



ONE

The Creation of the Park System

The artistic eye of Mr. Olmsted discerned at a glance our surpassing advantages. —David Gray, “The Buffalo Park Project,” 1868

Beginning in the early 1850s, a number of public-spirited citizens attempted to bring into being a suitable public park in Buffalo. They were driven by discontent with the generally unprepossessing appearance of their community, which was transforming itself from a frontier village into a modern city forty years after having been burned to the ground by the British during the War of 1812. “Their efforts were prompted not only by the desire for a sylvan counterworld, with opportunities for walking and for repose in the midst of the noisy, congested city,” the historian David Gerber observes, “but also by an awareness that for all the wealth the city generated, it remained a rough-hewn place without beauty.” Visiting the capitals of Europe, Buffalonians had found well-maintained public parks and promenades that were essential elements of modern urban life. Weighing the environment of their hometown against what they had seen abroad, they found it woefully inadequate. Nor did it help to have foreign visitors to the city lament its uninspiring, utilitarian appearance. (Fig. 1.1)

“Of all the thousand and one towns I saw in America, I think Buffalo is the queerest looking,” the British travel writer Frances Trollope remarked in 1832, adding that the city’s buildings “have the appearance of having been run up in a hurry, though everything has an air of great pretension.” Little had changed when her son, the novelist Anthony Trollope, passed through thirty years later. He wrote that “over and beyond the [grain] elevators, there is nothing specially worthy of remark at Buffalo.”¹

Nourished by travel and spurred by criticism of the city’s lackluster public image, civic pride eventually took root. By the middle of the nineteenth century, a number of progressive-minded Buffalonians, including several newspaper editors, wished to see the city augment its meager capital of green spaces, a miscellaneous collection of grounds in front of public buildings and modest residential squares. The largest public place was the Terrace, an open area near the lakefront where public gatherings were held and the city’s Liberty Pole stood. Prospect Place (the present Prospect and Columbus Park), the land for which had been donated to the city by a former mayor in 1836, formed the nucleus of one of the city’s first and most desirable residential neighborhoods. Wadsworth Park (the present Arlington Place)

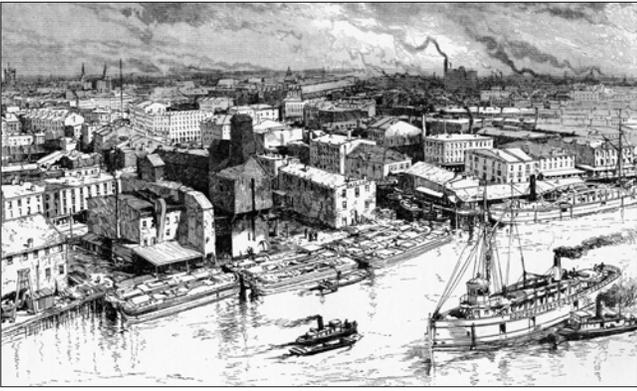


Fig. 1.1. The city of Buffalo from the waterfront. The city developed inland from Lake Erie and the Niagara River. The new parkland would be in the far distance in this view. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (July 1885).

and Days Park were smaller residential squares. These fenced squares followed the model established in 1831 by New York's Gramercy Park.

At the same time that Andrew Jackson Downing was calling for the establishment of a park in New York City and prominent citizens there were agitating to make his dream a reality, park advocates in Buffalo were seeking the same goal for their community. Located at the other end of the state and linked to New York commercially by canal and railroad, Buffalo viewed the grand metropolis as an older, more sophisticated sister to be emulated in matters of culture and urban life. (Early Buffalo directories invariably featured a section on New York City hotels and businesses.) "Now that people all over the country are getting waked up to the comfort and pleasures of parks, public grounds, suburban resorts, etc.," stated an editorial in the *Courier* in the summer of 1851, "we propose to say a word, in addition to what we have already written, touching such an improvement upon our Buffalo bareness." The paper called its readers' attention to two riverside sites that possessed considerable natural beauty. One was near Lake Erie in the vicinity of Buffalo Creek, along whose banks, according to the writer, "the Senecas, with their instinctive good taste," had lived in harmony with their surroundings for generations. The other was the long stretch of the Niagara River from Black Rock

to Grand Island. Equal in its breadth and beauty to the Tappan Zee on the Hudson, this section of the river, according to the paper, had been endowed by nature with "a wide sweep of blue water, bordered by sloping banks, clothed with rich verdure; its surface dotted with islands, sparkling in the sunshine, like emeralds set in lapis lazuli." Furthermore, the area could be reached easily by boat and would be just far enough away to make a pleasant excursion from town. Here was a site waiting to be developed that would surely equal New Rochelle, Cape May in New Jersey, and Nahant outside Boston, all new resorts popular with New York City's middle class. And while the location offered no sandy beaches, seashells, or tides, there was "shade instead of sand, green sward instead of rock, and all manner of rural delights instead of Bowery boys and target shooters." The editors hoped that a private investor would see the opportunity waiting here and unlock its recreational potential by building a suitable boating destination on the island.² (Fig. 1.2)

