

UPPER BLACK ROCK HISTORIC DISTRICT

CITY OF BUFFALO

Erie County, New York



Prepared by
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Description of Physical and Historical Qualities

The Upper Black Rock Historic District in the City of Buffalo is comprised of fifteen properties and one structure. The district is bounded by, and includes the Belt Line Railroad (CSX Rail) to the west, the west side of Niagara Street between Breckenridge Street to the south and Lafayette Avenue to the north, and the east side of Niagara Street between Breckenridge to the south and Auburn Street to the north. Mason Street runs between Breckenridge Street and Auburn Avenue parallel to, and between Niagara Street and the Belt Line corridor.

The properties on the west side of Niagara Street have two “faces”. Their west elevations face the Belt Line Railroad and what was historically the New York Central Rail Road (now CSX), and the Black Rock Canal, a National Register Eligible resource that is part of the Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor. Their east elevations face Niagara Street. The properties between Breckenridge Street and Auburn Avenue also face a short alley known as Mason Street. The east and west elevations are therefore equally important in their relationship to the historic transportation corridor that defines the historic district. Breckenridge Street between Niagara Street and the Belt Line retains its historic cobbles. A rail road bridge at the foot of Auburn Street remains extant, recalling the historic relationship among road, rail and water transportation. Interstate 190 - a contemporary transportation resource - follows the path of the historic Erie Canal to the west of the historic district. Across the interstate and Black Rock Canal is Bird Island Pier, a National Register Eligible resource and important historic landscape within the viewshed of the historic district. Also within the viewshed are the bascule bridge at the foot of West Ferry Street and the National Register Eligible Peace Bridge between Canada and the United States.

The Upper Black Rock Historic District is composed of intact buildings that were once part of a dense collection of factories, commercial storefronts and residences along Niagara Street, the Belt Line and the Black Rock Canal. The two and three story brick masonry factory buildings are utilitarian, defined by bays of window that allowed light onto factory floors. The commercial storefronts, with their cast iron columns are small in scale, historically providing everyday necessities to the surrounding neighborhood. The residences range from the small heavy timber frame structure on Mason Street, a rare surviving example from ca. 1889, before the influx of the large factory block, and the larger late nineteenth century stylized residences that were found along Niagara Street. Breckenridge Street, with its cobbles and 1827 Meeting Hall place in context the early history and development of Upper Black Rock and the historic district that encapsulated that history.

The industrial buildings generally retain a high level of integrity facing the Belt Line, with fenestration and industrial sash remaining extant. The integrity of the elevations facing Niagara Street has been compromised primarily by the replacement of the original sash windows. Despite this alteration the fenestration and other historic fabric remains intact providing sufficient integrity to convey historic meaning.

Alterations to the first floors of the late nineteenth century residential properties along Niagara Street to accommodate commercial uses reflect the shift from a mix of residential and commercial to primarily commercial function from the 1920s onward. Despite the alterations the buildings retain sufficient character defining stylistic features to allow for an understanding of the change of use over time.

The Belt Line, as a functioning rail road, retains a high level of integrity. The rail road bridge at the foot of Auburn Avenue also retains a high level of integrity, recalling the relationship between road, rail and water.

1. Application of National Register Criteria for Evaluation of Significance

The Upper Black Rock Historic District meets Criterion A for its association with the transportation and late nineteenth and early twentieth century industrial history of Upper Black Rock. The district further meets Criterion A under Community Planning and Development in relation to how the area physically developed due largely to its historic relationship to road, rail, and water transportation. The survival of the Union

Meeting Hall, for example, represents the early settlement and development of Black Rock while the mix of later residential, commercial, and industrial resources and their siting continue to reflect the link to transportation trends and resources.

The Upper Black Rock Historic District embodies the relationship between industry and transportation networks on water and land that defines the history of the former Village of Black Rock, specifically Upper Black Rock. Transportation-related commerce and industry were defining factors in the history of the area. The historic district conveys the industrial history of Upper Black Rock by water, rail and truck along the Black Rock Canal, Belt Line Rail Road and Niagara Street. The industries in the district were directly related to transportation with the Sterling Engine Company, Buffalo Gasoline Motor Company and the American Body Company occupying the major factory buildings in the district. The properties in the historic district are primarily industrial/manufacturing, although a house at 19 Mason Street, constructed ca. 1889 and the Union Meeting Hall, First Presbyterian Church of Black Rock, constructed in 1827 at 44 Breckenridge Street, remain extant on the west side of Niagara Street. Other properties within the district along Niagara Street reflect the diversity of functions required in a working class neighborhood. The property at 1225 Niagara Street, constructed ca. 1877 functioned as a grocery and meat market with an apartment and boarding rooms above. A plumber and baker occupied the storefront at **1233**. Two residences dating to the late nineteenth century remain extant on the northeast corner of Auburn Avenue and Niagara Street.

The period of significance begins in 1827 with the construction the Union Meeting Hall (First Presbyterian Church of Black Rock) and ends in 1960 when the last manufacturing company historically associated with the neighborhood moved out of their Niagara Street address.

The Village of Black Rock derived its name from an irregular triangle of black limestone approximately, one hundred feet wide and three hundred feet long with a level surface that rose approximately four feet above the water level of the Niagara River. The rock was located just west of the present intersection of Niagara and Hampshire Streets. The black limestone outcropping created a small natural harbor and was a favorite fishing spot of the Indians. The natural harbor, with its relatively calm water provided a port for docking, loading and unloading vessels. The rock was also used as a slip for a ferry that traveled to Canada from as early as the Revolutionary War until its demolition in 1825 when the Erie Canal was constructed. The rock is no longer extant and is located below what is now Interstate 190.

