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10-30-2011

## Front Park's Past and Future

Lawrence Bice

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## Front Park's Past and Future

### Abstract

Front Park is a 26-acre urban park in Buffalo, New York. The park entrance is located on Porter Avenue. The park is bounded on the west by interstate 190, on the north by the Peace Bridge truck plaza and on the north by Busti Avenue and the adjacent Columbus Park-Prospect Hill neighborhood. Front Park is part of Buffalo's Olmsted park system. The park system takes its name from its most prominent original designer, Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., a nationally renowned landscape architect who along with his partner, Calvert Vaux, designed parks and park systems across the country, including New York City's Central Park. Olmsted's work in New York City garnered the attention of prominent Buffalonians, who hired him to design a park system in 1868. Buffalo's Olmsted park system was designed over a nearly 50-year period, from 1869 to 1915.

### Keywords

Buffalo, Environment, Parks/Gardens/Green Spaces, Fact Sheet, PPG, PDF

## Front Park's Past and Future

Lawrence Bice

### What is Front Park?

Front Park is a 26-acre<sup>1</sup> urban park in Buffalo, New York. The park entrance is located on Porter Avenue. The park is bounded on the west by interstate 190, on the north by the Peace Bridge truck plaza and on the north by Busti Avenue and the adjacent Columbus Park-Prospect Hill neighborhood.

Front Park is part of Buffalo's Olmsted park system. The park system takes its name from its most prominent original designer, Frederick Law Olmsted Sr., a nationally renowned landscape architect who, along with his partner, Calvert Vaux, designed parks and park systems across the country, including New York City's Central Park.<sup>2</sup> Olmsted's work in New York City garnered the attention of prominent Buffalonians, who hired him to design a park system in 1868.<sup>3</sup> Buffalo's Olmsted park system was designed over a nearly 50-year period, from 1869 to 1915.<sup>4</sup>



[.com/2011/  
arks.html](#)

Front Park was completed in 1875. It was originally conceived as a place to enjoy views of the Niagara River and Lake Erie, as well as location for “stately ceremonies” and “civic displays.”<sup>5</sup> Although no formal athletic fields were laid out in the park, a large, grassy oval called the “Hippodrome” was suitable for large athletic activities and gatherings.<sup>6</sup> The two-story Lakeview House served as a comfort station to park users and offered enhanced views of the lake, but it was demolished by 1890.<sup>7</sup> At the peak of the park's popularity in the late 1800s, as many as 5,000 to 7,000 people a day visited Front Park.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to Front Park, Buffalo's Olmsted park system consists of the following major parks: Delaware, Martin Luther King, Jr., South, Cazenovia, and Riverside.<sup>9</sup> The six major Olmsted parks total 846 acres,

making up approximately 60% of the City of Buffalo's total park acreage.<sup>10</sup>

Olmsted also designed a series of linear parkways to connect the parks.<sup>11</sup> Lincoln, Bidwell and Chapin parkways are good examples of well preserved Olmsted parkways.<sup>12</sup> Buffalo's Olmsted Park system is one of Olmsted's earliest and most complete urban park systems.<sup>13</sup> In 1982 it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>14</sup>

### **What are the Benefits of Urban Parks?**

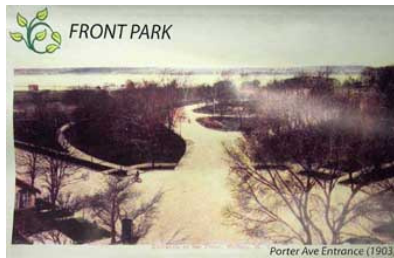
Urban parks confer many benefits to communities. For instance, they provide places for urban dwellers to recreate. This is particularly important in dense urban neighborhoods where individual dwellings lack surrounding land area for recreational facilities such as swimming pools and tennis courts, a lawn for sports and play, or outdoor cooking and dining areas.

But urban parks confer more than just recreational benefits. For instance, one study estimated that a *successful* park can add as much as 15% to the value of neighboring real estate.<sup>15</sup> While there is no scientific recipe for a successful park, most include at least some of the following characteristics:

- *Visual permeability* – the ability of people to see in and out of the park area;
- *Night time lighting* for security;
- *Physical permeability* – the ability of people to easily move back and forth between the park and adjoining neighborhood through clear and easily understood pathways; and
- *Diversity of uses* – uses that appeal to a wide variety of park users, keeping the park active and well-used throughout the day and evening.<sup>16</sup>

Urban parks also generate “green” benefits. For instance, they can reduce the costs of handling stormwater by allowing water to percolate into porous, natural surfaces.<sup>17</sup> Park vegetation also absorbs air pollution.<sup>18</sup> A 2005 study of Washington, D.C.'s park system estimated that park vegetation removed 244 tons of pollution from the air.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, urban parks also help to create “social capital” by providing public spaces in which community members can interact and exchange ideas.<sup>20</sup>



## Who manages Front Park?

The Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy (the “Conservancy”) is responsible for managing and maintaining Front Park, along with other parks and elements of Buffalo’s Olmsted Park system.<sup>21</sup> The Conservancy is a not-for-profit organization “whose mission is to promote, preserve, restore, enhance, and maintain the Frederick Law Olmsted-designed parks and parkways in the Greater Buffalo area for current and future generations.”<sup>22</sup>

In 2004 the Conservancy entered into an official agreement with the City of Buffalo to take responsibility for managing and maintaining the park system.<sup>23</sup> Prior to 2004 and its management contract with the City of Buffalo, the Conservancy operated more as an advocacy group.