Likewise, serious efforts were also under way to create a modern park within the city limits. In June 1851 the Committee on Wharves and Public Grounds recommended that a seven-and-a-half-acre site, which possessed "a beautiful growth of Forest trees," be acquired for the purpose.³ The property, however, was located in the predominantly German Fourth Ward, where stiff opposition to the idea soon developed. On August 27, 1851, Dr. Frederick Dellenbaugh, acting as spokesman for over a thousand residents who had signed a petition against the creation of a park in their neighborhood, declared to the Common Council (the city's legislative body) that they refused to be taxed "for the proposed Park which they did not want, and which they considered useless."⁴ Rather, Dellenbaugh said, they wanted to see the city invest tax dollars to improve the public market system, which would more directly benefit the people by reducing the cost of food. The anti-park forces gained the support of the city attorney, and soon the park proposal went down to defeat.⁵

In 1855, two years after the city expanded its borders to its present boundaries, park advocates tried again to

promote the cause of green space. In February of that year the Common Council received a “petition of sundry citizens” requesting that the city purchase a significant amount of land for parks in three separate parts of town. Once again the forces of progress were met with opposition from fellow citizens who feared the burden of higher taxes. Furthermore, the city attorney stated that the council had no power to buy land for parks and that bonds issued for that purpose would be declared void. Therefore, the council resolved to take no steps to purchase lands for parks unless the state legislature authorized it.

Money was less of an issue when, a few months later, two public-spirited citizens, the attorney Edward Bennett and the inventor Rollins Germain, offered the city land on the East Side for a public park. Despite

some opposition to the stipulation that the city pay to erect a substantial iron fence around the property, the offer was accepted. Nonetheless, “Bennett Park” existed for only a short time, for the following year the council began discussions that eventually converted the land into a site for a new city market. “We have strength and spirits for work, but none for the serene enjoyment of quiet and homely pleasures,” lamented an editorial in a local newspaper around this time. The editorial, however, also praised the same German community that had strenuously worked to kill the park for its ability to put aside labor and enjoy itself. While the Germans, said the writer, “were the most thrifty and prosperous of our population,” nearly the entire community found time for “innocent pastimes, having for its only objects recreation and pleasure.”⁶

Indeed, some park promoters pointed to the popularity of recreation among the German community as a reason to support the creation of places of amusement for the general citizenry. In 1856 “Civis” addressed a long letter to the *Commercial Advertiser* “concerning the deficiency of Buffalo in respect to public grounds” and informed native-born fellow citizens how they might gain access to a popular German private picnic grove known as Westphal’s Garden. The writer admitted that he had only recently discovered this pleasant eight-acre site at the intersection of Delaware Street and Gulf Street (now Delavan Avenue). He gave the newspaper’s readers a glowing description of this now long-vanished “forest of native trees,” where the visitor “finds avenues and walks laid out among the hills and dells, all of them beautiful and many of them entirely impervious to the sun.”⁷ Seconding the writer’s praise of this quaint place, which surely resembled many such places in American cities, another paper, the *Republic*, elaborated on the description of the grounds that Johann Westphal, a horticulturist, had created:

This Garden, although comparatively unknown to many of our citizens, is the loveliest spot within twenty miles around us. It contains many

