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The Valley of the Genesee: from Picturesque America, or the land we live in

William Cullen Bryant

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The Valley of the Genesee

by
William Cullen Bryant

Genesee Valley Historical Reprint Series



State University of New York at Genesee

Genesee Valley Historical Reprint Series:

The Valley of the Genesee

The Valley of the Genesee is a short essay, part of the two-volume set entitled *Picturesque America*, edited by the famous poet William Cullen Bryant and including engravings by famous nineteenth-century landscape painters such as John Frederick Kensett, James McDougal Hart and William Hamilton Gibson. The Valley of the Genesee features illustrations by John Douglas Woodward, one of several artists commissioned for his work on the Picturesque America series.

“There is said to be a mountain-peak in Potter County, Pennsylvania, standing upon which the observer may mark the fountain-head of two rivers. Though flowing through adjacent gorges, their courses are soon divided, the one tending southward, while the other marks out a winding way to the harbor at Charlotte, there losing itself in the waters of Lake Ontario.” So begins the essay on The Valley of the Genesee, a short description and guide to the river, landscape and history of the Genesee River Valley. The river, originating from northern Pennsylvania and flowing northward into Lake Ontario at Rochester, New York, is described as not particularly beautiful, until it is, “...the falls at Portage are reached that the river asserts its claim to recognition as one of the most beautiful and picturesque of all our Eastern streams.” This recognition of the beauty of Genesee River waterfalls (located in both Livingston and Monroe Counties) is also the recognition of the power which the Genesee River generates, the essay concisely describing the historical significance of Rochester’s use of the Genesee River for harnessing hydro-power to run the many mills and factories located along the banks of the Genesee River at the Upper Falls, giving rise to Rochester’s nickname of “Flour City.” The essay also traces the physical route of the Genesee River from its source, to the falls south of Mount Morris, through the gorges of what is now Letchworth State Park, and northward to the mouth at Rochester, emptying into one of the Great Lakes, Lake Ontario. The essay also details the history of the region, including the history of the Seneca and Iroquois, the mills of Rochester and the settling of the towns along the way.

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Summary by Katherine Pitcher



*The Valley
of
the Genesee*

from
PICTURESQUE
AMERICA



OR THE
LAND WE LIVE IN

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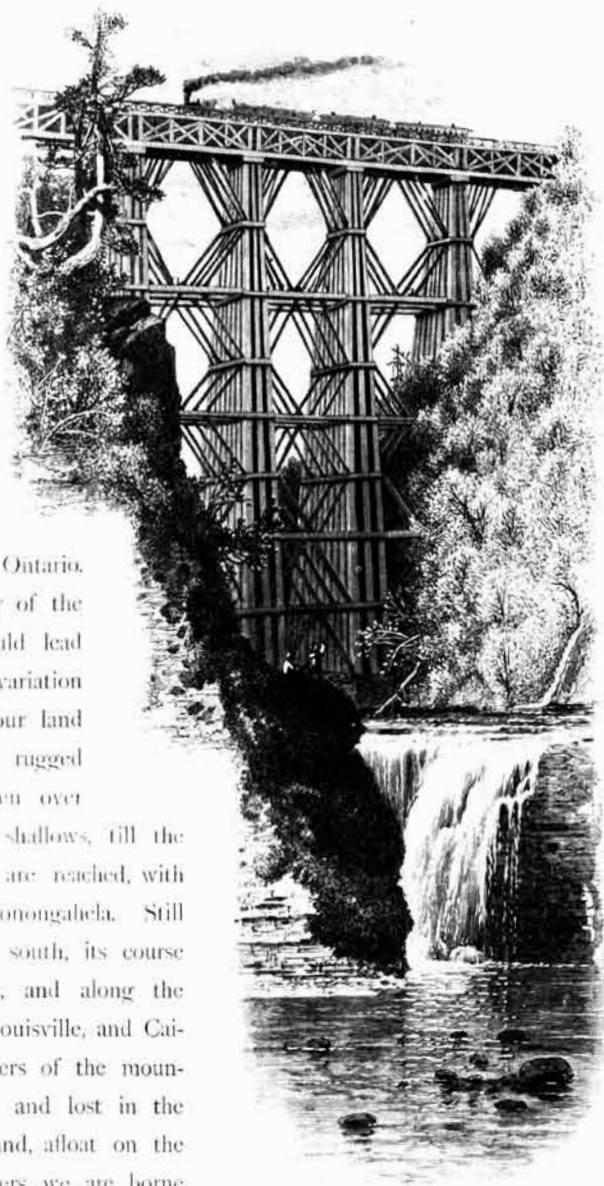
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THE VALLEY OF THE GENESSEE.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY J. DOUGLAS WOODWARD.

