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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Bay Rat Geography: Who Put the Roads There?

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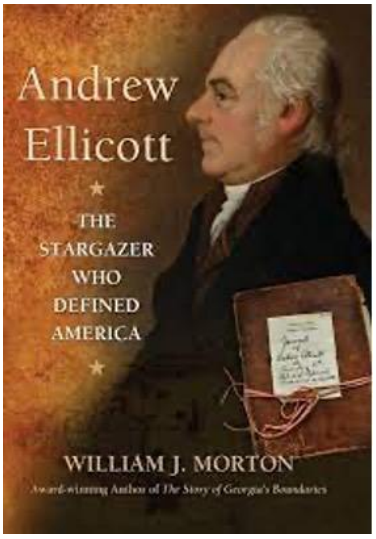
Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES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



Learning to find our way around Erie was simple when we were kids. The water was always to the north and, as parallel streets spread away from Presque Isle Bay, their numbers increased. First Street, which was called Front Street from its earliest days, was closest to the water and most northerly, with subsequent parallel numbered roads increasing. Second Street was south of Front, Third Street was next, etc.

The city's north-south streets had names instead of numbers; from west of State Street were types of trees (Peach, Sassafras, Myrtle, Chestnut, Cherry, Poplar, and Walnut); from east of State Street were nationalities (French, Holland, German) until reaching the parade grounds (Parade Street) from the time of the French arrival in 1753. Erie's named streets were bisected by the central commercial thoroughfare of State Street (following several decades when French Street and Parade Street served as the downtown hub). As these north-south streets extended to the west or east, the block numbers rose proportionately. The "100 block," for example, was closest to State Street followed by the 200 block, the 300 block and more. For us kids who lived in the 900 block on the west side, navigation was simple. We could get to State Street and the downtown by walking nine blocks east and watching the house numbers get closer to 100 – even numbers on the north side of the street and odd numbers on the south.

Who could have been responsible for such a logical and easy to understand system? Famous surveyor and city planner Andrew Ellicott, who lived from 1754 to 1820, a time period that included the establishment of the city of Erie. Ellicott, who was much more than a surveyor and city planner, had famously crafted a plan for Washington, D.C. in 1702 after George Washington and others had lost confidence in the ideas of French urban planner Pierre Charles L'Enfant, who was originally commissioned to do the work.

After unveiling his systematic plan for the nation's capital that included taking advantage of Washington's river location, Ellicott became the "rock star" of urban planning and more. His skill in developing the plan for Washington also endeared him to Thomas Jefferson, ultimately connecting him to Erie's contemporary Jefferson Educational Society.

In addition to being the nation's most acclaimed surveyor and city planner, Andrew Ellicott was a skilled astronomer and mathematician. His later career included a job as a professor of mathematics. Among his most famous accomplishments was the detailed identification of Pennsylvania's four borders, an accomplishment that was much more involved than it might seem these days. In 1784, he completed the west end of the incomplete survey of the Mason-Dixon Line, which served as the southern border of Pennsylvania. Ellicott was born and lived in Pennsylvania, which made him the logical choice for that assignment. Two years later, he was assigned to lead the surveying team that was to define Pennsylvania's western border. That project was much more strategically

important than the work on the Mason Dixon Line since that boundary was to define the western end of America's established states and serve as the gateway to the Western Reserve (of Connecticut) of the original colonies.

The frontier west of the anticipated western boundary of Pennsylvania was to include new territories (Northwest Territories), and each of the original colonies had been granted ownership of lands west of this line and continuing to the Mississippi River. Pennsylvania's western boundary, which was finally established in 1786, was called "The Ellicott Line." This line was of vital interest to the states of Connecticut and Massachusetts since both states considered the land beyond Pennsylvania to be theirs.

Ellicott's biggest challenge, however, was surveying the part of the eastern border that divided today's Pennsylvania and upstate New York across New York's Southern Tier. According to the established treaty agreement with Great Britain, that border was to be a meridian line that was perpendicular to the western-most shoreline of Lake Ontario. The difficulty in laying out the precise location of the meridian was that the British government (prior to Canadian federation in 1867) refused to allow an American surveying team access to its territory. Feelings were still raw after the Revolutionary War.

Pennsylvania's original northern border intersected with the Ohio line (Ellicott Line) well south of today's city of Erie. The bounded territory included the old French Fort LeBoeuf but did not touch Lake Erie. As the late 1700s unfolded and it became apparent to Pennsylvania authorities that the state was going to miss out on the anticipated shipping trade that was to unfold on Lake Erie, there was a movement to extend the state boundary to the north so that Pennsylvania could have a shipping port on the Great Lakes. The federal government forced New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania to cede their colonial claims to the Erie Triangle lands and sold the wedge of land to Pennsylvania in 1792.

Naturally, the surveying and planning work was assigned to Andrew Ellicott. He began by defining the triangle of land that was between the original northern boundary of Pennsylvania and Lake Erie. Ellicott then carefully laid out the Erie Triangle. The survey required that Ellicott return to his work on establishing the eastern boundary since there was concern that the actual meridian might have been west of the tip of Presque Isle, which would have excluded Pennsylvania's anticipated access to and ownership of the natural harbor that the French had called Presque Isle.