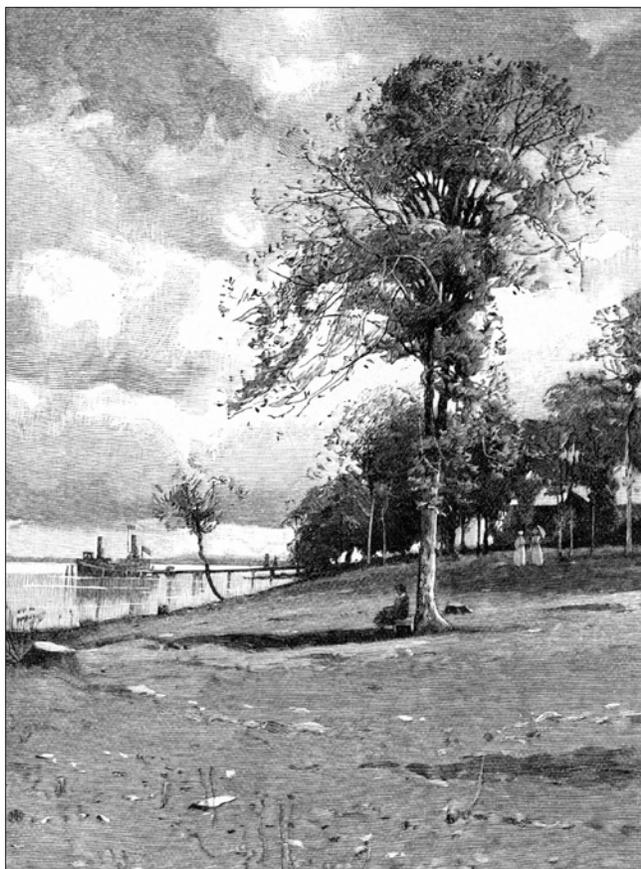


Fig. 1.2. Grand Island, between Buffalo and Niagara Falls on the Niagara River, was one of the locations that early park advocates proposed for a public park. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (July 1885).

acres of ground and is profuse in vegetation, in flowers, trees and shade. The whole place is laid out in the most delightful rural walks, and groves, and arbors, and nooks. Winding pathways lead into shady dells and cool springs. The ground is undulating, and affords a delightful variety of locality. The walks are all graveled, the trees trimmed, and the borders as neat as a flower garden. A fine country villa occupies the center of these grounds, almost embowered in luxuriant foliage. . . . A finely-arranged hot-house of plants and flowers, the property of Mr. Westphal, is not the least among the attractions of this beautiful vicinity.⁸

Echoing a suggestion that Downing had made in 1849 for a way to fund a park, the garden's owner proposed that subscriptions be issued that would allow the purchasers to visit the grounds year round. All those families who signed up, affirmed the *Republic*, "can be in the city with all the delights of the country."⁹ The *Commercial Advertiser*, however, took the opportunity to remind its readers of the larger need for a truly public park. Rather than have Westphal's Garden enjoyed only by those who were able to pay for the privilege, the paper's editors would "be glad to see any plan adopted by which so beautiful and capacious a park might be secured for the recreation of all inhabitants." They recommended that city authorities purchase Westphal's Garden and convert it to public use.¹⁰ The call went unheeded. Nor would Olmsted be impressed with Westphal's Garden; its crisscrossing paths, showy flowerbeds, refreshment stands, and large greenhouse all crammed into a mere eight acres must have seemed antithetical to the spacious and tranquil natural landscape he thought suitable for an urban country park.

Midcentury attempts to add parkland to the city map were consistently thwarted by an alliance between representatives of the German ethnic population and American-born conservatives who wished to limit municipal spending to what they considered strictly

essential public works. The struggle, however, David Gerber writes, "was the most intense civic confrontation of the period." Embittered by the city's failure to act, a local citizen complained to the press that "unfortunately, when land was cheap, and suitable locations for parks and public grounds of all kinds could have been had for a song, those whose business it was to look to such matters entirely neglected it."¹¹

FOREST LAWN CEMETERY

While public park advocates were fighting a losing battle to emulate New York's Central Park, private efforts to create a large naturalistic landscape in Buffalo moved forward. Forest Lawn Cemetery was Buffalo's first extensive designed landscape. The new burial ground was the brainchild of Charles E. Clarke, a wealthy lawyer who at midcentury believed that city residents were ready for a more appropriate resting place for their deceased loved ones than was provided by the miscellany of small, unprepossessing graveyards scattered about the town. Clarke took inspiration from such well-known products of the rural cemetery movement as Hillhouse Cemetery in New Haven, Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, Laurel Hill Cemetery near Philadelphia, and Mount Auburn Cemetery in Boston. "The true secret of [their] attraction lies in the natural beauty of the sites, and in the tasteful and harmonious embellishment of these sites by art," affirmed Downing, whose writings Clarke surely knew. Downing also observed that these rural cemeteries "were rich portions of forest land, broken by hill and dale, and varied by copses and glades."¹² In 1849 Clarke purchased from the Granger family—who were among the area's first settlers—eighty acres of gently furrowed farmland situated three miles inland from Niagara Square, a site that embodied Downing's words.¹³ Taking this "beautifully variegated" woodland in hand, Clarke, a self-taught gardener, undertook to lay out carriage drives himself, mark off plots, and generally improve the property for purposes of sepulture. "Even now in its infancy, it is the

most attractive spot for a drive, a walk, or a lounge, to be found in the environs of the city, and, as such, has become a general resort,” a local newspaper reported the year after the cemetery opened.¹⁴