THERE is said to be a mountain-peak in Potter County, Pennsylvania, standing upon which the observer may mark the fountain-head of two rivers. Though flowing through adjacent gorges, their courses are soon divided, the one tending southward, while the other marks out a winding way to the harbor at Charlotte, there losing itself in the waters of Lake Ontario. To follow down the pathway of the southward-flowing stream would lead the traveller through every variation of climate and verdure that our land affords—now shadowed by the rugged peaks of the Alleghanies, then over rough rapids and dangerous shallows, till the smoky precincts of Pittsburg are reached, with the blending waters of the Monongahela. Still farther, and bearing west by south, its course leads through fruitful valleys, and along the busy wharves of Cincinnati, Louisville, and Cairo. Here the clear, fresh waters of the mountain-rivulet are finally merged and lost in the expanse of the Mississippi; and, afloat on the bosom of the Father of Rivers, we are borne on its sluggish current to the delta, and the borders of the Southern gulf.

This tour of fancy ended, the river-voyager retraces his path till he stands again upon the Northern summit, and girds himself for the second and northward journey.



Railroad-Bridge, Portage.

This, though short as compared with his southward course, will yet prove one of exceeding beauty, and rich in all those varied phases which unite to form what we call the picturesque. It is to the "beautiful Genesee" that we now turn; and, as the valley that bears its name, and owes its richness to the river's turbulent moods, lies far to the northward, in the limits of the neighboring Empire State, we hasten toward it, trusting to the paths through which the river first made its way.

In its early course, the Genesee is not marked by any exceptional beauty or peculiar charm of surroundings. Nor is it till the falls at Portage are reached that the river asserts its claim to recognition as one of the most beautiful and picturesque of all our Eastern streams.

The summer tourist, if he leave the car of the Erie Railway at Portage Village, will be first attracted by what is the least picturesque though an important feature in the foreground; and that is the great bridge which spans the ravine and river at this point—a work which will well repay a careful survey, since it is regarded as a triumph of the bridge-builder's skill. This bridge, or, more properly, viaduct, is said to be the largest wooden structure of its kind in the world. It crosses the river at a point hardly a stone's-throw above the brink of the First or Upper Fall; and its lightly-framed piers, with their straight lines reaching from the granite base to the road-way above, contrast strangely with the wild roughness of the natural chasm it spans.

The reason given by the artist for not presenting an extended and architecturally complete view of this great work is not without force. "This is a tour in search of the picturesque," he says; "and the straight lines, sharp angles, and cut-stone buttresses of a railway-bridge do not belong to that order of beauty." Assenting to this just estimate of the artist's mission, we turn away from this hasty survey of the bridge to the contemplation of the rough-hewn, rugged walls of the chasm it spans.

Divided for an instant by the stone buttresses of the bridge, the waters of the river unite again, just in time to present a bold and unbroken front upon the brink of the first fall. As the body of water which passes over these falls is comparatively small—except in seasons of flood—and as the first precipice is but sixty-eight feet in height, the effect would be of little moment, were it not for the striking character of the surroundings.

Entering the gorge a short distance above the brink of this Upper Fall, the river has cut for itself a wild, rugged channel, the walls of which rise in a perpendicular height of from two to six hundred feet, each successive fall resulting in a deepening of the chasm, and a consequent increase in the height of the rocky barriers.

It is this chasm that constitutes the distinctive feature in the upper course of the Genesee. Beginning abruptly at a point not far above the Upper Fall, it increases in depth and wildness until the village of Mount Morris is reached, at which point the stream makes its exit from the rocky confines as abruptly as it entered them, and, as



Middle Falls, Portage.

though to atone for the wildness of its early course, settles at once into a gentle and life-giving current, gliding through rich meadows and fertile lowlands, its way marked by a luxuriant growth of grass and woodland. But there are other features in the region of Portage which deserve more extended notice, and to these we willingly return.

Having recovered from their first bold leap, the waters unite and flow onward in gentle current, with an occasional ripple or miniature rapid, for the distance of half a mile, when the brink of the second and highest fall is reached. Over this the waters pour, in an unbroken sheet, a distance of one hundred and ten feet. At the base of this fall the waters have carved out, on the western side, a dark cave, which may be approached by a wooden stairway, standing at the foot of which we see the sky as from the depths of a crater.

