

THE CLIFTON HOTELS

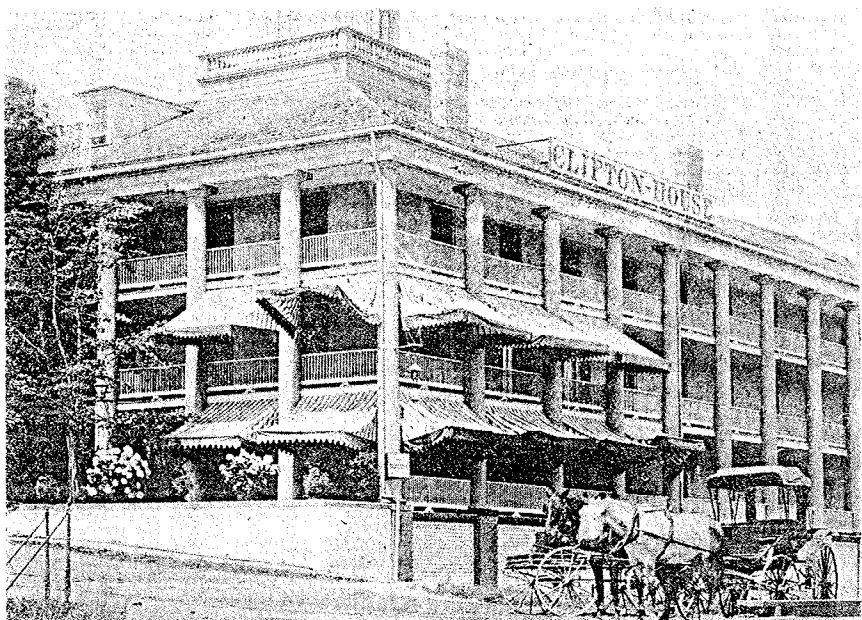
The First Clifton Hotel (1833-1898)

The Clifton Hotels are considered to have been the grandest hotels that ever existed in Niagara Falls. The first Clifton Hotel was built in 1833 by Hermanus (Monty) Crysler in 1833. It was situated at the present day location of the Oakes Garden Theatre, at Clifton Hill and River Road. It was a beautiful 60 room hotel which quickly became the most prominent hotel in Clifton. The hotel proved to be so popular that Crysler soon added a north wing along Ferry Road (present day Clifton Hill), forming a large "L" shaped structure, and bringing the total number of rooms to 150. It was purchased by Samuel Zimmerman in 1848 who operated it until his death in 1857. At this point it passed into the control of Senator John T. Bush. Although Bush never operated the hotel himself, he leased out the management of the property for a number of years. In 1869, Bromley Shears was recorded as being the owner of the hotel.

Trains brought hundreds of visitors to Niagara Falls daily, and buggies from the Clifton Hotel met all first class trains. For those who could afford it, the Clifton was the hotel of choice, and guests at the Clifton Hotel often included the rich and famous. In 1851, the Swedish singer, Jenny Lind, stayed at the Clifton Hotel for three months, and was often seen singing from its balconies. When the Prince of Wales visited the area for five days in September, 1860, the Clifton Hotel was one of his stops, and it is said that he watched Charles Blondin cross the Gorge on a tight-rope from the colonnades of the hotel. In 1864, the Clifton Hotel was the site of an unsuccessful peace conference to end the U.S. Civil War. Indeed, until 1898, the Clifton Hotel enjoyed a pre-eminent position, and attracted visitors from all over the world.

On the morning of June 25, 1898, a fire started in the chimney of the boiler room near the roof of the Clifton Hotel. Although fire-fighters fought valiantly, low water pressure hampered their efforts, and the fire soon engulfed the entire structure. When it became apparent that the fire could not be contained, the hotel's furnishings, silverware and china were removed to Queen Victoria Park. The salvaged contents of the hotel were sold by auction later that summer. Many spectators flocked to the area to watch the blaze, and some of them emptied the well-stocked larder and wine cellar of the hotel and dispensed food and drink to the rest of the crowd.

The fire burned for the remainder of the day, and by nightfall, the Clifton Hotel was completely destroyed; the charred stone walls were all that remained of the once-grand hotel. Plans were made to immediately rebuild, but these plans fell through, and as a result, the ruins of the first Clifton Hotel were not cleared away until 1905.