Despite Clarke’s high hopes, his picturesque enterprise floundered financially. Five years after the cemetery formally opened in August 1850, it was reorganized as the Forest Lawn Association, with Clarke as president. Prominent clergy gave their blessing to the venture, including John C. Lord, who the following year would come to the nation’s notice for his sermon on the “higher law” and the Fugitive Slave Act. But distance from town seems to have discouraged burials. In 1865, with the city now rapidly advancing, the cemetery was restructured as a nonprofit corporation under the name of the Buffalo City Cemetery Association, although locals continued to refer to it as Forest Lawn. The new trustees, who included Joseph Warren, added to the original Forest Lawn boundaries land from surrounding farmsteads to raise the total holdings to 234 acres. The expanded cemetery was dedicated on September 28, 1866. (Fig. 1.3)

To assist in the task of enlarging the cemetery and placing its management on a modern footing, the trustees hired Adolph Strauch (1822–1883). Strauch was born in Germany, where he studied landscape gardening and was briefly associated with the renowned horticulturist and gardener Prince Hermann von Pückler-Muskau. Emigrating to the United States in 1851, Strauch settled in Cincinnati, a city about twice the size of Buffalo at the time. Together with Olmsted and Vaux, Strauch is revered as a pioneer of the profession of landscape architecture in America; Olmsted especially held him in high regard. In 1854 Strauch took over the management of Cincinnati’s Spring Grove Cemetery, a fledgling rural cemetery that had fallen on hard times. With Germanic efficiency and determination, Strauch wasted no time in revising both the administration and the design of Spring Grove. His efforts attracted national attention. Olmsted thought Spring Grove “the best example in the world, probably, of landscape gardening applied to a burial place.”¹⁵

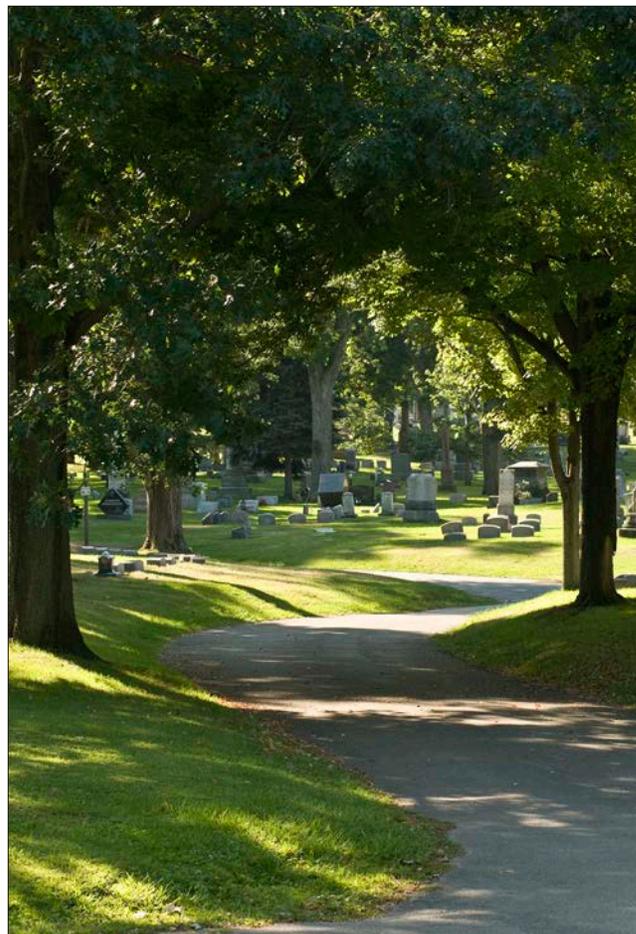


Fig. 1.3. Forest Lawn Cemetery. Photograph by Andy Olenick.

One of Forest Lawn’s trustees who was especially familiar with the Cincinnati cemetery was Lewis F. Allen (1800–1890), a correspondent of Downing and a man well known for his writings on farming, horticulture, and rural architecture. At the dedication in September 1866, Allen extolled the virtues of Spring Grove as the “one taking precedence as a model.” What the citizens of Cincinnati enjoyed now lay within the grasp of Protestant Buffalonians, for Strauch had visited Forest Lawn and furnished the trustees with a plan for the new portions of the property. For Allen, the stage was set for the creation of an uplifting mortuary environment equal to that of Spring Grove. Allen foresaw that this new landscape, fashioned in partnership with

nature, would “become the admiration of all who love to look on natural beauty or artistic effort.”¹⁶