Ascending again to the plateau that reaches out on a line with the brink of this fall, we come in sight of Glen Iris, a rural home, the fortunate owner of which is evidently the possessor of a sympathizing and appreciative taste for the beauties with which he is surrounded.



Lower Falls, Portage.

Upon the lawn that divides Glen-Iris Cottage from the brink of the precipice stands a rude log-cabin, which is in the possession of a history so closely linked with that of the first inhabitants of this wild region that it becomes at once a monument of peculiar interest. The form of this cabin is given by the artist with so careful a regard for truth that a description is not needed. We have called it merely a log-cabin; and yet it is, in truth, an ancient Indian council-house, and stands alone, the only ruin of what was once a village

of the Iroquois. This ancient council-house of Caneadea stood originally upon a bluff of land overlooking the Genesee, about twenty-two miles above its present site. It was the last relic of aboriginal sovereignty in the valley, and it is not surprising that it should be so jealously guarded by its present owner, Mr. Letchworth, on whose lawn it stands. During the Indian wars, all the white captives brought in from the South and East were here received, and compelled to run the gantlet before this council-house, its doors being their only goal of safety. Among the famous captives who were thus put to the test was Major Moses van Campen, a name distinguished in the annals of the wars with the Iroquois. This building sheltered Mary Jemison, "the white woman of



Indian Council House.

the Genesee," after her long, fearful march from the Ohio to her home and final resting-place in the valley beyond. It was here that the chiefs of the Seven Nations were wont to hold their councils of war. There is no record of the date of its construction, but upon one of the logs is the sign of a cross, the same as that which the early Jesuit fathers were known to have adopted as the symbol of their faith. Besides this single evidence of the presence of the stranger, the old council-house bears upon its rough sides the marks and signs of the Indians who are now without a home or a country, and yet who once could call all these wild passes, royal forests, and broad acres, their own, by virtue of a long inheritance. When the Indians took their departure to more western



High Banks, Portage.

reservations, the old council-house came into the possession of a white squatter, who guarded it against decay, and made it his home for fifty years.

It is this council-house that now stands on the lawn at Glen Iris, in full view of the distant bluffs, and within but a stone's-throw of the Middle Fall. Prompted by his own worthy interest in this last relic of the old league, Mr. Letchworth caused the council-house to be removed from its original site at Caneadea, and erected where it now stands. In effecting this removal, great care was taken to place the building precisely as it originally stood, each stick occupying the same relative position to the others. At the rededication of the building, in the autumn of 1872, there were present twenty-

two Indians. Among these justly-distinguished guests were the grandsons of Mary Jemison, Cornplanter, Red-Jacket, Tall Chief, Captain Brant, Governor Blacksnake, and other chiefs whose names are associated with the early history of this region. Many of these strange guests wore the costumes of their tribes. The council-fire was again lighted; the pipe of peace—the identical one presented by Washington to Red-Jacket—was passed again around the circle of grave and dignified chiefs, many of whom were natives of the valley, and whose ancestors were once the sole possessors of all this land. These men were said to be fine representatives of their race; and the speeches that followed the first silent ceremony were delivered in the Seneca tongue, with all the old eloquence and fire. It was an occasion worthy of a lasting record, as this was, no doubt, the last Indian council that will ever be held in the valley of the Genesee.

After the Revolutionary War the league of the Iroquois was broken, the Mohawks,



High Banks, Mount Morris.

with Brant at their head, entering the service of the British, while the Senecas remained true to the new claimants of their soil. Thereafter, Mohawk and Seneca met only as enemies; nor was the feud healed until the day of this their last council, when the grandsons of Brant and Cornplanter shook hands across the council-fire, and there smoked the pipe of peace.

The lonely council-house, the dying embers, and the dull rustle of the falling autumn leaves—all seemed in accord with this the last scene in the history of that wild race whose light has gone out with the rising of the new sun.

Turning again to the river, we follow down a wild mountain-road for the distance of two miles, at which point a narrow, winding foot-path leads down a steep and rugged defile. Descending this, and guided by the rush of waters below, we suddenly come upon the Lower Falls. Here the waters of the river are gradually led into narrower channels, until the stream becomes a deep-cut canal, which, rushing down in swift current between its narrow limits, widens out just upon the brink of the fall, that more nearly resembles a steep rapid than either of the others. Standing upon one of the projecting rocks which are a feature of this fall, we can only catch occasional glimpses of the cavern's bed, so dense and obscuring are the mist-clouds. A second and more hazardous pathway leads from these rocky observatories to the base of this the last of the Portage falls; and the course of the river now lies deep down in its rock-enclosed limits, until the broad valley is reached.

