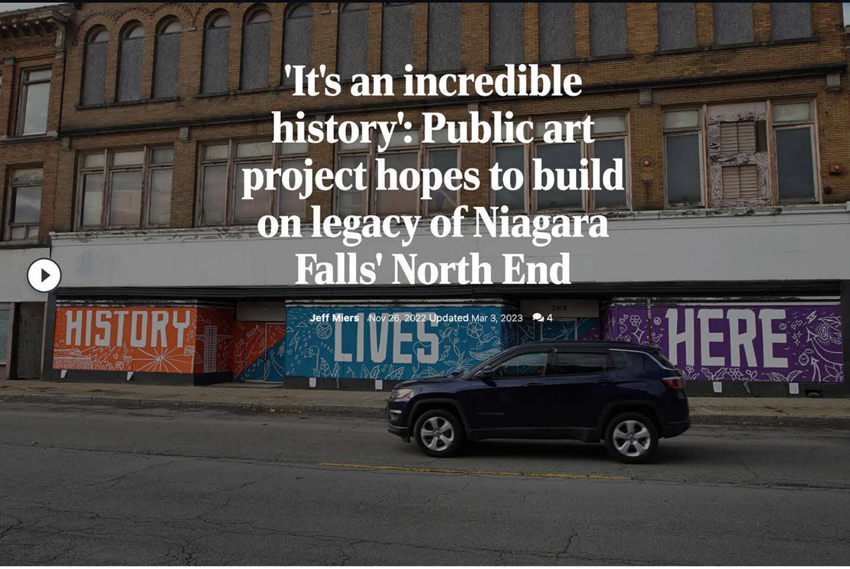

'It's an incredible history': Public art project hopes to build on legacy of Niagara Falls' North End

Jeff Miers Nov 26, 2022 Updated Mar 3, 2023 4

Unique, colorful murals are popping up around Western New York. Take a look at some of them through the camera lens of The Buffalo News' photographers.

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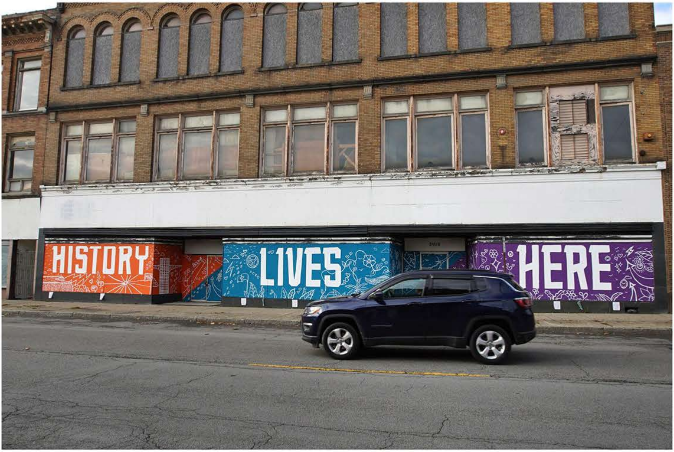
For Niagara Falls residents in the community encompassing the stretch of Main Street between the Public Library and the Underground Railroad Heritage Center, hope has long been in short supply. Abandoned buildings and empty storefronts have given the area the appearance of a dilapidated ghost town, despite the region's geographic proximity to the tourist hotspot that is the Falls themselves.



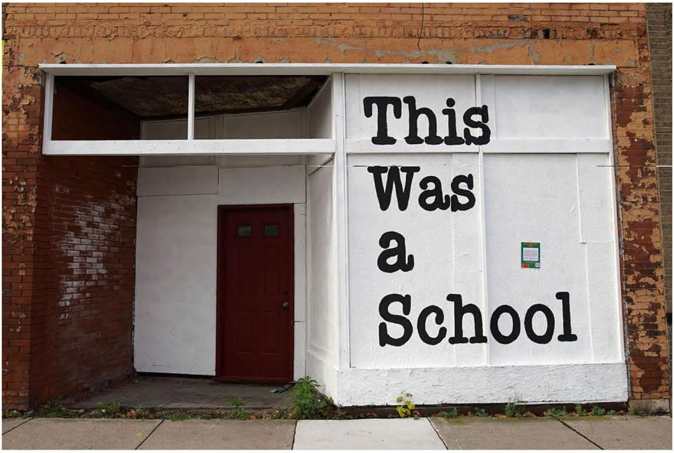
The Niagara Falls National Heritage Area has initiated a series of public murals to bring awareness to a dilapidated Main Street, engaging the community through art. The project hopes to ignite conversations about Main Street's historic legacy, present day community, and future possibilities.