For Forest Lawn, Strauch prepared a naturalistic plan that Olmsted and Vaux would have found to their liking. (Fig. 1.4) As they would do in their park next door, Strauch capitalized on the potential of Scajagada Creek, a “striking feature which distinguishes Forest Lawn from almost every other cemetery.” (Fig. 1.5) The stream’s “naturally stone-walled banks; steep, wooded sides; graceful curves; rocky bottom, and varied cascades, alternated with smoothly flowing waters—all

variously shaded, with lofty trees, render it an object of peculiar interest and beauty,” Allen remarked. Strauch further proposed to create an artificial lake of about two acres by damming the creek where it crossed Delaware Street. This now vanished body of water, which Olmsted would have seen, came to be known as Swan Lake. Along the crest of the high wooded western bank of the stream, Strauch proposed to lay out the Ramble (a name he surely borrowed from Olmsted and Vaux’s Central Park), a “natural wilderness” where original forest trees and native shrubbery would be preserved.¹⁷

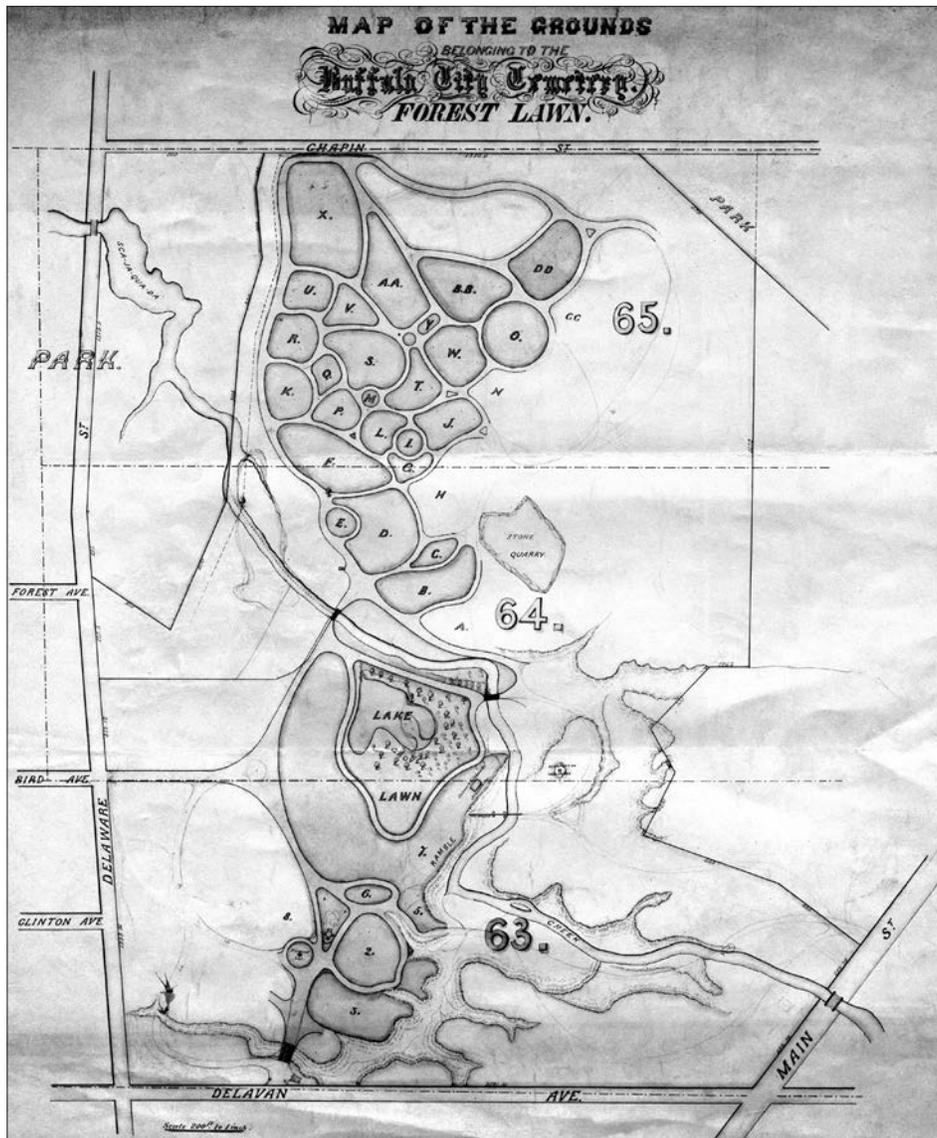


Fig. 1.4. This plan of Forest Lawn Cemetery c. 1870 shows the additions and revisions by Adolph Strauch. Olmsted probably stood in the area of section “X” when he viewed the future site of the Park. Courtesy Forest Lawn Cemetery.

Fig. 1.5. Adolph Strauch developed the Scajaquada Creek as one of the most attractive features in Forest Lawn Cemetery. Courtesy Forest Lawn Cemetery.