To this rocky defile the general name of High Banks is given—a name rendered more definite by a prefix denoting their immediate locality. Thus we have the High Banks at Portage, the Mount-Morris High Banks, and, at the lower end of the valley, the High Banks below the lower fall at Rochester.

To the tourist who is possessed of a full measure of courage and strength, a journey along the river's shore from the lower falls to the valley will reveal wonders of natural architecture hardly exceeded by the cañons of the far West. Here, hidden beneath the shadows of the overhanging walls of rock, it is hard to imagine that, just beyond that line of Norway pines that forms a fringe against the sky above, lie fertile fields and quiet homes. A just idea of the depth of this continuous ravine can best be secured by an ascent to one of the projecting points above, where, resting on a ledge of rock, the river is seen at one point six hundred feet below, a distance which changes with the varying surface of the land above. At certain points the river seems to have worn out a wider channel than it can now fill, and here are long, narrow levels of rich, alluvial soil; and, if it be the harvest-season, we can catch glimpses of life in these deep-down valleys, pigmy men and horses gathering in a miniature harvest of maize or wheat; while, at noonday, the rich golden yellow of the ripened grain contrasts strangely with the deep, emerald green of the sloping sides or the dull gray of the slaty walls beyond.

Although the point where the river enters the ravine at Portage is but twelve miles in a direct line from that of its exit at Mount Morris, the distance, following its winding course among the hills, is much greater. Having traversed this distance, however, we are brought suddenly into the presence of a scene the direct antithesis of all that has gone before. Emerging through what is literally a rocky gate-way, the whole mood of the



Elms on the Genesee Flats.

river seems to have changed with that of its surroundings. In order to make this change as conspicuous as possible, we ascend to one of the two summits of the terminal hills. Standing upon this, and shaded by the grand oaks which crown it, we have but to turn the eye southward to take in at a glance the whole valley below, which is a grand park, reaching far away to the south. The sloping highlands are dotted here and there with rural villages, whose white church-spires glisten in the rich, warm sun-