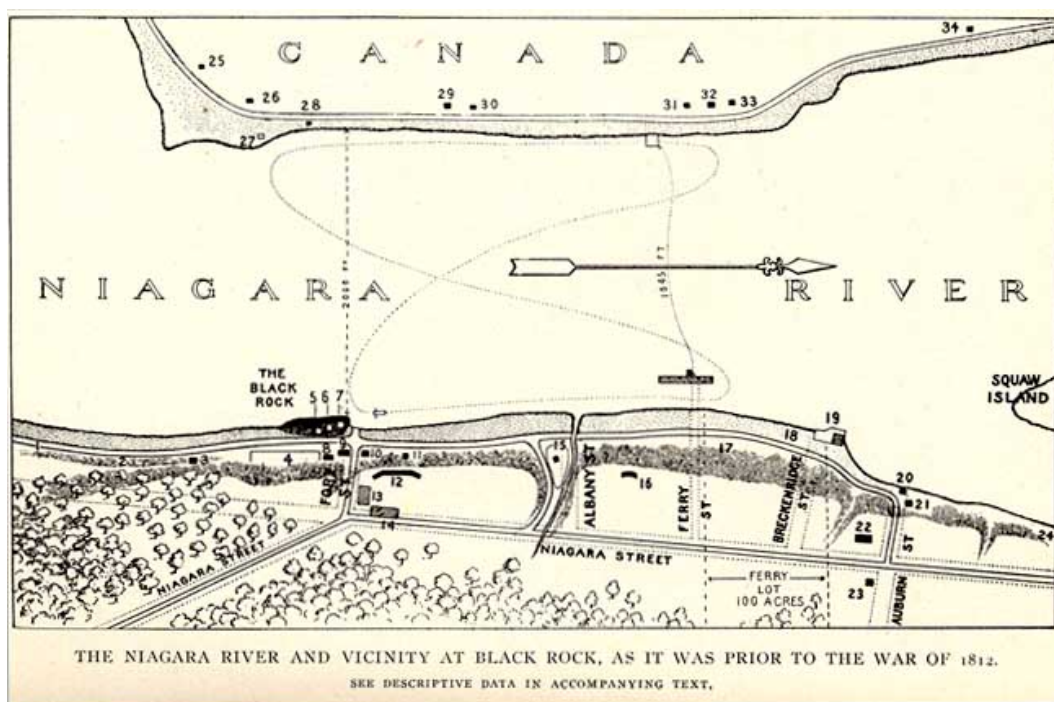


Figure 1. Map of *The Niagara River and Vicinity at Black Rock, as it was Prior to the War of 1812*. Note “The Black Rock” to the south and Breckenridge Street farther north.

The area between the Village of Buffalo and Scajaquada Creek was known locally as Upper Black Rock while the area north of Scajaquada Creek was known as Lower Black Rock. The historic district lies within the Upper Black Rock area. Upper Black Rock was mainly rural farmland in the first half of the nineteenth century. Ship building was an important industry at Scajaquada Creek and Upper Black Rock developed quickly into a trading and transportation hub for the region. The area's initial development occurred because the Black Rock Ferry was a busy transportation link between the eastern and western shores of the Niagara River.¹

Most of the improvements at that time were transportation-related: Niagara Street was declared a public highway in 1826, the Black Rock ferry was moved and improved, the Erie Canal was enlarged, and the area saw the construction of the first railroads in Buffalo.²

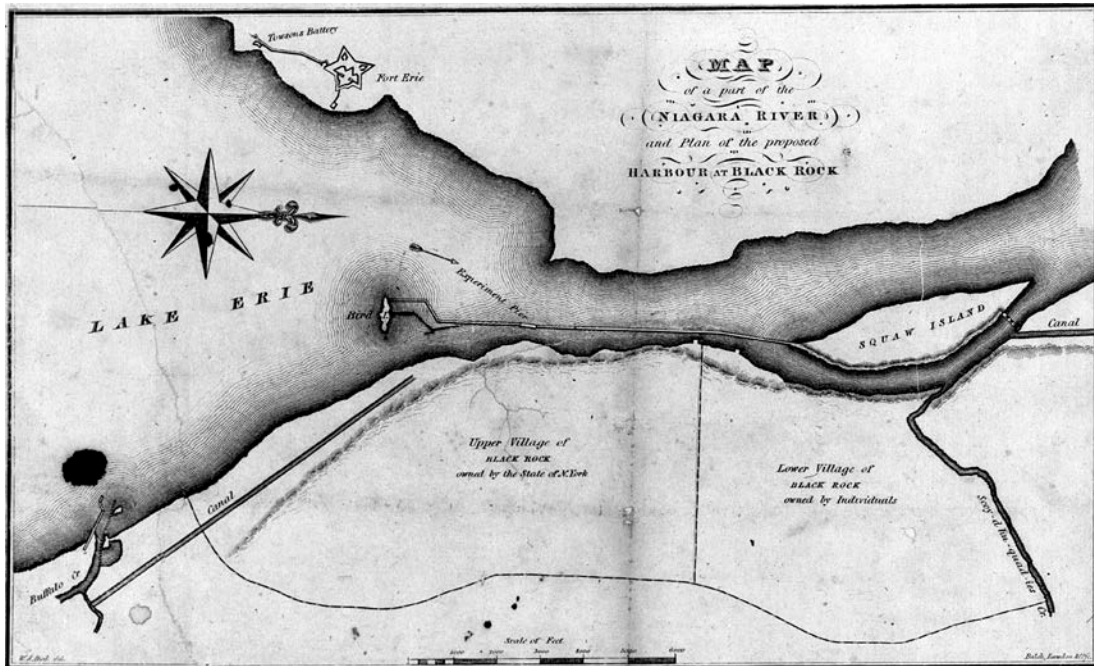


Figure 2. 1829 map showing part of the Niagara River and the “Plan of the proposed Harbour at Black Rock.” Note Upper Village of Black Rock to the south and Lower Village of Black Rock to the North.