Even before Olmsted came to Buffalo, Forest Lawn had earned the love of the general public as a place for outdoor recreation. “The beautiful and secluded cemetery grounds,” noted an observer in 1856, had regularly been so thronged with day-trippers that “the Trustees have been compelled, in defense of private rights, to admit visitors by tickets, in order to prevent the resting place of the dead from becoming a public pleasure ground.”¹⁸ Awareness of Forest Lawn’s attractions could only have helped alert Olmsted to the possibilities presented by the adjacent land as a location for a large park. And for some local park promoters, the land next to the cemetery was already their top choice for a park site.

THE POST-CIVIL WAR PARK MOVEMENT

The national financial collapse brought on in 1857 by runaway inflation, rampant speculation in land and

railroads, and fear that the federal government would default on its credit obligations had a deep and lasting effect on the local economy and stanching all further talk of park construction for several years. The downturn caused severe cutbacks among local businesses and curtailed the progress of Buffalo’s nascent industries. The outbreak of war in 1861, however, proved to be a forceful stimulus. Buffalo experienced the rejuvenating effects of an expanding economy, which lasted until depression returned in 1873. Indeed, by reason of its strategic position well away from the theater of war on the major east–west transportation corridor, Buffalo grew and prospered during the conflict. By 1865 numerous railroads had reinforced the bonds of commerce that linked Buffalo to other regions of the country. In fact, railways had eclipsed the Erie Canal as the main route between the Great Lakes and the eastern seaboard. Year-round service also brought about a dramatic change in the work habits of people living in the city. When the canal was king, laborers and merchants

alike had experienced a hectic concentration of activity during the warm-weather months, when the canal was in operation. Men toiled long hours every day to meet the demand for their services, and home life suffered. With economic activity spread more evenly throughout the year, the population could generally enjoy regular hours of work and leisure.

By the time the Civil War ended, Buffalo was rich. One of the nation's foremost cities, it was eager to take up the task of remaking itself in order to match its newfound status. "Progress is written on every street corner," the public-spirited city comptroller William F. Rogers proclaimed.¹⁹ It was indeed a time of optimism, a period of city building whose effects would last into the mid-twentieth century. The city of expectations has long since receded into history. But when the International Industrial Exhibition opened in Buffalo in October 1869, the future looked bright indeed. The "success of the enterprise is beyond all question," the *New York Times* reported. "The city, its geographical position and facilities for railway and water communication, are acknowledged to be superior to all other points."²⁰

Seizing the rising spirit, Buffalo's leaders implemented many progressive improvements: streets were paved before those in most other cities; the capacity of the waterworks was greatly increased; miles of new sewers were laid; a railroad bridge across the Niagara River was constructed to facilitate trade with Canada (it opened to traffic in 1873); a new city hall was erected, along with other public buildings, markets, schools, firehouses, and police stations; and a normal school was established. Nor were the finer things of life neglected. Already in 1862 the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy (ancestor to the present Albright-Knox Art Gallery) had been founded, a sure sign, stated William Dorsheimer, one of its trustees, that "a widespread interest in art—an interest in it, not merely as an ornament to life, but as a serious matter, worthy of the attention of serious men," had taken root in the young and active city.²¹ The Buffalo Historical Society, with Millard Fillmore as its first president, was formed in the same year, and

the Grosvenor Library, which eventually amassed one of the finest collections in the country, opened in 1871. "The resources of the city are equal to a much larger expenditure," declared the forward-looking Comptroller Rogers in 1867, "and by the proper manifestation of an enlarged spirit of public enterprise can be increased to an almost indefinite extent."²²

In January 1867 Rogers urged the city council to establish a large municipal park, stating that "public attention has been directed for several years past to the propriety of securing a tract of land, within the present limits of the city, for a Public Park, and I take the liberty of inviting your attention to this subject, while the city has the opportunity of securing what will, eventually, be considered a great public necessity." The comptroller's advice that day may not have stirred council members, but he did inspire prominent private citizens to take up the cause with him. His address might be taken as the prelude to the process that would lead two years later, during Rogers's mayoralty, to the adoption of the historic park and parkway system that Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux designed for Buffalo.

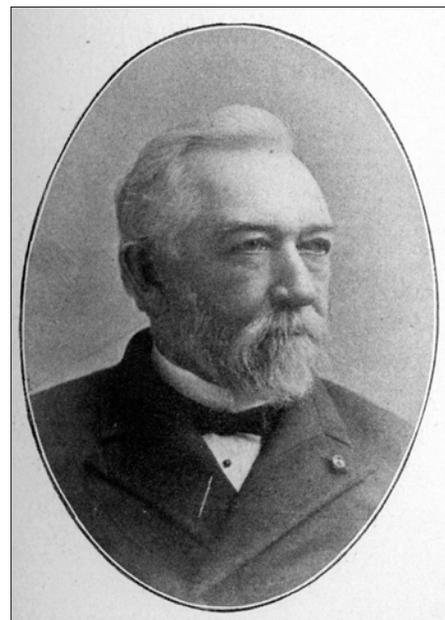


Fig. 1.6. William F. Rogers (1820–1899). From Dwight H. Bruce, ed., *The Empire State in Three Centuries* (1898).