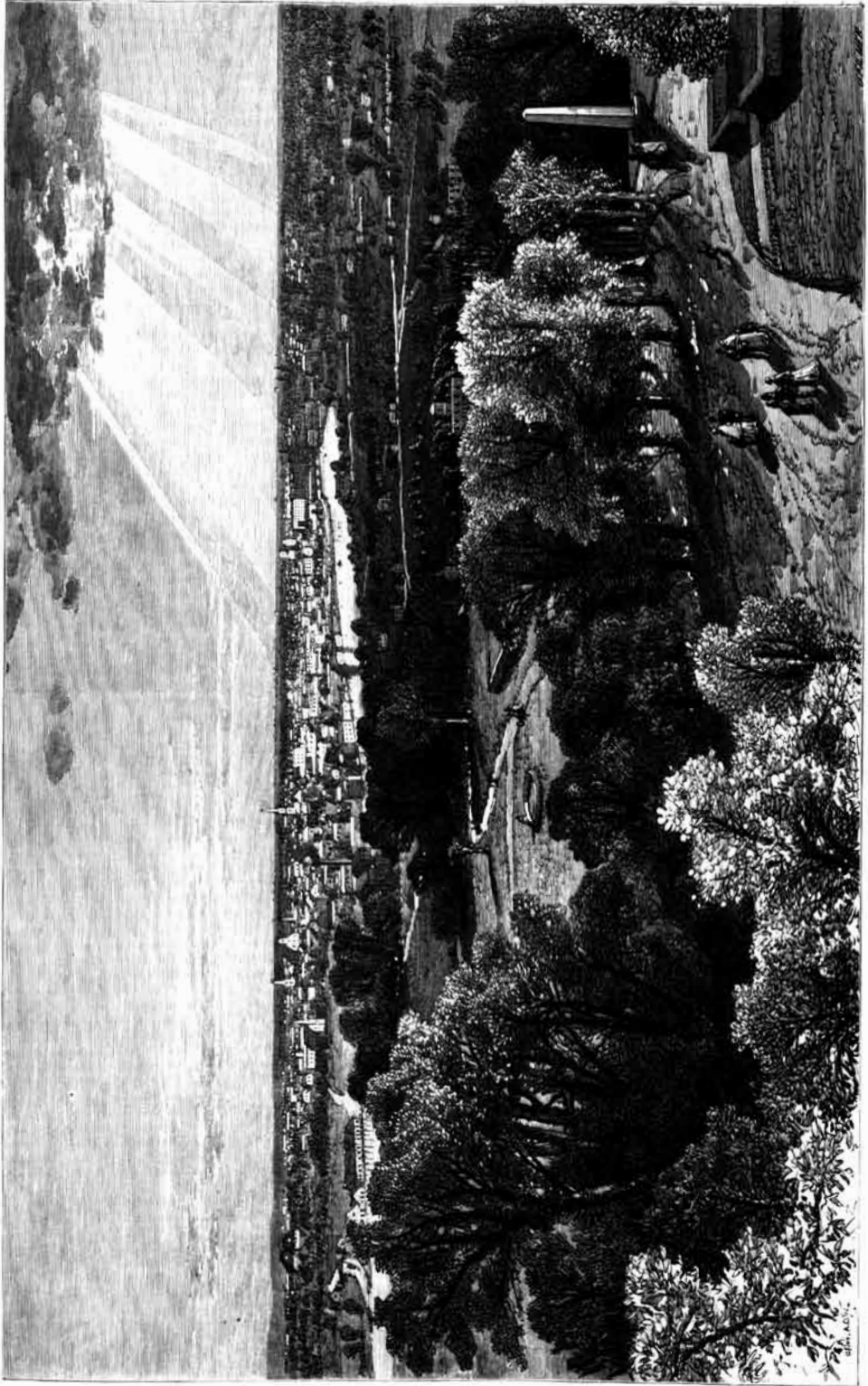


Flats of the Genesee.

light. Below and around are the meadows and alluvial places known as the Genesee Flats.

The present view embraces broad, level fields, marked out by well-kept fences, enclosing areas often one hundred acres in extent. Should it be the harvest-season, we may distinguish almost at our feet broad fields crossed their entire length by endless rows of richly-tasselled broom-corn. To the right are the justly-celebrated nurseries, with their lines of miniature fruit and shade trees; the distant slopes are dotted with the golden wheat-harvests; while, reaching far away to the south, are the rich meadow-lands of the Genesee. In the midst of all flows the river, its waters giving life and beauty to the numerous groves of oaks and elms which shadow its course. It is, in fact, a broad lawn, unbroken save by an occasional hillock, with here and there groves of rare old oaks, beneath whose shade droves of cattle graze at leisure. These groups of oaks and elms are a marked feature of the flats, and many of our most famous landscape-painters—among others Casilear, Coleman, Durand, and Kensett—have taken up their abode here in order to secure sketches of these "trees," which have afterward figured as among the most attractive features of their finished works.

This valley, like all others watered by rivers taking their rise in neighboring mountain-districts, is subject to frequent and occasionally disastrous inundations. Fortunately, however, the moods of the river are oftenest in accord with those of the varying seasons; for this reason freshets seldom come upon the ungathered harvests. The possibility of this event, however, leads the landholders to reserve their meadows



