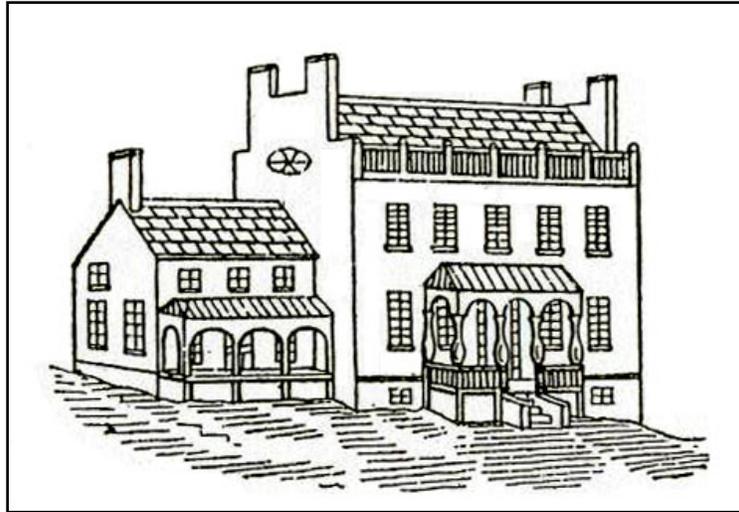Site of the Augustus and Letitia Porter Home[1]
Buffalo Avenue, just east of First Street, on bank of the Niagara River
Niagara Falls, New York

Significance: Augustus S. Porter and his brother Peter B. Porter were the first private European American owners of land in Niagara Falls. As part of Porter, Barton, and Company, they established ports in Niagara Falls, Lewiston, and Black Rock (now part of Buffalo). Augustus Porter built a house in Niagara Falls in 1808. After the British burned it in 1813, he rebuilt it on the same site in 1818. Before he moved to Niagara Falls, Augustus Porter owned at least one person in slavery in Canandaigua, New York. He reputedly brought the first African American family to Niagara Falls, Harry and Kate Wood. In the 1820 census, the Wood family and the Abraham Thompson family, all free people of color, lived near the Porter family. The Porter family home was demolished in the 1920s.
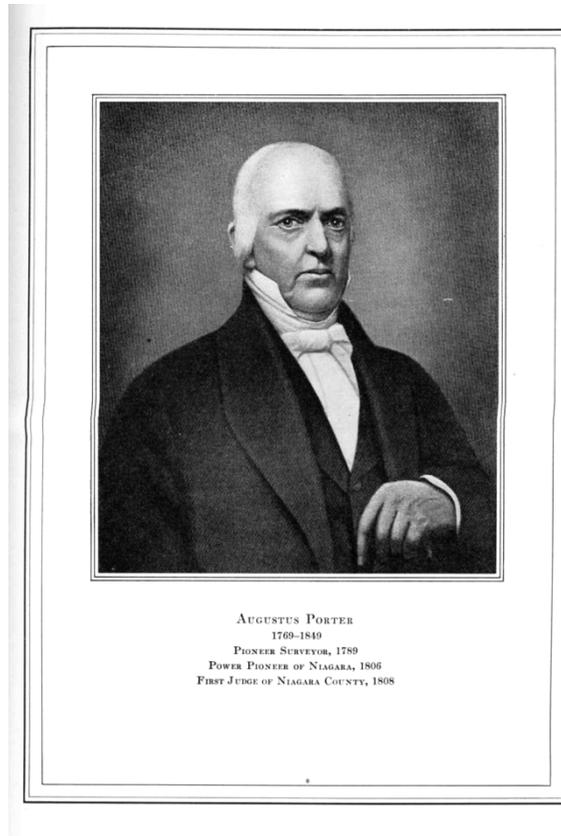

Clinton Brown, *Intensive Level Survey Historic Resources—Downtown Neighborhood, City of Niagara Falls: Phase I,* 3-8,
http://buffaloah.com/surveys/nf/3.pdf

Sign at site of Augustus S. Porter Home
Looking northwest toward Dexter Jerauld House, August 2011

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[1] Site description from *Survey of Sites Relating to the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism, and African American Life in Niagara Falls and Surrounding Area, 1820-1880*, by Judith Wellman, Ph.D., April 2012, pp. 42-44. Prepared by New York Historical Research Associates for edr Companies and the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Area Commission. The complete historic resources survey report is available at www.niagarafallsundergroundrailroad.org.