The oldest property in the district, the **Federal Style Union Meeting House (44 Breckenridge St)**, was constructed in 1827 on land donated by Major General Peter Porter, who was the first US Congressman from Buffalo. The street that separated the Union Meeting House and Porter's home received its name in honor of the maiden name of Porter's wife, “Breckenridge.” The street retains its historic cobblestones. When constructed the area was rural and the church looked out toward the Niagara River and the Erie Canal. The Meeting House served an Episcopalian, Presbyterian and Methodist congregation before being transferred in 1831 to the Presbyterians who founded the First Presbyterian Church of Black Rock.

¹ Severance, *The Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, 251-261. Shmookler et al., *Appendix E*, 5-4.

² Bureau of Engineering. *Index to Records of Streets, Public Grounds, Waterways, Railroads, Gas Companies, Water Works, etc. of the City of Buffalo from 1814 to 1896* (Buffalo: The Wenborne Sumner Company, 1897). Hopkins, Griffith Morgan. *Atlas of the City of Buffalo, Erie Co., New York: from actual surveys & official records*, (Philadelphia: G.M. Hopkins, 1872).

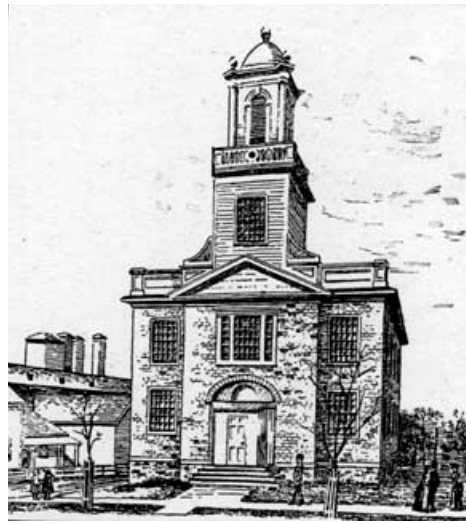


Figure 3: Sketch of the Union Meeting Hall.³

Buffalo was incorporated as a city in 1832 and grew at a phenomenal rate because of the Erie Canal terminus and the construction of major railroads through the city. The Village of Black Rock became the Town of Black Rock in the same year and developed slowly as business and commerce gravitated to the south at Buffalo and to the north at the Lower Black Rock canal lock and Scajaquada Creek area. Black Rock was absorbed into the City of Buffalo in 1853, although local reference to Upper and Lower Black Rock remained.⁴

The second half of the nineteenth century saw Buffalo continue to grow out toward its city limits. The Buffalo Street Railway Company was formed in 1860 and Niagara Street was one of the first streets in Buffalo to acquire tracks. The first cars were small and were drawn by horses. The rails were cast iron and were laid with tie rods between them to prevent the tracks from spreading apart. By the end of the 1860s, the streetcar lines were reaching the sparsely settled areas of the city. A car house, stables, and office were built near the intersection of Niagara and Albany Streets in 1862.⁵

In 1883 New York Central Railroad constructed a railroad that encircled the City of Buffalo and connected to the main railroad network. The **Belt Line**, as it was called, was a fifteen-mile loop that transported people and goods around the city, and provided connections to the larger railroad system that connected Buffalo to the rest of the country. Industry and neighborhoods developed along the loop. Black Rock saw the growth of factories and working class neighborhoods. The Belt Line was in operation for approximately thirty-years, gradually fading out of existence due to competition from trolley lines and automobiles.

Improvements and expansions of utilities like sewers, corduroy and otherwise paved streets, gas lines and the introduction of streetcar lines allowed citizens to move farther away from the city center. Residences, commercial buildings, and industry followed the construction of parks, streetcar lines, and utilities.

As noted on the 1889 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map the historic district reflected the growth of the area. **19 Mason Street**, which appears on the 1872 Hopkins Map of Buffalo, was among a number of frame residences that occupied the alley just south of Niagara Streets. The residents were working class with laborers, carpenters, motor drivers and plasterers listed among inhabitants over the years. In 1907 the block became home of the Sterling Engine Company, leaving 19 Mason Street as one of the few surviving example of domestic architecture on the street.

³ Source: Severance, *The Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*. 1912

⁴ Spear, *The Peace Bridge*, 12-21.

⁵ William Reed Gordon, *90 Years of Buffalo Railways, 1860-1950, International Railway Company*, (Buffalo, New York: Ms. on File. Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, 1990), 68-72, 99.

The 1889 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map also documents the retail properties remaining extant in the Upper Black Rock Historic District, which would have provided everyday necessities for the working class community: a grocery and meat market located in a brick commercial Italianate storefront at **1225 Niagara Street**; Prong's boot and shoe repair shop at **1226 Niagara Street**, which occupied the three story, brick commercial storefront for over thirty years; Holsa Smith's Bakery in the simple frame building with cast iron storefront and William Logan's plumbing business. The upper floors of the retail space would have served a domestic function as apartments or rooms for boarders.

Interspersed among the commercial storefronts and industry were larger residences. The Stick style residence at **1277 Niagara Street** was occupied in 1888 by Frederick Ogden, who worked at the Banner Milling Company, located at the corner of Seneca and Pearl Streets. The residence to the south was constructed in the Queen Anne style with gambrel roof. James Burgess, a real estate agent, and his family occupied the home until 1917. The history of residency in the house after the Burgess' left is consistent with the working class neighborhood with a carpenter, a machinist, a woodworker, and metalworker occupying the home over the years.