In its 2008 “Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” the Conservancy articulated a broad vision for Buffalo’s Olmsted Park system that seeks to return it to its original historic condition.<sup>24</sup> The conservancy’s vision for the park system includes removing active recreational infrastructure added to the park system after 1915, such as tennis courts, ice rinks, athletic fields and swimming pools, in favor of passive uses such as walking, relaxing and picnicking.<sup>25</sup>

## How is Front Park used today?

For a variety of reasons, Front Park receives very little use today. In the 1950s, what is now I-190 was built along the western edge of Front Park, over the Erie Canal.<sup>26</sup> Today, I-190 elevated ramps and overpasses largely obstruct the views of the Niagara River and Lake Erie that inspired the original location of the park.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, combined traffic noise and fumes from I-190 and from the adjacent Peace Bridge Plaza likely render the park unattractive to many users. A number of studies have linked vehicular emissions, particularly from idling trucks at the Peace Bridge plaza,

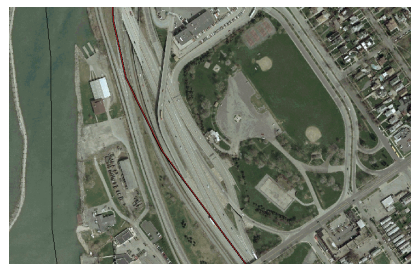


Image source:  
<http://www.classicbuffalo.com/WNYOutdoors/OlmstedParks.htm>

with serious health problems in adjacent Buffalo neighborhoods, including elevated lung and bronchial cancer rates.<sup>28</sup> One study indicated that Buffalo residents living near the Peace Bridge Plaza (and hence Front Park) were four times more likely to suffer from asthma than other Buffalo residents.<sup>29</sup>

Lastly, Front Park is difficult to find. Its original grand entrance at the corner of Porter and Busti Avenues was removed to make way for the Peace Bridge access road that cuts through the park. The current entrance to the park is nondescript and easily missed. For many people, even lifelong Buffalo residents, the park is unknown. Many simply assume it is a green space surrounding the entrance to the Peace Bridge.

A small children's play area and two tennis courts lie at the western edge of the park, but it is unclear how much use they receive, given their proximity to raging thruway and Peace Bridge traffic and idling Peace Bridge trucks. The Peace Bridge service road, with its fast and intense traffic, cuts through the park and divides it from its closest and most logical users, residents of the Columbus Park-Prospect Hill neighborhood.

### **What investments have recently been made in the park?**

The Conservancy in partnership with the City of Buffalo has undertaken a number of projects to improve Front Park. In 2006 the Conservancy spent approximately two million dollars on "interim improvements" including combining the Peace Bridge's two access roads into one, removing two tennis courts and an ice rink, resurfacing the remaining two tennis courts and . In 2006 a major repair of the Front Park's landscape, including rebuilding the former "Terrace" – a promenade and viewing area overlooking Lake Erie and the Niagara River (and now I-190), Funding for the project was supplied by the City of Buffalo and the Public Bridge Authority.<sup>30</sup>

In 2008 and 2009 55 trees were planted at a cost of \$19,250. In 2009 the Buffalo Arts Commission undertook conservation measures on the Commodore Perry statute at a cost of approximately \$30,000.

On October 4, 2011, Erie County announced a \$50,000 grant to spruce of



Image source:  
<http://buffaloah.com/h/kowskv/kowold/source/15.html>

the Olmsted Parks System in advance of the National Historic Preservation Conference, which was held in Buffalo in October 2011.<sup>31</sup>

### **What future investments are planned?**

The Conservancy is in the process of making a proposal for \$700,000 in funds to provide additional enhancements to Front Park including: enhancement of the park entrances off Porter and Busti Avenues; further improvements at the terrace and dedication of the gardens as a peace garden; repair of the stone shelter building; and the preparation of an historic structure report and design drawings for the reconstruction of Lakeview House at some point in the future.

### **What is the long term vision for Front Park?**

Developing a long term vision for the park is hindered by the uncertain future of the proposed Peace Bridge expansion project. Original plans for a much larger Peace Bridge plaza, which would have significantly increased truck traffic, were recently shelved due to a downturn in the economy and the increasing unlikelihood of federal funding for the project.<sup>32</sup> Now, the Public Bridge Authority is planning a much smaller expansion and renovation of the truck plaza, but it has not yet published its exact plans.

