roads, at Beaver Island, and on West River near Sixth (Six Mile) Creek.

FRENCH AND INDIAN WARS

In the early eighteenth century, French traders and missionaries may have used the island as a stopping place. The first authoritative historical reference dates to 1697, in Louis Hennepin's *Nouvelle Decouverte*.

When the French sent aid to the besieged Fort Niagara during the French and Indian War, the men used the island as a stopping point. The island was acquired by the British Colonies in 1764, after the French and Indian War. The British held the island until the late 1700s, when they were forced out of the Niagara Region.

The Seneca Nation then asserted that they should resume ownership. To keep peace, the State of New York bought the Niagara River islands for one thousand dollars, plus an annual annuity.

In 1993 the Seneca Nation took legal action to reclaim the island, which would have resulted in the eviction of over two thousand landowners. The Senecas argued that the purchase of Native American land by a state was not legal—it needed to be approved by the federal government. Ultimately the Supreme Court denied this request.

WAR OF 1812

During the War of 1812, Generals Smyth and Porter fought their famous pistol duel on the south end of the island. Porter publicly insulted Smyth, accusing him of cowardice. Both men shot and missed, and a truce was arranged.

SQUATTERS

Settlers came to the island between 1817 and 1819. They built about seventy log cabins under the leadership of Pendleton Clarke, who later went on to found the town of Pendleton, New York. These individuals cleared small plots of land to grow crops, but made their livelihood by harvesting lumber. White oaks were plentiful on the island, and these settlers would cut them into barrel staves in exchange for cash.

There was no regular means of transportation off the island. Yet some members of the settlement near Buffalo heard that this valuable resource, timber, was being depleted, and wrote to the Governor DeWitt Clinton. Legislature was passed ordering the Niagara County Sheriff to remove these settlers by any means necessary.

In 1819, the sheriff read the new law to each landowner at his cabin. The family was ordered to gather any possessions they wished to keep, and the sheriff and his men burned the house to the ground. Most of the settlers fled to Canada. After five days of evicting and burning, the sheriff finally finished. Some settlers eventually returned; under law they could only be evicted once, so the sheriff could not take action.

ARARAT

In 1824 the land was surveyed and divided into parcels by New York State. The parcels were sold at public auction. Samuel Leggett purchased 2,555 acres of land on behalf of Mordecai Noah, who intended to create a haven for Jewish people. Noah ordered a cornerstone with the inscription “Ararat, A City of Refuge for Jews...”, but his plan never came to fruition. The stone currently resides at the Buffalo Historical Society.

WHITEHAVEN

The East Boston Company purchased 16,000 acres of land on the east side of the island in 1833. The Company started a logging settlement that cut and shipped white oak timber to shipyards as far away as Boston. The settlement was called Whitehaven, after company president Stephen White.

Whitehaven included a general store, a blacksmith, a church, a schoolhouse, a dock, a wharf, and a warehouse. The settlement also had a gristmill and sawmill, which was said at the time to be the largest steam saw in the world.

FERRY SERVICE

From 1825 until the 1930s, various ferries ran from Tonawanda to to the island. The ferries were small, often holding only one buggy or a few passengers on bicycles. They were powered by steam or by a team of horses on a treadmill-type mechanism. The ferries operated year-round, but shut down during inclement weather. In the 1930s, ferry fare started at fifty cents per car plus twenty cents per passenger, and a dollar or more for large vehicles.

FARMING

The first houses were log cabins, but plank houses soon became the norm. Some of the originals still exist on the island today, but most have been covered with shingles or clapboard. Many people drank the river water, but residents at the center of the island faced a problem. The water from wells and springs was sulfuric, so residents had to collect rainwater in cisterns.

Farming became a prominent industry on the island during the later half of the nineteenth century. Farmers struggled to clear the wooded land, but were rewarded: the soil was ideal for growing fruit trees. Peaches, apples, pears, and cherries thrived. During the 1870s and 1880s the farmers on the island were better off than farmers in surrounding areas, due to the many markets and diversity of crops (everything from hay to beef to fruit) produced on the island.

