

Whirlpool

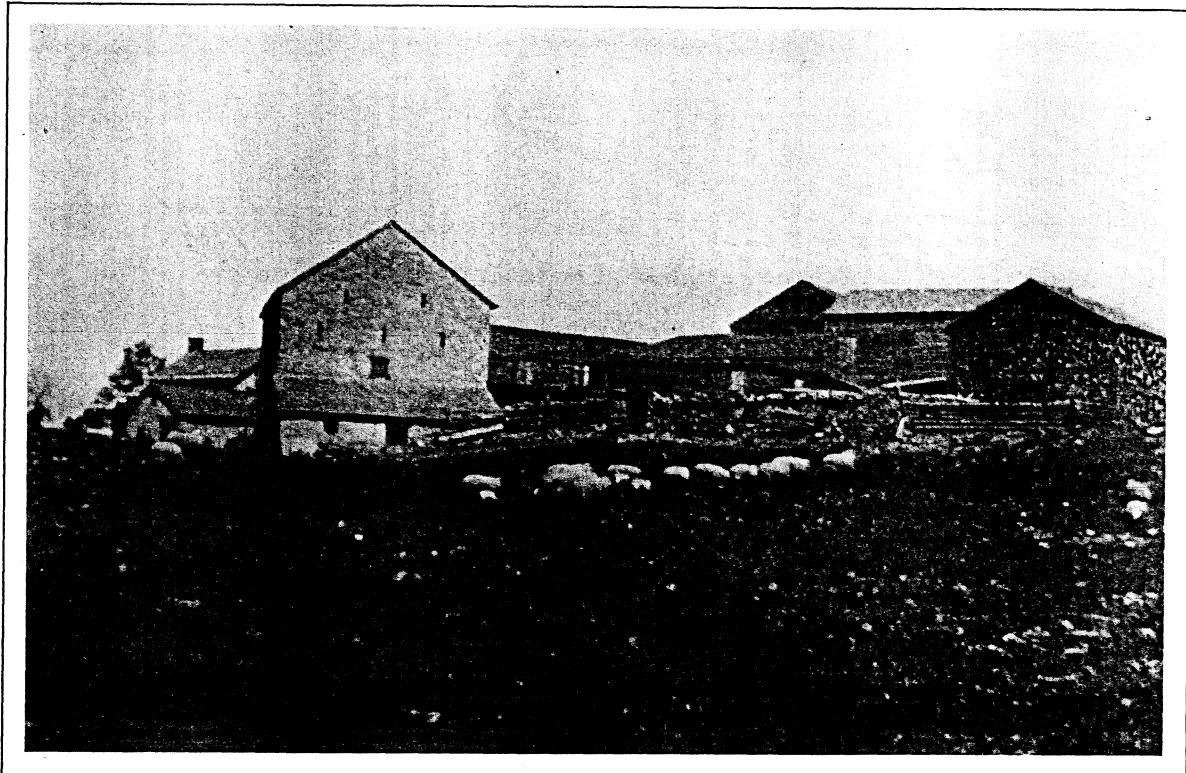
The Whirlpool is mentioned in early writing as the "Twelve Mile Pond on the St. Lawrence" - a pond twelve miles from Lake Ontario. The Niagara was not considered to be a river, but a continuation of the St. Lawrence River. In 1782 Archibald Thomson and Jacob Bowman settled side by side on the Twelve Mile Pond, having received their grants of land from the Crown upon disbanding from Butler's Rangers.¹ When Archibald's brothers, James and John, emigrated from Scotland in 1785, John was granted lots 41 and 58 by the Land Board and his brother Archibald gave him a portion of his land so that John's property abutted James Park's on the rim of the Whirlpool.²

When the Land Titles were being prepared some officials misspelled the Thomson name, writing in "Thompson" instead. To avoid confusion the family accepted Thompson as their name. The Whirlpool was not accessible until John Thompson and his wife Jeannet built a log house and barn on the high bank, just north of the Whirlpool and John cut a rough road through the forest connecting their farm with the Portage Road. They called their farm Whirlpool Farm.³ The year was 1785. John erected a stone house in 1802 and a stone barn in 1806. He built a saw mill on the gorge bank where a small stream fell into the gorge.