Right: The Clifton Hotel c. 1895

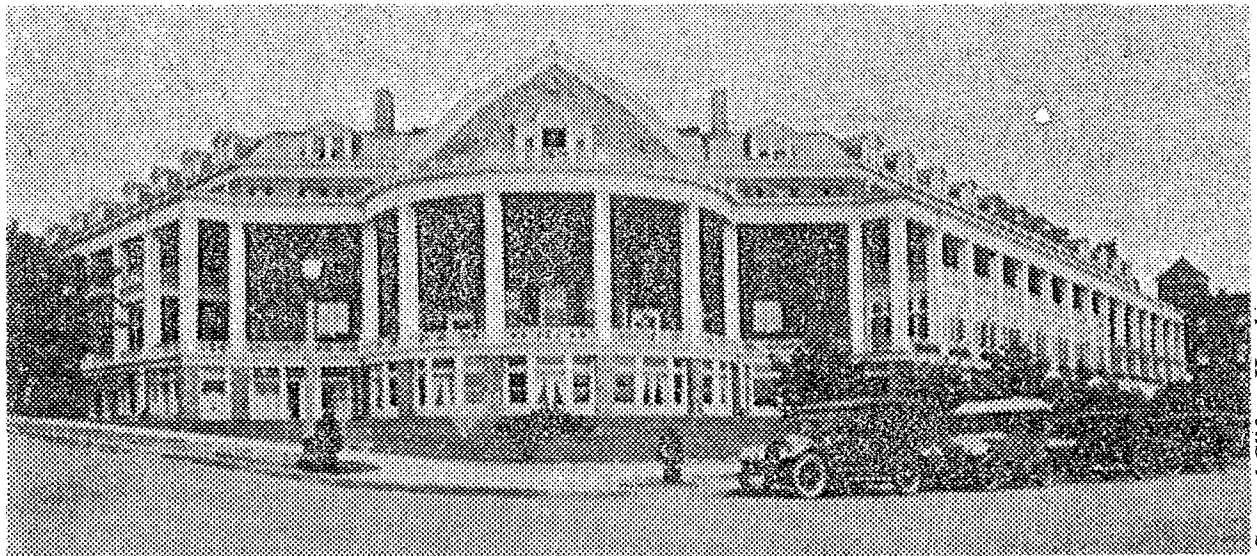
The Second Clifton Hotel (1906-1932)

At that time, a decision was made to build a second Clifton Hotel. This Clifton Hotel was built in 1906 at nearly the same location as the first Clifton had been. Constructed of cut limestone, the hotel was a large "L" shaped structure which fronted on Clifton Hill and River Road. With 270 rooms, it was larger than the original Clifton, and advertisements often boasted that the Clifton Hotel "had no superior in the world." Its amenities included phones, an electric elevator, hot and cold running water, and electric light and heating, as well as elegant parlours and writing rooms, a magnificent ballroom, and a dining room capable of seating 600 people. The new hotel opened in July, 1906, and the total cost of the rebuilding was estimated at \$500,000. Like its predecessor, this Clifton was, for a time, the most important hotel in Niagara, and its most influential guests included King George V and Queen Mary (then Prince and Princess of Wales), and King Albert and Queen Elizabeth of Belgium. As well, it was often the scene of brilliant parties, balls, and other such social gatherings.

At the close of World War I, the Clifton Hotel merged with United International Hotel, although the Clifton Hotel Company retained a controlling interest. The second Clifton Hotel continued to prosper, until the opening of the Hotel General Brock in 1928-1929. In 1929, to deal with the increased competition, plans were drafted to renovate and enlarge the hotel with a 12-storey addition. Before these plans could be carried out, however, the second Clifton Hotel, like its predecessor, would succumb to a spectacular fire.

It was in the early hours of December 31, 1932 that the second Clifton Hotel caught fire. As the hotel was closed for the winter, the only occupants were the caretaker and his family, who quickly left the building and called the fire department. Fire departments on both sides of the border responded immediately, but the flames spread rapidly throughout the wooden interior of the hotel and the fire was soon out of control. The fire burned throughout the day, and by the morning of January 1, 1933, only the blackened remains of the outer stone walls of the hotel remained.

Initial newspaper reports estimated the damage at \$1,000,000, but the real amount was later assessed at around \$600,000. As the ruins were cleared away, there was talk of immediate rebuilding, but the plans never materialized. Soon after, the site of the Clifton and the adjacent Lafayette Hotel were purchased by Harry Oakes. Oakes had the Lafayette Hotel demolished, and then presented both properties to the Niagara Parks Commission. The land was developed by the NPC into a beautiful garden and outdoor theatre, the Oakes Garden Theatre, which remains, virtually unchanged, at the corner of Clifton Hill and River Road.



Second Clifton Hotel