Nevertheless, the vision for Front Park expressed in the Conservancy's "Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," is to return the park to its original form as much as possible.<sup>33</sup> Two concepts currently under consideration by the Conservancy, however, also have an eye to new and different park uses that were not part of the original park plan. The first idea is to leverage the park's location along Niagara River Greenway Trail, by providing trail user amenities such as benches, shelters, picnic tables, and drinking fountains, as well as interpretative displays that tell the story of Olmsted, of Buffalo and the War of 1812.

The second concept under consideration by the Conservancy is to leverage the park's location adjacent to the Peace Bridge by having it serve as a gateway into the United States. The proposed Lakeview House reconstruction that is currently under consideration could be a possible venue to provide this service to visitors arriving in Buffalo via the Peace Bridge.

Lastly, several conceptual, long term ideas for mitigating the effects of I-190 have been proposed, and to some extent studied, including decking it over<sup>34</sup> and/or removing the elevated ramp that largely blocks views to the water. However, it appears unlikely that the New York State Department of Transportation would implement either of these ideas in the foreseeable future.

## **In addition to the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy, who are the other key stakeholders?**

Key stakeholders include neighboring community groups, such as the Niagara Gateway Columbus Park Association. These groups have adamantly opposed the expansion of the Peace Bridge plaza.

At the other end of the spectrum is the Public Bridge Authority (the “Authority”). The Authority is governed by a 10 member board consisting of 5 members from Ontario and 5 members from New York.<sup>35</sup> The Authority is a public benefit corporation organized under the laws of New York State and has the power to “acquire, hold, and dispose of real and personal property for its corporate purposes.”<sup>36</sup>



The City of Buffalo has apparently not taken any official position on the Peace Bridge plaza expansion. This has placed pressure on the Conservancy to do so, as many residents see as the Conservancy as the natural defender of the public’s interests. In general, the Conservancy has opposed the expansion of the Peace Bridge plaza, but since transitioning away from its former advocacy role, the Conservancy has increasingly attempted to distance itself from political issues that take it away from its mission of maintaining the parks. This has caused tension between the residents and the Conservancy when the latter has attempted to collaborate with the Peace Bridge Authority.

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<sup>1</sup> The Olmsted City. The Buffalo Olmsted Park System: Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, prepared by the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy (January 2008), page 6.

<sup>2</sup> National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form for Central Park, January 23, 1978, available at <http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NHLS/Text/66000538.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> The Olmsted City. The Buffalo Olmsted Park System: Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, prepared by the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy (January 2008), page 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 52.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 54.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 31.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 25.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 104.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*



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<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> “Measuring the Economic Value of a City Park System,” Peter Harnik and Ben Welle for the Trust for Public Land (2009), page 1.

<sup>16</sup> University of Idaho Community Design and Planning Research Page, “Park Design,” available at [http://www.class.uidaho.edu/communityresearch/park\\_design.htm](http://www.class.uidaho.edu/communityresearch/park_design.htm).

<sup>17</sup> “Measuring the Economic Value of a City Park System,” Peter Harnik and Ben Welle for the Trust for Public Land (2009), pages 11-14.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 9-10.

<sup>21</sup> Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy Website: History, available at <http://bfloparks.org/index.php/conservancy/History>

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> The Olmsted City. The Buffalo Olmsted Park System: Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, prepared by the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy (January 2008), page 1-3.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 33-34.

<sup>26</sup> The Olmsted City. The Buffalo Olmsted Park System: Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, prepared by the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy (January 2008), page 55.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> Peace Bridge Expansion Opponents Website, <http://www.movetheplaza.com/healthimpact.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Jamson S. Lwebuga-Mukasa, “Geographic Clustering of Adult Asthma Hospitalization and Residential Exposure to Pollution at a United States–Canada Border Crossing,” *Am J Public Health*. 2004 July; 94(7): 1250–1257.

<sup>30</sup> The Olmsted City. The Buffalo Olmsted Park System: Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, prepared by the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy (January 2008), page 56.

<sup>31</sup> “Erie County Supporting Olmsted with 50k,” WKBW News, October 4, 2011, available at <http://www.wkbw.com/news/business/tb1-131034503.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Lakamp, “The 10-year, \$20 million Peace Bridge lesson,” *Buffalo News*, July 2, 2011, available at <http://www.buffalonews.com/incoming/article476247.ece>.

<sup>33</sup> The Olmsted City. The Buffalo Olmsted Park System: Plan for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, prepared by the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy (January 2008), pages 52-61.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 56.

<sup>35</sup> Peace Bridge Authority Website, “Authority Information”, available at [http://www.peacebridge.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=5&Itemid=647](http://www.peacebridge.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5&Itemid=647).

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*