AUGUSTUS PORTER
1769–1849
PIONEER SURVEYOR, 1789
POWER PIONEER OF NIAGARA, 1806
FIRST JUDGE OF NIAGARA COUNTY, 1808

Judge Augustus Porter
http://www.mikalac.com/map/map7.html

Description: Augustus Porter built this elegant stone house in 1818 to replace the original 1808 house burned by the British in 1813). He constructed it in a typical five-bay central hallway Federal style, with the broad side facing the street, stepped gables, and oval windows in each gable end. Successive generations of family members lived here until the house was demolished after 1920.

Discussion: Augustus Porter was born in Connecticut in 1769 and then moved to Canandaigua, New York. He first visited Niagara County in 1795, surveying land throughout western New York and Ohio for Phelps and Gorham, Robert Morris, the Holland Land Company, and others. In 1797, he and his younger brother Peter B. Porter (born 1773) owned the first vessel built on Lake Ontario, the beginnings of their investments in lake transportation.

In 1805, the Porters bought much of the mile strip of land along the U.S. bank of the Niagara River, ceded by the Seneca to the State of New York in 1802. They also leased the Portage Road from the State of New York. In 1807, the Porters formed Porter, Barton, and Company to conduct a forwarding business from Oswego to the upper Great Lakes via the Portage Road around the Falls. When Augustus Porter moved to Niagara Falls, Peter B. Porter moved to Black Rock (now part of Buffalo), while Benjamin Barton moved to Lewiston. Only a few buildings stood anywhere in the vicinity, huddled around the old British Fort Schlosser, east of the rapids.

The Porter brothers had a vision of using the immense waterpower from the Falls to create an industrial giant in North America, so Augustus Porter named his new settlement Manchester, after the great English mill village. He built the first sawmill in 1803 and a productive paper mill on Bath Island in 1826. In 1825, Augustus and Peter B. Porter presented a prospectus, touting the economic advantages of developing Goat Island as an industrial site. It was a "situation . . . not surpassed, and probably not equaled, in the United States, as a site for the establishment of manufactures." "A thousand mills might be erected with the same ease, and equally accessible, as if on a plain; and each supplied with a never failing water-power."[2]

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[2] Patrick McGreevy, *Imagining Niagara: The Meaning and Making of Niagara Falls* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 109; Edward Dean Adams, *Niagara Power: History of the Niagara Falls Power Company* (Niagara

During Judge Porter's lifetime, however, the village's industrial potential was dwarfed by its development as a tourist resort. Augustus and Peter B. Porter exploited this opportunity, also. In 1816, they purchased Goat Island from New York State. Working with engineer and hotel operator Parkhurst Whitney, they developed the first bridge from the mainland to Goat Island in 1818, the first staircase from Prospect Point to the base of the Falls in that same year, a ferry service across the river in 1820, and a whole series of gardens, walks, bridges, staircases, and other attractions, creating a picturesque and romanticized human garden, all mapped out, from which tourists could explore the spectacular natural beauty of the Falls in a semi-controlled environment.[3]

Like many wealthy European American families in New York State, Augustus Porter and his family owned people in slavery. The 1800 census noted that one enslaved person lived in the household of Augustus Porter in Canandaigua, New York. No census listing for Augustus Porter was found for 1810, but in 1820, there were eight people, all European Americans, living in the Porter household. Two African American families lived nearby. Both Abraham Thompson and Harry Wood had seven free people of color living in their households. An article in *Publications of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society* noted that the Augustus Porter family hired "a negro and his family," brought from Canandaigua. Harry Wood was "the first negro in Niagara Falls," and his wife Katie was the cook.[4]

Augustus Porter married Lavinia Steele, who died young, and then married Jane Howell, with whom he had three sons (Albert H., Peter B., Jr., Augustus S.) and two daughters (Lavinia, and Jane S.) He died on June 10, 1849, age eighty, and now lies buried in Oakwood Cemetery.

Falls, 1927), quoted in P.M. Eckel, "Historic Background at Niagara Falls: The Porters," www.mobot.org/plantscience/ResBot/Niag/Hist2/Porters.htm.

[3] "Judge Augustus Porter," ancestry.com, http://www.archive.org/stream/officialrecordof00willuoft/officialrecordof00willuoft_djvu.txt.

[4] *Publications of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society,* No. 7, (1879), 265.