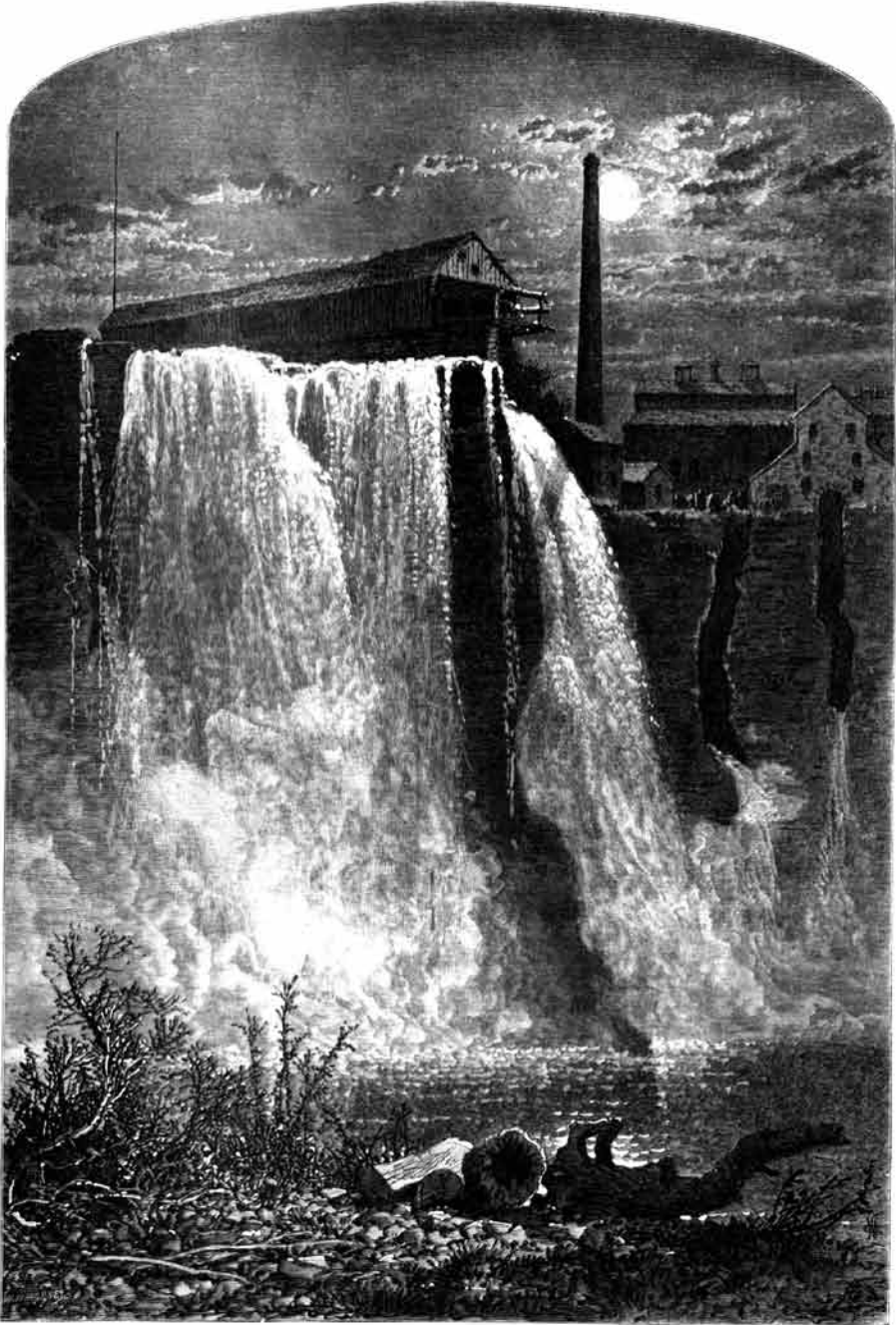
ROCHESTER, FROM MOUNT HOPE CEMETERY.

1894



East Side, Upper Falls of the Genesee.

upon the flats for grazing purposes, and hence the damage of a flood is mainly confined to the destruction of fences and an occasional hay-barrack. The regular recurrence of these inundations affects, also, the laying out of the highways. Were it not



West Side, Upper Falls of the Genesee.