Mark Mulville / Buffalo News

But in late October, a project initiated by the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area found four new murals appearing on this stretch of Main Street within a one-week period. These murals – each given a theme and a title ("History Lives Here," "We Are the Community," "Imagine the Possibilities" and "This Was a School") – aim to celebrate what once was, while pointing the way toward a more positive future.

"This project is about hope, in a world where it's hard to feel that, right now," said Sara Capen, executive director of the heritage area. "I'm not sure that many people realize the effect that art can have – and also, the ability to *participate* in art – in restoring a sense of place and instilling pride in that place.

"That's what we're trying to do here, and we're seeing it start to work."



A mural painted on a vacant building along the stretch of Main Street between the Niagara Falls Public Library and the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center in Niagara Falls.

Mark Mulville / Buffalo News

A hub of activity

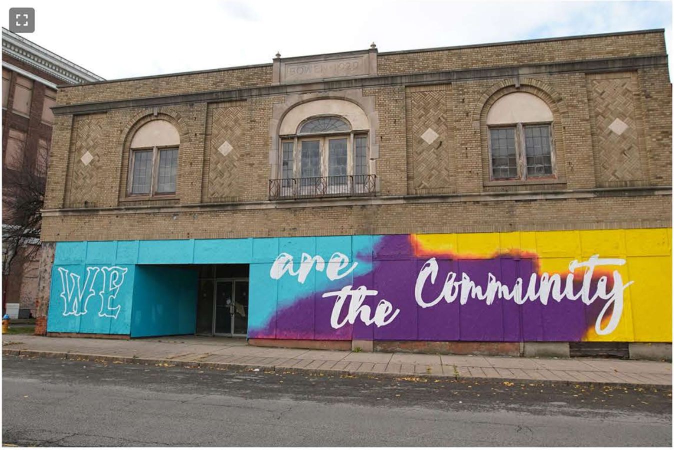
The heritage area – one of the country's 55 National Heritage Areas designated by the U.S. Congress through the National Park Service – considers the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, which opened at 825 Depot Ave. in 2018, its hub. The center's mandate – "To reveal authentic stories of Underground Railroad freedom seekers and abolitionists in Niagara Falls that inspire visitors to recognize modern injustices that stem from slavery and take action toward an equitable society" – is at the core of all the projects initiated from that hub, including the #NFMurals public art series.

"We started with the Discover Niagara Shuttle and the Underground Railroad Heritage Center as our major projects, and from the beginning, it was ingrained in all we do that we work with the community directly," said Ally Spongr, director of public art at Niagara Falls National Heritage Area. "We learned from them that there was a deep desire to hear the stories and celebrate the history of this area."

That led to an initiative to "bring the stories outside the walls of the Heritage Center," and the 2019 launch of the #NFMurals program, aided by funding from the New York State Health Foundation. Concentrating on the predominantly Black Highland community in the North End of Niagara Falls, Spongr and team "reacted to what the people were telling us, which was that they wanted art to depict *their* stories, in a way that they had never been shown before, celebrated in the public view."

The project yielded eight murals during its first year of activity, employing a grassroots campaign to find both emerging and experienced artists from Niagara Falls and Buffalo and creating an opportunity for them to work side by side. From the get-go, members of the community were eager to pitch in, whether that meant offering feedback or picking up a paint brush and getting to work.

"That initial feedback from the Highland community became the template for everything we've done since, including this latest series of murals," Spongr said. "There's a lot more to come."



A mural painted as part of a project initiated by the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area.

Mark Mulville / Buffalo News

Buffalo artist Princessa Williams has a history with Niagara Falls. In 2020, she created a mural depicting the late congressman and civil rights hero John Lewis, at Main Street and Depot Avenue. Williams was more than happy to throw her hat into the ring when the opportunity for further involvement in the community presented itself.

"With this area of Niagara Falls, well, let's just tell the truth – it's an eyesore," Williams said. "All the abandoned buildings and lack of businesses suggest that hope has somehow been abandoned, as well. So why not beautify this community?"