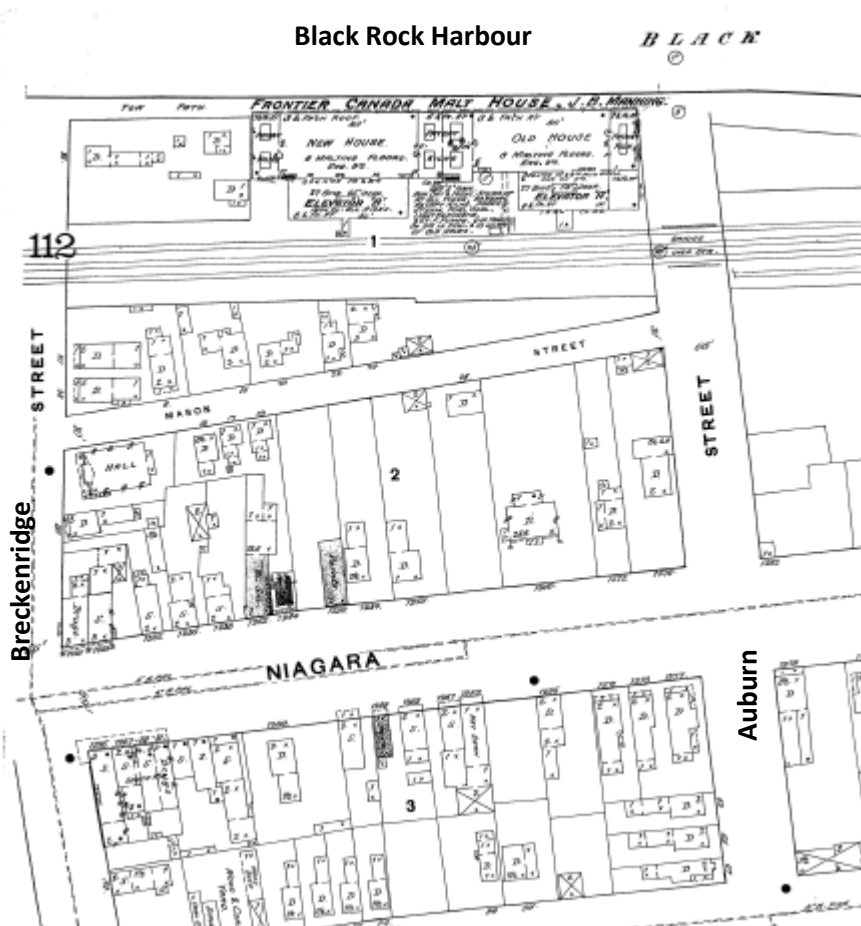


Figure 4. Part of 1889 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map vol.3, sheet 113 showing Niagara Street between Breckenridge Street and Auburn Street.

At the beginning of the 20th century the small single-family homes and smaller businesses were giving way to large industry and apartment buildings. The neighborhood character was shifting from a fairly even mix of residential, commercial, and industrial development to more industry, including heavy industry. West of Niagara Street, the industrial character was shifting from light and medium industry to more medium and heavy industry. The eastern side of Niagara Street was moving from residential and

commercial to more industry and larger buildings mixed in with single-family dwellings.⁶ The International Railway Company took possession of the local streetcar companies in 1902 and by 1908 the cars were longer and heavier and required better rails. New and stronger rails were laid and were supported by steel ties embedded in concrete.⁷ With the rise of improved public transportation, especially the automobile, it was no longer necessary for workers to live close to their place of employment; after the 1900s, places of business or industry were not always surrounded by worker cottages or apartments.

Transportation elements were undergoing change as well. Between 1905 and 1924 the federal government made improvements to Black Rock Harbor and Bird Island Pier. The work created the Black Rock Canal and Lock, a channel between Buffalo and Tonawanda for deep-draft vessels.⁸ The section of canal in Buffalo was abandoned by 1918 upon completion of the Erie Barge Canal, which terminates in Tonawanda.⁹

The **Buffalo Gasoline Motor Company building (1280 Niagara St)**, which occupies the block on the west side of Niagara Street on the block north of Auburn Avenue, was constructed in 1903, with an **addition** (20 Auburn Ave) in 1916. The company produced marine engines and combustion engines for automobiles. The company maintained their manufacturing enterprise at this address until 1946.



The large and well equipped factory where the Buffalo marine engines are built.

Figure 5: Historic Photo showing the Buffalo Gasoline Engine Company. Picture published in "Motor Boating" magazine, January 1913

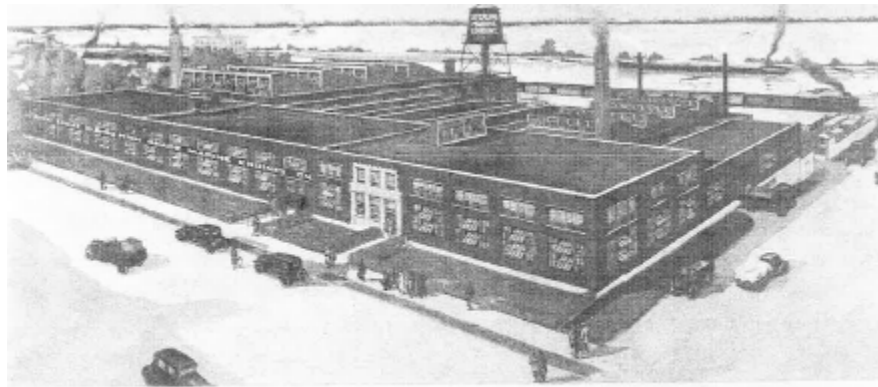
In 1907 the **Sterling Engine Company (1246-1260 Niagara St)**, constructed a factory building on the west side of Niagara Street between Breckenridge Street to the south and Auburn Avenue to the north. Neighboring properties on the block between Breckenridge Street and Auburn Avenue, and along Mason Street were residential. By 1925, Sterling Engine's address had expanded to south to include 1246 Niagara Street. More significantly, by ca.1925 Sterling Engine had usurped the entire residential area on Mason Street and had constructed a second factory building at **42 Breckenridge Street**, which ran the entire length of Mason Street adjacent to the rail way lines. As early as 1908, Sterling Engine was utilizing interchangeable parts in its marine engine construction. At that time, Sterling Engine's "only goal" was marine construction, but by 1946, the company was producing engines for ships, airplanes, cars, and trains. Sterling Engine produced engines that powered ships, such as the *83 Footer* and landing craft in World War II. In the late 1950s Sterling Engine was purchased by Phillips Petroleum Company of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, and the production facility moved to Paola, Kansas.