The Farmers Alliance, established to advance the social and financial aspects of the farmer, took root on the island. Members of the Alliance started a stock company called the Grand Island Creamery Company, which processed over 5,000 pounds of milk each day.

The cooperative farming community eventually declined, due to difficulty of transportation to the mainland and lack of young men to run the farms. But the agriculture movement remains entrenched in the community even today; many residents have farms of varying sizes, and some have been in the family for generations.

GRAND ISLAND TOWN

The Town of Grand Island was formed in 1852, comprised of three islands: Buckhorn Island, Beaver Island, and Grand Island. The first supervisor, John Nice, held annual town meetings with the rest of the elected officials. Shortly afterward, the main roads — East River Road, West River Road, Stony Point, and Baseline Road — were planned. In 1877 the first post office was established.

SOCIAL LIFE

As Buffalo and Niagara Falls expanded, the peaceful and secluded Grand Island became a getaway. Churches were a social hub; they held socials, festivals, parties, and picnics. The first churches were built in the early 1860s.

In 1859, Lewis F. Allen, Grover Cleveland’s uncle, built a resort called Falconwood on the southwest side of the island. This location made the resort popular with vacationers and social organizations; they could take a steamer from Buffalo right to the wharf of Falconwood. Cleveland himself visited Grand Island many times. Falconwood had a saloon, a ballroom, a hotel, and a bowling alley.

Other resorts, hotels and clubs of similar grandeur sprang up around the edge of the island, including Oakfield, the Bedell House, the McComb House, Sheenwater, the Buffalo Launch Club, and Eagle Park. They boasted amusement rides, cottages, competitions, and fine dining. Chartered steamers brought boatloads of people to the island every summer until about 1912, when the resorts began to decline.

A series of fires and accidents, along with the opening of other resorts more easily accessible by car, contributed to the downturn of Grand Island's resorts and amusement parks. But cycling clubs were popular in Buffalo during the early 1900s. The Town of Grand Island constructed a cinderblock bike path around the edge of East and West River Roads, and clubs came to the island every Sunday for recreation.

PARK REVIVAL

After a few years of the resort decline, New York State decided to bring back Grand Island's festive summer atmosphere. The State purchased Beaver Island and surrounding estates, and turned it into Beaver Island State Park.

They later purchased Buckhorn Island and nearby land, creating Buckhorn Island State Park. Much of the work done in Buckhorn during the 1950s was done by the Civilian Conservation Corps., or CCC. The state holds riparian rights to most riverfront along West River, connecting the two parks with a strip of green space.

WORLD WAR TWO

At the height of World War II the 21-year-old Charles N. DeGlopper left his family farm in Grand Island to take part in the largest military operation in American history: the Allied Invasion of Normandy, D-Day. Charles and his comrades squeezed into a plywood glider and guided that flimsy shell through air thick with bullets.

German soldiers attacked before they could even exit the glider. Charles told his companions to run, and stood his ground. He continued to fire until he could no longer stand, buying his companions enough time to rejoin the rest of the battalion. Grand Island's hero was awarded the Medal of Honor for his selfless sacrifice.

BRIDGES

After two centuries of unreliable boat transportation, a bridge was proposed in 1819. Nothing came of it, and in 1894 a bill was introduced in Congress to permit a bridge. Though the Grand Island Supervisor lobbied for the bill, it was not voted on. In 1898 Congressmen came to the island to decide if a bridge was necessary. The bill did eventually become a law, and it was amended that construction must begin by 1902. But the bridge was delayed at the county level.

In 1929 the Niagara Frontier Bridge Commission came into existence, supported by Robert Moses, Former Governor Alfred E. Smith, and Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt. Legislature approved the appropriation of funds, and ground was finally broken for a bridge in 1933.

The first set of bridges — leading south, to Tonawanda, and one leading north, to Niagara Falls — were completed in 1935. The second set of bridges, twins to the existing bridges, opened in 1965.

Population in the 1930s was less than 1,000. The majority of people were visitors and vacationers. After the bridges were built, population steadily increased; it shot up to 5,000 by the 1950s. From there it has continued to rise, and businesses and ecotourism followed. Grand Island, the jewel of the Niagara, had started to shine.