Ellicott called upon his 1793 topographical survey of the Niagara River and used calculations from that work to better estimate the precise location of the western edge of Lake Ontario. That meridian was well east of the tip of Presque Isle, almost in the precise location that contemporary motorists encounter when traveling on

today's Interstate 90. The location reassured Pennsylvania authorities that their new "territory" would include a harbor on Lake Erie.

The Erie Triangle in yellow

Once Ellicott had identified the precise boundaries of the Erie Triangle, Pennsylvania began to focus on purchasing the land from the federal government. Earlier, in January 1789, the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy released the Triangle land for payments of $2,000 from Pennsylvania and $1,200 from the federal government. The Seneca Nation separately settled land claims against Pennsylvania in February 1791 for the sum of $800, according to S.B. Nelson's 1896 "Biographical Dictionary and Historical Reference Book of Erie County, Pennsylvania."

After the land acquisitions had been secured, Ellicott went to work creating a street and park plan for Erie and laying out the roadway that was to connect the anticipated "Port of Erie" with Philadelphia, which was already the United States' busiest ocean port, and Erie, Pennsylvania.

While the creation of Erie was important, Ellicott's best work was yet to unfold. In anticipation of the Lewis & Clark Expedition across North America (Corps of Discovery), President Thomas Jefferson hired Ellicott to tutor Meriwether Lewis. Jefferson's 1803 Louisiana Purchase had essentially doubled the size of the country and, while his ultimate objective was to expand the United States all the way to the West Coast, he realized that there would be a need to make a survey of the unknown lands west of the Mississippi purchased from France's Napoleon. So, in 1803, Lewis reported to Ellicott's home, where he learned the essentials of surveying. Jefferson had complete confidence in Ellicott and continued to call upon him for technical help. In 1813, Ellicott finally received the posting of his dreams. He was appointed to the faculty of the United States Military Academy on the Hudson River, where he taught applied mathematics.

Even though Ellicott's urban planning work took place more than two centuries ago and the Erie Metropolitan area has grown geometrically since then, the core of his original design continues and works. The system of numbered streets ranging from the bay to the south, with named cross-streets spreading east and west from the State Street core, continues to make Erie easy to navigate. Ellicott's system of parks that originally included Perry Square (previously Central Park and the Diamond) and Gridley Park (previously Cascade Park) also continues to delight. Today's Frontier Park (L.E.A.F.) and Wayne Park near East Middle School later followed the same spacing principle.

Author's note: The trendy, nearby ski resort and brewpub town of Ellicottville, N.Y. was not named for Andrew Ellicott, but for the director of the Holland Land Company that developed much of upstate New York.

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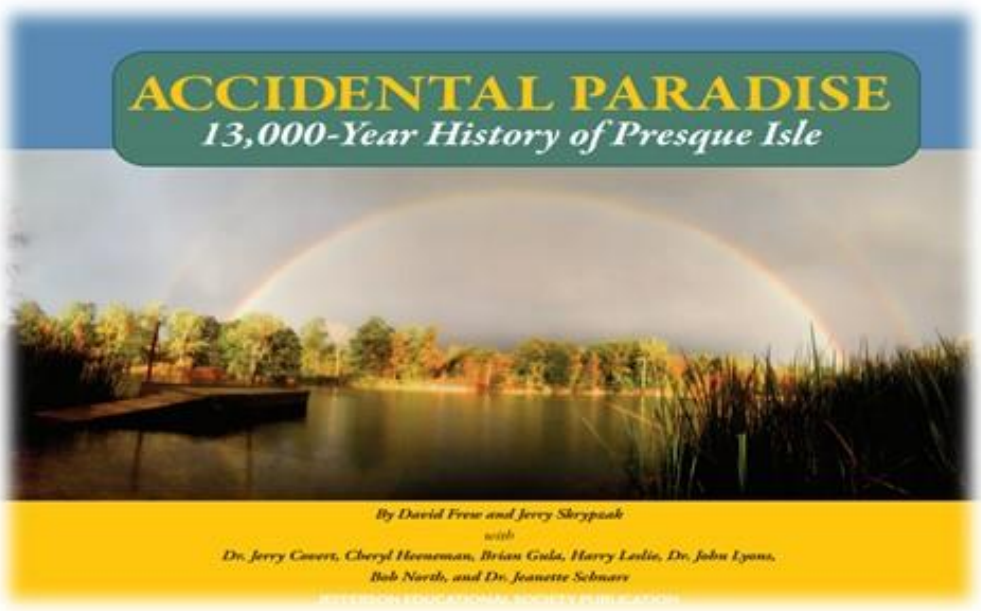
Accidental Paradise

by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – "**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**" – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center's gift shop and through a special website, **AccidentalParadise.com**.

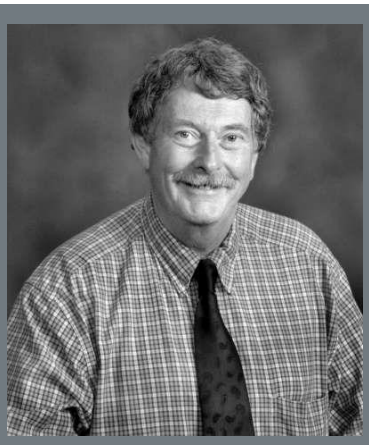
The book, priced at **$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, **AccidentalParadise.com**.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales ***daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.***

For more information, send an email to **aperino@TRECF.org**.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click **here**.

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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