

THOMAS BARNETT (1799-1890)

Thomas Barnett was born on December 4, 1799 in Harborne, Staffordshire, England. At the age of 25, he immigrated to the United States, but was induced by Sir Peregrine Maitland, then Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, to settle in Niagara Falls, Canada. Here he established Barnett's Museum at Table Rock, in an abandoned building on the North side of Murray Hill. In 1827, he built a stone building 300 feet south of Table Rock. This building had a broad veranda across the front and an outside stairway which led to an observation area on the roof. The building was too damp for a residence, and so Barnett used it as a museum and observatory. He obtained permission to cross the Chain Reserve, 66 feet of land (one chain) bordering the Falls and along the entire river which was reserved by the government for military purposes, and built a stairway down the Gorge for his patrons.

Barnett's Museum was very popular and was praised in all of the travel books of the time as a must-see attraction. The exhibits were interesting and informative, and included plant, animal and rock specimens and Indian crafts amongst the items on display. In addition, the Museum had a refreshment area and a souvenir store. The Museum was considered one of the very few establishments in the area which were worthy of patronage.

In 1854, an American named Saul Davis built his own Table Rock House between Barnett's Table Rock House and Table Rock, and a fierce rivalry ensued. Unlike Barnett, who was an honest businessman, Davis was unscrupulous and would stop at nothing to gain the upper hand. In spite of Davis, however, Barnett's Museum continued to do very well. A new Museum, which surpassed all other area buildings in architectural beauty, was built in 1859, at the site of the present Victoria Park Restaurant. To improve the Museum, Barnett acquired many new exhibits, including a number of Egyptian artifacts and mummies which were secured by his son, Sydney prior to 1860. To attract tourists to the establishment, Barnett also staged a number of promotional stunts, including the re-enactment of an Indian burial in 1870, and a Buffalo Hunt in 1872. The hunt was a dismal failure, and resulted in heavy financial losses for Barnett. This was the first of a series of set-backs which ultimately forced Barnett to sell out to Saul Davis, in 1877. Thomas Barnett died in Clifton, in 1890.

When the Queen Victoria Parks were created in 1888, Barnett's Museum was one of the few buildings which were not demolished. It was converted into the Dufferin Cafe, and remained open until the early 1900's, when the land was required by the Ontario Power Company to build an underground distributor of the water which was collected from the Dufferin Islands Intake. In 1903, the company paid \$20,000 towards the construction of a new cafeteria, and the Dufferin Cafe was demolished.

Although Barnett's Museum no longer exists, his artifacts and specimens have been preserved, and remain on display at the Niagara Falls Museum on River Road. Thomas Barnett created one of the first reputable attractions in Niagara Falls, and in the process, also established the first Museum in North America.