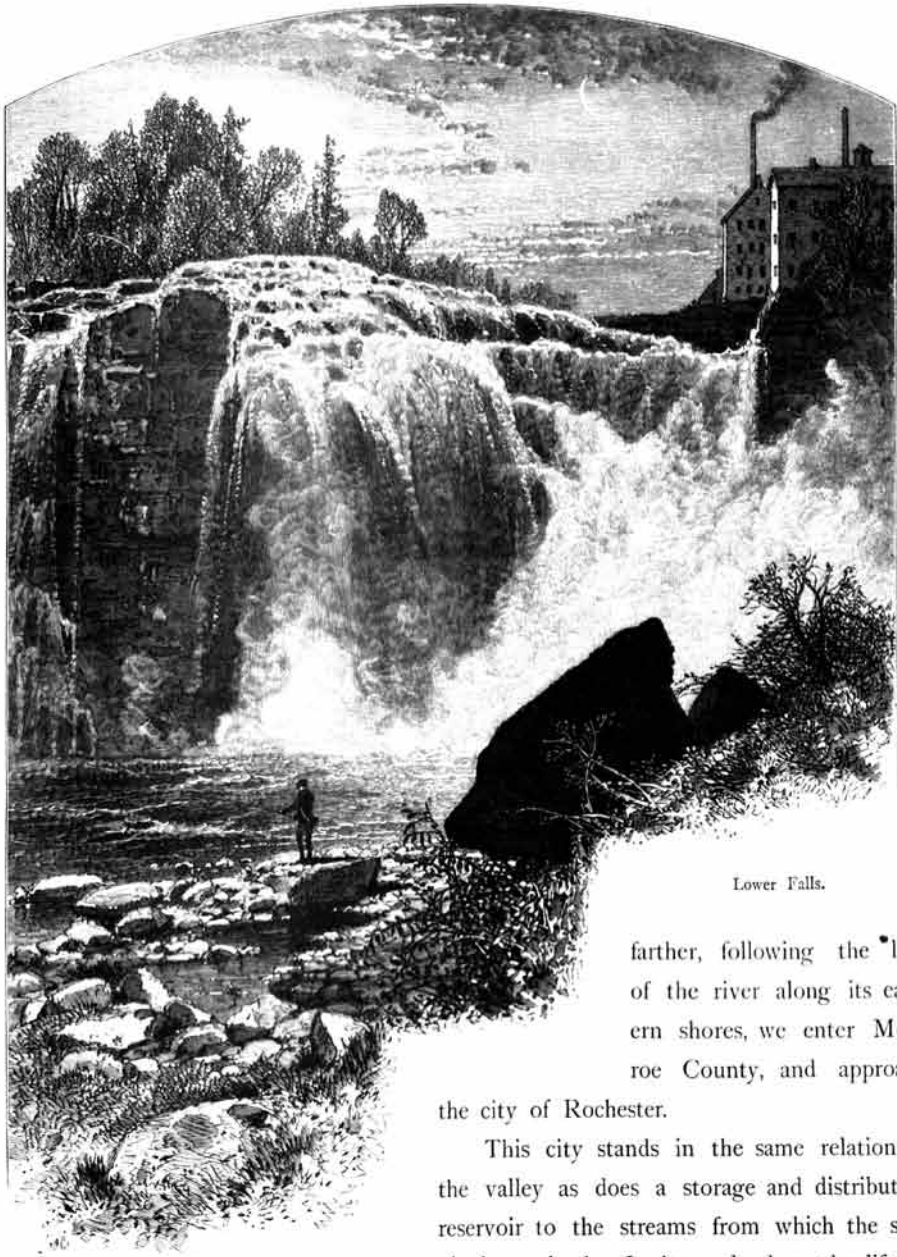
for the floods, the main avenues north and south would naturally be surveyed along the level land of the flats. As it is, however, these highways lead along the adjacent hill-sides, with an occasional road leading across the valley. Among the important

and most frequented of these avenues is that leading from the village of Mount Morris southward, and known as the Mount-Morris Turnpike. It is along this that our southward journey now tends, the objective point being the lovely village of Geneseo.

This village is the shire town of Livingston County, within the boundaries of which the richest of the valley-lands are situated. It stands upon the eastern slopes of the valley, the river, at its nearest point, running half a mile distant. The history of Geneseo is that of the valley itself, since it was here that many of the first white settlements were made. We enter its limits from the south, and the first suggestion of its presence is the old Wadsworth homestead, whose broad porticos, facing westward, command a glorious view of all the rich domain below. The grounds that belong to this old mansion mark the southern limit of the village proper, the entrance to which is bounded by the homestead-grounds upon the right, and an old, prim-looking village park upon the left. Leaving the artist to obtain his desired sketch of the valley from this point, we will turn our back upon him for the present, while we ascend the avenue marking the southern boundary of the town, and reverently enter the "Village on the Hill." Here lies, in the peace and rest that come after noble service, all that remains of one of New York's most illustrious citizens, General James S. Wadsworth, who, after distinguished service in the field, fell "with his face to the foe" in the battle of the Wilderness.

Along the western slope of the hill, upon the summit of which is this village of the dead, rests the village of the living; and one might go far to find a more perfect rural hamlet. The streets, which run at right angles, are lined with graceful shade-trees; and the view from those running east and west embraces that of the rich valley in the foreground, and, in the distance, the undulating harvest-fields. That dark opening into the hill-side toward the south is the gate-way through which the river enters the valley; while, far away northward, that cone-shaped eminence marks the suburbs of the city of Rochester, our next objective point, and the limit of our valley tour.