Newspaperman, military hero, politician, and unceasing promoter of the fortunes of his adopted city, William F. Rogers (1820–1899) had moved to Buffalo in 1846 from Philadelphia, where he had been associated with the *Enquirer*, to take over the management of the *Republic*, a local organ of the Barnburner wing of the Democratic Party. (Fig. 1.6) During the 1850s he became one of the city’s leading citizens. When war broke out, Rogers, despite his Quaker background, eagerly took charge of a local regiment of the state militia. “Rogers’s Rangers” saw action at Second Bull Run, South Mountain, and Antietam. Back in Buffalo after the conflict, Rogers—now known as Colonel—entered public life, first as auditor, then as comptroller, and finally, in 1868, as mayor. In this post Rogers vigorously pursued civic improvements. The ability to pay for these things, he believed, was well within the means of his fellow citizens. The “resources of the city are equal to a much larger expenditure, and by the proper manifestation of an enlarged spirit of public enterprise can be increased to an almost indefinite extent,” he proclaimed.

In 1867 a group of citizens petitioned the Common Council to set aside a site on the waterfront for a park. This land, which commanded views over the lake and river, was adjacent to Fort Porter, the federal installation that since the early nineteenth century had guarded the entrance to the Niagara River from Lake Erie. In fact it enjoyed the informal status of parkland. The setting and past use seemed to make it a natural choice. Rogers, however, favored another location. In his January 1867 address as comptroller, he proposed the large undeveloped territory in North Buffalo between Main Street on the east and Niagara Street on the west, “beyond Forest Lawn,” for a new city park. This area was traversed by two creeks (one of which was Scajaquada Creek, which flowed through the cemetery) that could be dammed to create artificial lakes.²³ Rogers predicted that this farmland could be easily improved to make it as attractive “as the far-famed Central Park of New York City.” Also citing the example of Central Park, he affirmed that the increase in the value of residential property surrounding

the new park would more than pay for the city’s initial investment in its construction. Future generations, he declared, would always remember “those whose farsighted policy had snatched the most desirable location from the encroachments of brick and mortar.”

SENDING FOR OLMSTED

Chief among those who shared Rogers’s desire for a municipal park was the lawyer, politician, and man of culture William Dorsheimer. He became the postwar park movement’s primary spokesman and most energetic advocate. In the winter of 1868 Dorsheimer suggested to a group of park promoters (possibly including Rogers) that if they were truly serious about creating a park in Buffalo, they should seek the advice of Frederick Law Olmsted.²⁴ (Fig. 1.7) Dorsheimer did not know Olmsted personally, but he was familiar with Central Park and could vouch for the reputation of its co-designer. Olmsted possessed “the widest experience in such matters [of] any man in the country,” Dorsheimer assured his colleagues. “Send for him!” chorused his eager associates, and they

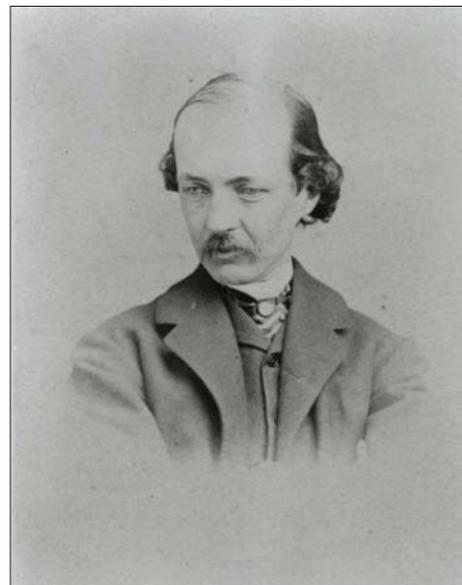


Fig. 1.7. Frederick Law Olmsted, c. 1868. Courtesy National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

backed up their command with a pledge of \$750 (a handsome sum in those days) to foot the bill for his trip. On August 12, 1868, Dorsheimer wrote to Olmsted inviting him to Buffalo. Olmsted, who had been in the city briefly in 1863 on United States Sanitary Commission business, agreed to stop a few days later on his way to Chicago, where he was to discuss with the Riverside Improvement Company a plan to create a residential suburb on prairie land some twenty miles west of that city.²⁵

