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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Mysteries of the Boulevard *Grand Entrance to Nothing*

By David Frew
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Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.

Bay Rat expeditions to the west eventually led us to something that we did not understand. Immediately west of the wooded area that contained the strange oval track at (today's Scott Park) there was a roadway, leading north toward the bay. And it wasn't a simple, ordinary roadway. It was a wide, tree-lined boulevard. Street signs identified it as "Presque Isle Boulevard" and the mystery roadway was parallel to the more familiar Peninsula Drive. Once we found it, we followed it north regularly and wondered. What was this street for and where did it lead? We walked along the fancy street and speculated. Could it have been an early roadway that was supposed to have led to the Peninsula? Who built it? Why?



Why is there a grand, southern plantation-style, tree-lined boulevard running parallel to Peninsula Drive and leading to absolutely nothing?

The story of Presque Isle Boulevard, a street that still exists, is connected to Erie's wealthiest person, William L. Scott. Born and raised in Virginia, Scott continued to imagine himself to be connected to the South throughout his life. While associates in Erie hoped he had become a committed Erie resident, he spent more time in and around his original family home in Virginia as his wealth increased. His wife, Mary Matilda Tracy Scott, whose family was from Erie, as well as his children, anchored him here but he had business interests and a winter home on the Delmarva Peninsula.

As a southerner, Scott had grown accustomed to southern plantations, which were common along the Atlantic Coast in both Virginia and the Carolinas. One of the distinguishing features of almost every southern plantation was a tree-lined entry road. Depending upon the most common local tree species, these roadways, which usually lead to the main house, could have been lined by oak, sycamore, or other tree species. When William Scott decided to build a grand hotel at the Head and connect it to his western farm he created an entry road for land visitors, which would take them by carriage from West Eighth Street through the farm and down the bluffs to the level of Presque Isle Bay, where his Massassauga Point hotel stood.



Live oaks line the entry to McLeod Plantation in Virginia



The entry road to Magnolia Plantation near Charleston, South Carolina

Scott patterned his entry road after plantation drives that he had seen in the South and decided to design a two-lane boulevard to accommodate the carriages, which would be carrying hotel guests in both directions. His architectural vision convinced him to line both sides of the road with trees and to plant them in the center boulevard, as well. Everything about the original hotel, which opened in the late 1870s, was extraordinary. At the time that the hotel burned to the ground in 1881, Scott was in Virginia buying horse breeding farms and the sudden loss caused him to reconsider his use of the farm property west of Erie. His Erie farm managers were eager to rebuild the hotel, but he was hesitant. His newly acquired racehorse stables and breeding operations in Virginia in combination with the difficulties of

running the hotel persuaded him to transition the West Eighth Street farm property into a thoroughbred racehorse breeding farm.

From 1881 until 1885, the beautiful tree-lined roadway languished as Scott instructed his farm managers to concentrate on building new stables and barns. During that time the road was used again, but for hauling construction materials, including sand, up from the old bayside hotel site to the farm. There was a better but not aesthetically pleasing road west of the site of today's Presque Isle Boulevard. It was a gravel and shale construction road that had been used by the previous owner of the lower property to haul bog iron gathered near the shoreline up to West Eighth Street. Years later, after Presque Isle had become a state park, that old construction roadway right-of-way was donated by William Scott's daughter, Annie Scott Strong, and became the west end of today's Peninsula Drive.

While Scott's farm managers reluctantly honored his wishes to refocus their attention on the development of Algeria Farms, they continued to lobby for a hotel to replace the one that had burned down. In 1885, with construction completed on the horse farm, Scott relented and agreed to build a second Massassauga Point hotel. But when the second, far less opulent hotel opened, the bulk of the visitors and overnight guests began coming by excursion boat from the Public Dock (Dobbins Landing) at the foot of State Street. That was a part of the design of the replacement hotel, which included a landing dock for excursion boats. As a result, the old entry boulevard continued to languish.



An excursion boat from the Public Dock discharges passengers at the new hotel.

The fancy boulevard had a short new life in 1890 when the Erie Streetcar Company extended a line along West Eighth Street to Trinity Cemetery and Waldameer Park. Eventually, passengers began to exit the streetcar at Presque Isle Boulevard and walk to the Head and the hotel area. Noting the new streetcar traffic, Scott's farm

managers began to offer carriage rides and even built a tram that operated on tracks that ran from the end of the boulevard down the hill to the hotel. But all of these efforts to increase traffic to the new hotel continued without the direct involvement of William Scott, who was spending most of his time in Virginia and building a new railroad that ran the length of the Delmarva Peninsula. Scott's Virginia railroad terminated at a car ferry that was designed to haul the coal that he was transporting to Norfolk, Virginia.