⁶ Sanborn Map Company, *Fire Insurance Map of Buffalo*.

⁷ Gordon, *90 Years of Buffalo Railways*, 39.

⁸ Hill. *Municipality of Buffalo, New York – A History*, 264.

⁹ Shmookler et al., *Appendix E*, 5-20, 21.



STERLING ENGINE COMPANY
1270 NIAGARA STREET BUFFALO, N. Y., U. S. A.

Figure 6: Early 20th century sketch of the Sterling engine Company. Image Courtesy of Buffalo History Museum.

The **American Body Company** produced Model L bodies and other medium-priced auto bodies in aluminum, steel and wood out of their factory at **1255 Niagara Street** beginning in 1911. By the 1920s the company was producing experimental aluminum automobile bodies. By the 1950s the company had moved out of their Niagara Street location.

Sowers Manufacturing Company constructed a factory at **1294 Niagara Street** in 1914. The company made "DOPP" equipment for heating – cooling – mixing, including seamless jacketed and single shell kettles, mixers, soap crutchers, vacuum and pressure apparatus and noted in a ca. 1930 product publication. Dopp kettles and pans were constructed out of cast iron and used in the chemical industry. The company remained at the factory located on Niagara Street until 1942 when the property was sold.

In addition to the larger companies there were some smaller industries interspersed on smaller lots in Upper Black Rock. Phelps Auto Top and Trimming was located in a simple brick masonry building constructed ca. 1910 at **1245 Niagara Street**. As was common with smaller industries, companies came and went relatively quickly. New Method Laundry occupied the space in 1915 and by 1916 Reed Chocolate Company Candy Factory had moved in. By 1922 there was a new tenant; a pattern that continued through the years.

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STERLING ENGINE CO
 FORMERLY STERLING ENGINE CO. OF NEW YORK
 1870-1880. ESTABLISHED 1870. MANUFACTURED
 BY THE STERLING ENGINE CO. OF NEW YORK
 1870-1880. ESTABLISHED 1870. MANUFACTURED
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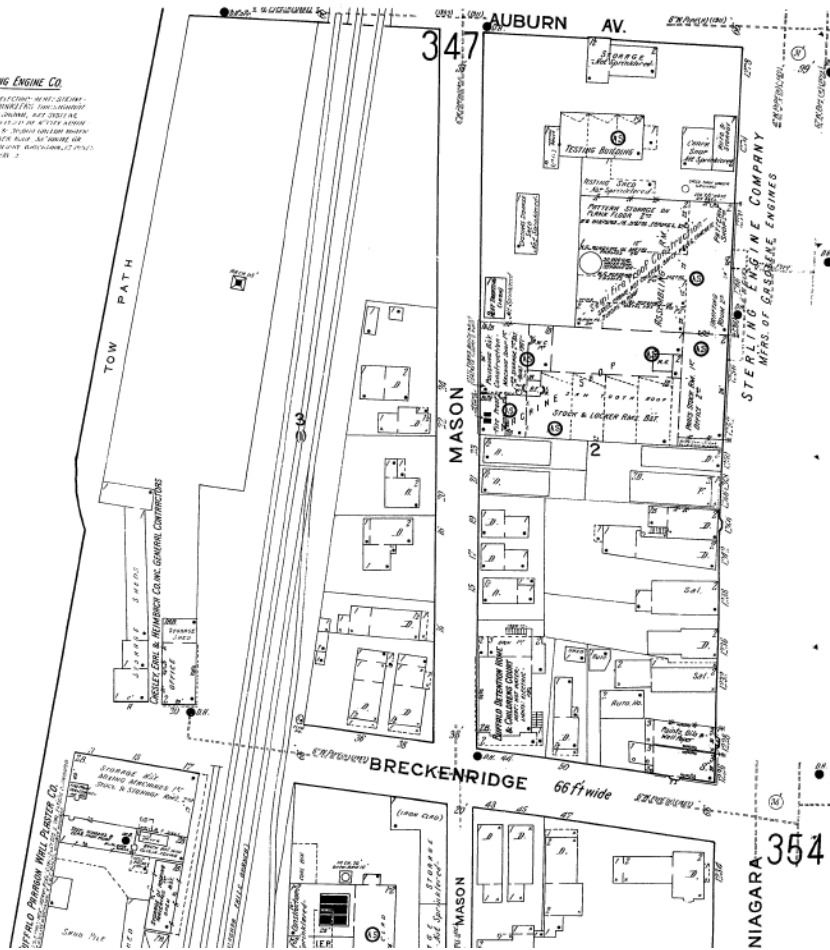


Figure 7: Part of 1916 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map Volume 4, Sheet 353 showing west side of Niagara Street between Breckenridge Street and Auburn Avenue. Sterling Engine Company is located at the northwest corner of Auburn Avenue and Niagara Street, the remainder of the block east of the railroad tracks is residential, with commercial storefronts and the Meeting Hall on Breckenridge Street.