A powerful living bond in Buffalo to American legend John Lewis. From left: Lonnie Carter (first cousin) of Buffalo; Stacey Whitaker (first cousin once removed) and Willie Lee "Sis" Carter Whitaker (first cousin), both of Niagara Falls; and Carthen "Ricky" Carter (second cousin) of Buffalo, by the mural of John Lewis outside the Matt Urban Hope Center at 385 Paderweski Drive.

Buffalo News file photo

The sense the area has been abandoned “creates a blank canvas” and abundant opportunities to employ art as a means of brightening the outlook of community members, Williams said.

“In connecting with the community, we ask, ‘What do you guys want to see to lift this up, to make it feel alive again?’ What we’ve done so far has made that area a bit more vibrant and community members are responding to it in a very positive way. As an artist, that gives you more light, and then you can then share more light through your art, through the graphics, the painting, the colors, the message.

“It feels like the community and the artists are feeding one another.”

Williams, who was heavily involved in the creation of two of the four new murals, said she’s eager to participate in future endeavors. Her commitment to Niagara Falls is “deep and real.” She currently runs Princessa’s Studio & Art Gallery on Hertel Avenue in Buffalo, and plans on opening a second gallery space in Niagara Falls within the next two years.

Imagining possibilities

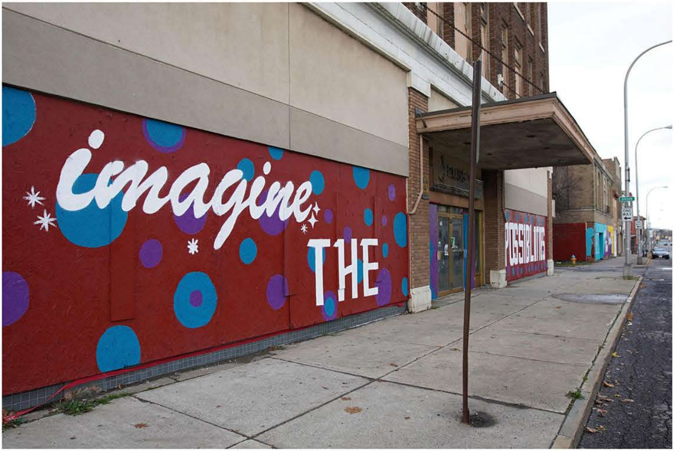
In 2018, Buffalo artist Tyshaun Tyson completed his first mural in Niagara Falls, at the African Heritage Food Co-op on Highland Avenue. Initially commissioned by the national heritage area, Tyson was soon hired as their artist/community liaison. He then worked on the Black Lives Matter and Niagara Falls Love Story mural projects, which were completed in 2020.

Tyson said the new four-mural project on Main Street developed as a rapid response to the threat by the City of Niagara Falls to tear down the old Hart to Hart Furniture building at 2018 Main St. if the building’s owner – Buffalo investment firm Blue Cardinal Capital – fails to make improvements to the structure.

Painter and muralist Tyshaun Tyson is the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area artist liaison.

Photo courtesy Tyshaun Tyson

“When Ally Spongr and Sara Capen heard about that, they said, ‘Let’s get some members of the community down here and start a conversation, because these buildings hold historic value and they tell stories,' " Tyson recalled. "So the team began collaborating on ideas, and the slogan 'History Lives Here' emerged. This was on a Wednesday. By Friday, we were already working on the mural. Then just down the street, at the old Jenss building at 1708 Main, we came up with the slogan 'Imagine the Possibilities,' and it spread from there."



A mural painted on a vacant building along the stretch of Main Street between the Niagara Falls Public Library and the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center in Niagara Falls.

Mark Mulville / Buffalo News

Tyson said stories members of the community shared with him while working on the murals over the past few years impressed upon him "how heartbroken they are that the area has become what it is now," a sentiment underscored by what he calls "an intense passion to get involved and help out" among community members.

Capen said building "a sense of renewed hope in the history, the landscape and the culture of Niagara Falls" is necessary in the face of the continuing loss of physical representations of that history. The long-term goal is to foster an environment that attracts new businesses, so that the city's history might become a living one once again.

"We haven't been kind to ourselves here – we've allowed our history to be taken from us," she said. "It's an incredible history – one of hydroelectric power, of freedom seekers crossing into Canada, of resilience. So we're hoping that through this project, we can reflect with the community on just what does this place *mean*? At the same time, we have to uplift voices that are often unheard and say, hey, this is too important to let go."