Transferring ourselves and baggage, including the artist's easel and the tourist's portfolio, from the lumbering stage to the less rural but more expeditious rail-car, we are soon under way, northward bound. The railway that serves as a means of exit from the region of the upper valley is a branch of the Erie, known as the Genesee Valley road. It connects the city of Rochester with the valley villages of Avon, Geneseo, Mount Morris, and now Dansville, the last a flourishing town seated upon one of the tributaries of the Genesee, and thus being entitled to a place among this beautiful sisterhood. At Avon this road crosses the northern branch of the Erie. At this point are the justly-famous sulphur springs; and, if the health-giving properties of these waters are in any degree commensurate with their mineral strength, Avon deserves a front rank among the health-resorts of the State. Continuing our journey twenty miles



Lower Falls.

farther, following the line of the river along its eastern shores, we enter Monroe County, and approach

the city of Rochester.

This city stands in the same relation to the valley as does a storage and distributing reservoir to the streams from which the supply is received. In its early days, the life of

the city was dependent upon the harvest of the valley; when these were abundant, then all went well. Having already referred to the wheat-product of the valley, we can readily understand the need and consequent prosperity of the city, which has long been known as the "Flour City of the West." Although now ranking as the fifth city in the State, there are yet living many persons whose childhood dates back of that of the city in which they dwell. From a brief historical sketch on the subject, we learn that, in expressing aston-

ishment at the career of Rochester, De Witt Clinton remarked, shortly before his death, that, when he passed the Genesee on a tour with other commissioners for exploring the route of the Erie Canal, in 1810, there was not a house where Rochester now stands. It was not till the year 1812 that the "Hundred-acre Tract," as it was then called, was planned out as the nucleus of a settlement under the name of Rochester, after the senior proprietor, Nathaniel Rochester. "In the year 1814," writes one of these pioneers, "I cleared three or four acres of ground on which the Court-House, St. Luke's Church, First Presbyterian Church, and School-house No. 1, now stand, and sowed it to wheat, and had a fine crop. The harvesting cost me nothing, *as it was most effectually done by the squirrels, coons, and other wild beasts of the forest.* Scarcely three years, however, had elapsed before the ground was mostly occupied with buildings." From this and abundant kindred testimony, it is evident that the early pioneers of this western region were men of energy and foresight, who saw in the valley of the Genesee the "garden-plot of the West," and in the then village of Rochester the future "Granary of America."

Having already referred to the second series of falls and high banks, we will again return to the guidance of the river as it enters the city limits at its southern boundaries. Its course lies directly across or through the centre of the city, the main avenues, running east and west, being connected by several iron bridges, with the exception of that known as the Main-Street Bridge, which is of stone, and the two wooden railway-bridges.

It is at the city of Rochester that the Erie Canal encounters the Genesee River, which it crosses upon the massive stone aqueduct, that has long been regarded as one of the most important works of American engineers. In its present course the river has rather the appearance of a broad canal, save that the current is rapid, and, at times, boisterous. The shores are lined by huge stone mills and factories, the foundation-walls of which act the part of dikes in confining the waters to their legitimate channels. At a point near the Erie Railway depot the river is crossed by a broad dam, from either side of which the waters are led in two mill-races, which pass under the streets and conduct the waters to the mills along the route. At a point somewhat below the centre of the city, and yet directly within its limits, are the First or Upper Falls. These are ninety-six feet in height, and it is thus evident that, with such a cataract in the centre of the city, the facilities for obtaining water-power could hardly be excelled. The mill-races conduct the main supply along the two opposite shores, and, as the mills are mainly situated below the level of the falls, the full force of the water can be utilized. The illustrations of the Upper Fall have been so designed that the two combined present a full view of the whole front as viewed from the chasm below, the darkened channels through which the water from the races are returned to the river being shown to the right and left.

The brink of this fall marks the upper limit of a second series of high banks

similar in general character to those that lie between Portage and Mount Morris. The height of these walls at certain points exceeds three hundred feet. At the distance of about a mile from the Upper Fall, a second descent of about twenty-five feet is followed, at the distance of a few rods only, by the Third or Lower Falls, which are nearly one hundred feet in height. It thus appears that, within the limits of the city, the waters of the Genesee make a descent, including the falls and the rapids above them, of two hundred and sixty feet, and the water-power, as estimated for the Upper Fall alone, equals forty thousand horse-power. Among the interesting features of Rochester are its nurseries and seed-gardens, the largest in the world.

As the river has now reached the level of Lake Ontario, it assumes the character of a deep-set harbor, and the vessels engaged in lake-traffic can ascend it five miles to the foot of the Lower Falls. The port of entry, however, is at the mouth of the river, where stands the village of Charlotte. Here are wharves, a light-house, and a railroad-depot, which road leads direct to Rochester.



Light-house, Charlotte.



Entrance to Thousand Islands.

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