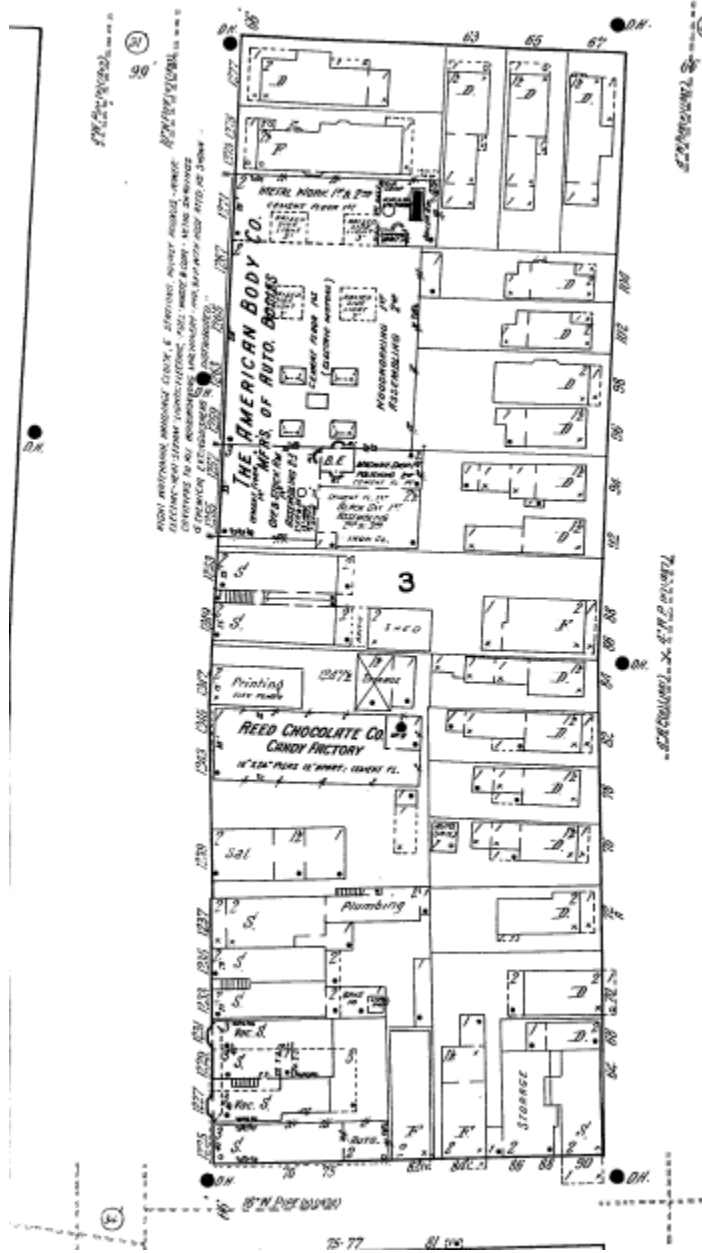


Figure 8: Part of 1916 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map Volume 4, Sheet 354 showing east side of Niagara Street between Breckenridge Street and Auburn Avenue. The American Body Company is located at the northeast corner of Niagara Street and Auburn Avenue. Note Reed Chocolate Company – Candy Factory in the middle of the block and the commercial storefronts. The residences at the north end of the block remain extant.

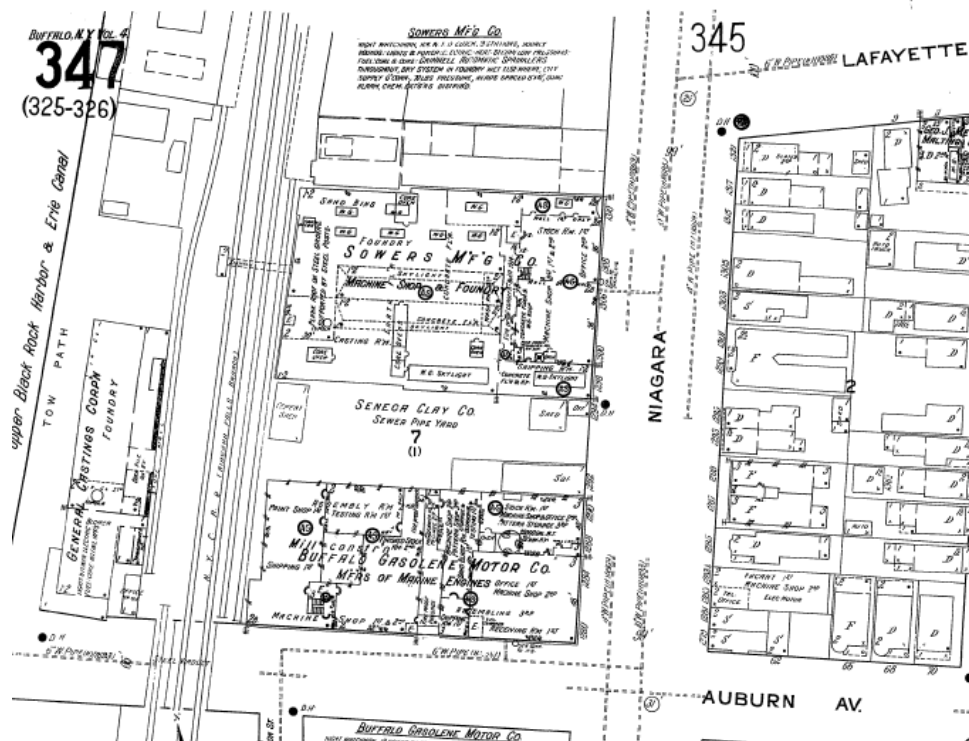


Figure 9: Part of 1916 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map Volume 4, Sheet 347 showing Niagara Street between Auburn Avenue and Lafayette Avenue. Buffalo Gasoline Motor Company is located at the southwest corner of Auburn Avenue and Niagara Street and Sowers Manufacturing is located at the northwest corner of Niagara Street and Lafayette Avenue. Buffalo Gasoline Motor Company will add an addition to the north; expand into the lot occupied by Seneca Clay Company. Note the east side of Niagara Street is primarily residences and flats with a few commercial retail spaces interspersed.