It was not long before curious travellers were making a side trip from the Portage Road, through the Thompson farm, to see the Whirlpool. The earliest written record of a visit to the Whirlpool was made by Mrs. Simcoe, the wife of Lieutenant-Governor

John Graves Simcoe, recorded in her diary in 1793. "I rode to the Whirlpool, a very grand scene halfway between Queenston and the falls, where the current is so strong that Eddies are formed in which hewn timber trees carried down the falls from the sawmill upriver spin round and round. Vast Rocks surround this bend of the River and they are covered with Pine and hemlock spruce, some cascades among the rocks add to the wild appearance."⁴ On August 15, 1795 she wrote: "The Governor drove the children to see the Whirlpool and I rode part of the way, we carried our tent and provisions as yesterday and dined on the Point from whence the Whirlpool and the opposite Bank of the River on which is a mill, form altogether a very fine Scene . . . In the bay or Whirlpool . . . are now a number of logs collected by Canby at his Saw Mill above the Falls . . . Where they whirl about and probably will continue to until the end of the World".⁵

In 1848 the Crown granted Thompson permission to build a stairway down the steep bank at the point near the Whirlpool exit, to allow visitors to get to the lower river bank. He was not allowed to charge for the privilege but was to be content with whatever revenue he could make from the sale of light refreshments.⁶ Mrs. A.H. Walker, a direct descendant of the Thompsons, has in her possession a visitors' book from the 1850's which lists the names of hundreds of visitors who viewed the Whirlpool from this vantage point. Thompson kept a record of people who visited the Whirlpool before he built the stairs. In the period from June to November 1845 no fewer



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The Thompson farmyard at the Whirlpool in the early 1900's. The house is partly concealed by the large stone barn. Slits in the barn were for ventilation.

size. Whereas the Indians set fire to dry leaves in order to kill the snakes when they were emerging from hibernation, the settlers made war on them with the help of their hogs. Some five hundred were killed by an organized expedition in the gorge".⁸

John Thompson cleared some areas of his land for grain and fodder, other areas he cleared and planted apple trees. He sold apple trees to other farmers, and bartered them as well for goods. Mrs. A.H. Walker has in her possession the "Debtors Account" of a tailor who exchanged apple trees with Thompson for a suit of clothes. The account showed a debit of £7 15 s 6 p for a suit and a credit to Thompson of £7 10 s 6 p.⁹ Along with other farmers in the area, Thompson used his oxen and wagon to haul goods on the Portage Road. In return for his services he received a "Portage Credit" which he exchanged for goods at the portage merchants' stores.

Thompson had a further source of income. Beginning in the early 1800's he made use of the limestone which was easily accessible - there was an exposed ridge of limestone along the front of his property close to the edge of the gorge. He quarried the limestone and processed it in a lime kiln,

producing agricultural lime. At one time he had two kilns in operation. He sold the lime in bulk to nearby farmers who then used it on their land. Packed in barrels it was also sent by boat to Toronto. The size of the quarry grew as more and more limestone was quarried. During the War of 1812, the quarry was considered important to the war effort and a guard was posted. One of the sentries, standing on the gorge bank at the Point, was shot at and killed by a sharpshooter from the American side.¹⁰ It was a breach of truce and the American General Van Rensselaer wrote to General Isaac Brock expressing regret for the incident.¹¹

The Queen Victoria Park Commissioners purchased land from the Thompson's at the Niagara Glen and also for the right-of-way for the Niagara Falls Park and River Railway. The Railway Company laid its tracks in a curve around Thompson Point so that passengers could get a view of the Whirlpool while riding by in the cars. The ravine was an obstacle that had to be bridged and a steel trestle was built, to carry the tracks across the gap.

When the Park Commissioners took over, the area around Thompson Point was a wasteland of bare rock. In 1897 the Point was renamed Whirlpool