All of that ended in 1891 when William Scott, "the coal king," former Erie Mayor, and congressman, died of heart failure while vacationing in Newport, Rhode Island. Scott's family immediately began to divest itself of his holdings, beginning with the horse farms and winter home in Virginia. The family was committed to life in Erie and began by selling off all of the Virginia properties. The Erie horse-breeding operations, including the best of the stud horses and mares, were sold or transferred to Virginia but the family hung onto the Algeria Farms property. Meanwhile, farm managers continued to shuttle people down Presque Isle Boulevard to the Head in an attempt to keep the hotel in business. With Waldameer growing and advertising its clean, "disease-free" Lake Erie beaches, however, people lost interest in the hotel. Eventually the hotel manager gave up and the building was abandoned.

After Scott's death, the managers at Algeria Farms converted it to a riding academy and horse-boarding farm. To expand and enhance the riding experience the grand old boulevard and its northern extension (where the tram had been) leading down the bluffs to Presque Isle became an extended riding trail. It was called the "Bridle Trail" and was used regularly for almost 30 years. When Presque Isle became a state park in 1921, Scott's family negotiated a deal that allowed Algeria's riders to follow the boulevard path down to the beaches at the Head, where they built a shelter as well as an enclosed corral. From there, riders could continue out and onto Presque Isle to Water Works Beach and ferry landing.

The post-World War II building boom resulted in the sale of the eastern portion of Algeria Farms, where the riding academy had been and the property was divided into housing developments as well as the strip mall on West Eighth that became today's Colony Plaza. In 1955, the estate of Scott's daughter Annie Scott Strong sold the western portion of the old farm to the Erie Catholic Diocese so that St. Jude Church and Our Lady's Christian School could be developed.

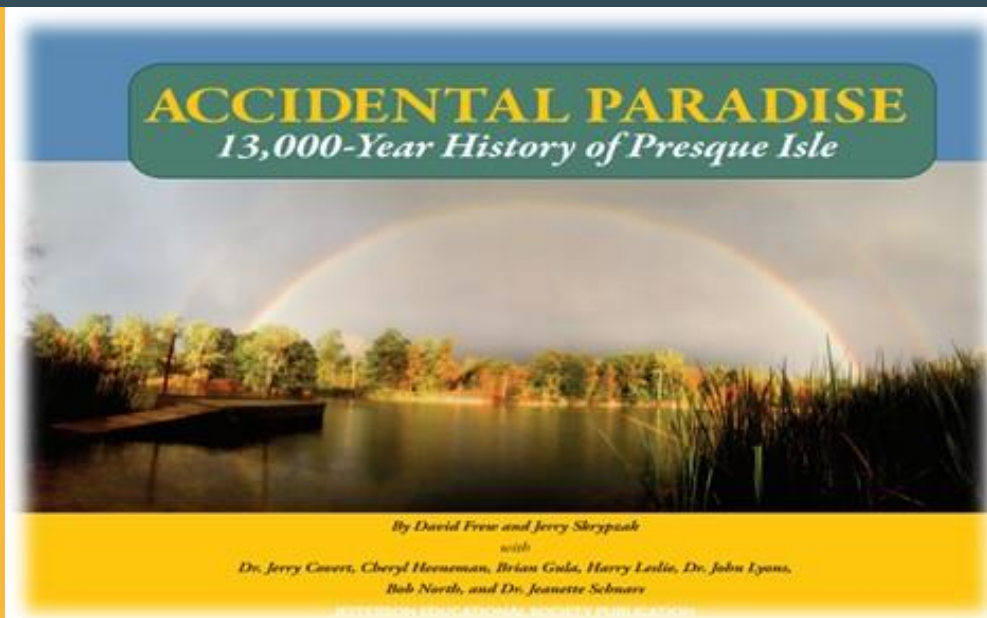
After lying unused for decades, Presque Isle Boulevard returned to life when condominiums were built near the northern end of William Scott's plantation-style drive. The very end of the road currently connects with the upper-level of Sara's Campground.

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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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