Buffalo's population peaked in the 1950s and began a steady decline as large companies started leaving the area, among them Sterling Engine, Buffalo Gasoline and Sowers Manufacturing. War industries scaled back or closed altogether. Small local companies could not compete with national corporations and the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway allowed shipping to bypass Buffalo. The construction of the interstate highway system and inexpensive Federal new-home loans sparked an exodus from the city. All of these factors accelerated the general loss in industry and population in the second half of the 20th century.¹⁰

2. Boundary Justification and Description

The boundaries of the Upper Black Rock Historic District in Buffalo, NY are identical to those of the local preservation district of the same name recommended by the Buffalo Preservation Board and approved by the Buffalo Common Council on April 28, 2015. The district is bounded by and includes the Belt Line Railroad (CSX Rail) to the west, the west side of Niagara Street between Breckenridge Street to the south and Lafayette Avenue to the north, and the east side of Niagara Street between Breckenridge to the south and Auburn Street to the north. Mason Street runs between Breckenridge Street and Auburn Avenue parallel to, and between Niagara Street and the Belt Line corridor. This portion of Niagara Street retains a relatively dense collection of intact properties that retains a strong relationship among water, rail and road, with minimal visual discontinuity resulting from vacant lots. Other areas or nodes along Niagara Street, which is approximately five miles long, may have National Register potential, such as the residential neighborhood to the south, and the commercial and residential neighborhood in Lower Black Rock.

¹⁰ Shmookler et al., *Appendix E*, 5-39.

The properties on the west side of Niagara Street have two “faces”. Their west elevations face the Belt Line Railroad and what was historically the New York Central Rail Road (now CSX), and the Black Rock Canal, while their east elevations face Niagara Street. The properties between Breckenridge Street and Auburn Avenue also face a short alley known as Mason Street. The east and west elevations are therefore equally important in their relationship to the historic transportation corridor and boundaries that define the historic district.

Breckenridge Street, with its historic cobbles west of Niagara Street forms a definable southern boundary. To the south of Breckenridge Street, Niagara Street is defined by vacant lots and parking. The district extends from Breckenridge Street to Auburn Avenue on the east side of Niagara Street to include commercial retail, small industry and residential properties, which were an important component in the working class industrial neighborhood. The district does not continue north beyond Auburn Avenue on the east side of Niagara Street due to the number of vacant lots and non-historic properties.

3. Definition of Contributing Building Types and List of Non-Contributing Resources

The Upper Black Rock Historic District has fourteen contributing (14) primary buildings and one (1) structure associated within its boundaries. There is only one (1) non-contributing building. The district is made up primarily of factory buildings constructed in the early 1900s; late nineteenth century commercial storefronts, and residences. Also included within the boundaries of the district is a portion of the Belt Line Railroad and a railroad bridge at Auburn Avenue. The buildings all retain sufficient integrity to convey historic meaning and contribute to an understanding of the relationship between industry and transportation networks on water and land that defines the history of the Village of Black Rock, specifically Upper Black Rock.

The factory buildings along Niagara Street, facing Mason Street and the Belt Line are large, two and three story brick masonry blocks defined by large window bays. The expanse of glazing along the elevations and skylights at the roof allows light into the open plan defined by a structural column grid. Loading docks, though now infilled, at the railroad, Mason Street, and Auburn Avenue allowed for the transshipment of goods. Although some of the original wood and industrial metal sash windows have been replaced the original parte remains extant, allowing for an understanding of the function of daylight in the factory type.

Cast iron columns define the commercial storefronts, with windows on the upper floors allowing light into apartments and boarding rooms. Despite being infilled with board, replacement windows or infill brick, the original parte remains defined by the cast iron columns at the storefront and fenestration on the upper floors.

Other contributing types in the district include residential buildings. In one instance the first floor has been converted to commercial use, while another has been subdivided into apartment units, while the oldest, along Mason Street retains its residential function. The Union Meeting Hall retains its open volume, with smaller rooms at the additions towards the rear. It is currently vacant. A non-historic brick masonry addition has been added to the east of the meeting house.

The sole non-contributing residential building at **1239 Niagara Street** (built 1868) has been drastically altered by a front addition that obscures the historic fabric resulting loss of historic integrity. It has been converted to commercial and apartment use.

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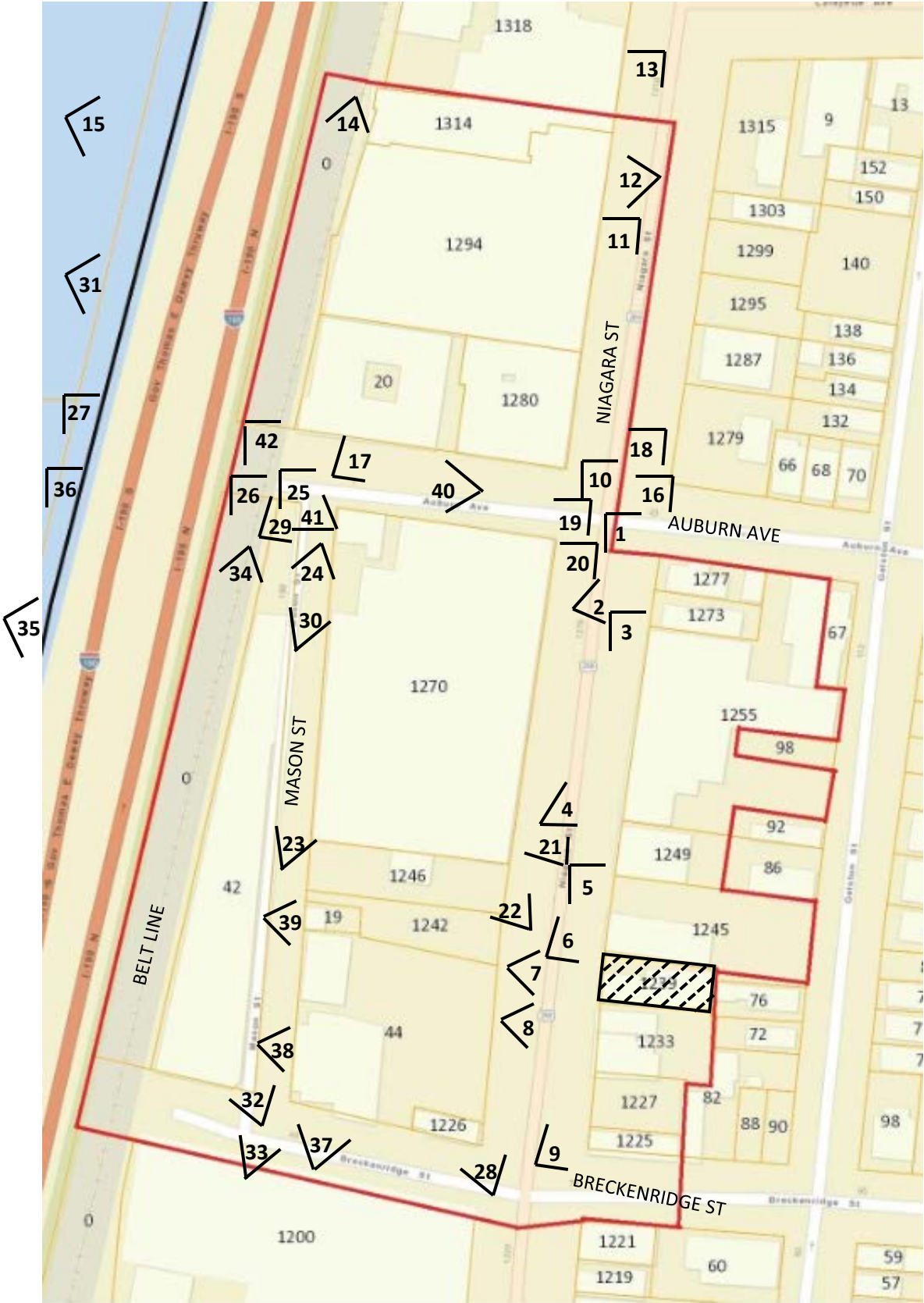
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Table 1. Upper Black Rock Historic District: Annotated Building List

STREET NUMBER AND NAME	DATE	COMMENTS
Niagara Street – East Side		
1277	Ca. 1888	Two-and-one-half-story Stick style residential building with commercial use first floor, apartments upper. Contributing.
1273	Ca. 1888	Two-and-one-half-story Queen Anne residential building with gambrel roof; apartments. Contributing
1255	1911	Former American Body Company building. Brick masonry office/manufacturing. Contributing.
1245	Ca. 1910	Small-scale manufacturing building. Two-story brick masonry commercial building. Contributing.
1239	Ca. 1868	Two-story, heavy-timber frame residence. Lower floor commercial; upper floor apartments. Now vacant. Additions to exterior may mask hidden historic fabric. Non-contributing.
1233	Ca. 1889	Historically two properties; two, two-story commercial storefronts and a 1 1-2 story front facing gable building with first floor storefront. Contributing.
1225	1877	Three-story brick Italianate commercial building. Contributing.
Niagara Street – West Side		
1294	1914	Former Sowers Manufacturing Company. Current Northwest Community Mental Health Center. Two-story brick masonry warehouse/manufacturing. Contributing.
1280	1903	Former Buffalo Gasoline Motor Company. Two- and three-story brick masonry warehouse/manufacturing. Contributing.
1246-1270	1907	Former Sterling Engine Company. Masonry commercial/factory building. Contributing.
1226	Ca. 1888	Three-story brick commercial building with storefront. Current Bait & Tackle shop. Contributing.
Auburn Avenue		
20	1916	Addition to former Buffalo Gasoline Motor Company. Brick masonry warehouse/manufacturing. Contributing.
Breckenridge Street		
42	Ca. 1925	Former Sterling Engine Company. Three-story brick masonry manufacturing building. Contributing.
44	1827	Federal Style brick masonry Union Meeting House. Current Presbyterian Church of Black Rock. Faces cobblestone street. Vacant. Contributing.

STREET NUMBER AND NAME	DATE	COMMENTS
Mason Street		
19	Ca. 1872	Two-story, heavy-timber frame, side-gable residence. Replacement siding and windows. Contributing.
BELT LINE RAILROAD/Bridge (CSX)	1883	Part of 15-mile rail loop around city. Steel panel bridge over where now infilled road passed. CSX uses track. Contributing.

Upper Black Rock Historic District, Buffalo, Erie County, NY



Non-contributing Property: 