On Sunday, August 16, Olmsted and John Bogart, the engineer assisting Olmsted and Vaux on the work at Prospect Park, arrived in Buffalo. Dorsheimer guided them around, showing Olmsted sites that had already been proposed for parkland. From the station, Dorsheimer drove his carriage to the center of town, Niagara Square. (Fig. 1.8) Here he no doubt pointed out the spot on the north side of the square where former president Millard Fillmore, the “Sage of Buffalo,” resided in a picturesque Gothic Revival mansion. The dwellings of other prominent citizens also overlooked the tranquil open space, which must have reminded Olmsted of town commons in his native Connecticut, for Niagara Square had yet to feel the pressure of urbanization. This would have been an opportunity, too, for Dorsheimer to point out Delaware Street, which proceeded north from the square and was beginning to assume the status of Buffalo’s grand residential avenue.

From the square, Dorsheimer took Olmsted along Niagara Street, another important residential thoroughfare, to the place where Fort Porter overlooked the Niagara River and the lake. (Fig. 1.9) Long before the military claimed the site, generations of Seneca hunters had visited the breezy crest to fashion arrowheads from the abundance of good flint to be

found there. The open land next to the fort had been spoken of for a park. It was also used by Buffalo’s baseball players, who had adopted it as a playing field when the game became popular locally in the 1850s. Although Olmsted was of the opinion that creating a sizable park at this location would prove to be prohibitively expensive, he also saw more here than late-summer drought-parched grounds where the Rochester Alerts might slug it out with the Buffalo Erics. He strongly advised his guide that “the beautiful view of the lake and river from that point were extremely desirable to secure.”

Turning away from the waterfront, Dorsheimer



Fig. 1.8. This woodcut by J. R. Chapin shows Niagara Square as it would have appeared to Olmsted in 1868. Millard Fillmore’s Gothic Revival residence is shown at the upper center, where Delaware Street leaves the northern border of the square. The horse cars ran along Niagara Street. *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (September 20, 1873).

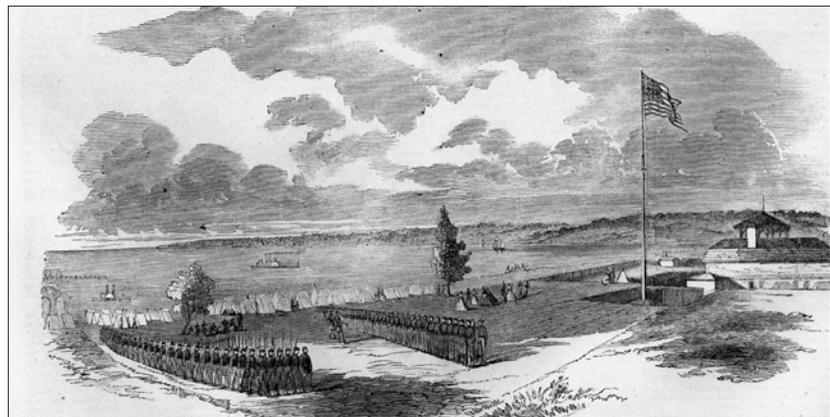


Fig. 1.9. Fort Porter. The beginning of the Niagara River and the Canadian shore are in the distance at the right. *Harper’s Weekly* (September 28, 1861).



Fig. 1.10. “Here is your park, almost ready made.” Photograph by Andy Olenick.

and Olmsted next proceeded inland over York Street and Rogers Street (now Richmond Avenue) and then out Delaware Street to Scajaquada Creek, some two and a half miles north of the center city. Here Olmsted would have seen for the first time the grounds of Forest Lawn Cemetery. The two men would also have inspected the area south of the cemetery, where lay the wooded grounds of Westphal’s Garden, the private picnic grove that had been proposed as the site of a public park before the war. Dorsheimer then drove west along Clinton Street (now Potomac Avenue) to inspect land west of the cemetery, in the area that Rogers had recommended for a large park. Unimpressed with what he saw, Olmsted expressed to his host the desire to return to Scajaquada Creek so they might explore the terrain

north of the cemetery, gently ignoring Dorsheimer’s assertion that there was nothing there to see. As they were going out Chapin Street (a street that no longer exists but once skirted the northern border of the cemetery), Olmsted asked Dorsheimer to stop “on an elevation about one third of the way to Main street.” After a moment’s reflection, Olmsted declared to his companion, “Here is your park, almost ready made.” In his mind’s eye he saw in the sunny, tree-studded meadows bordered by deep woods, a fine and extensive park landscape. (Fig. 1.10) The citizens of Buffalo, he said, “could consider themselves fortunate in having so good a ground, so near the city.” “A very trifling expense would impart to it a park-like character,” he believed.

From this historic vantage point, Olmsted and Dor-

sheimer traveled to the junction of Ferry and Jefferson streets, an elevated location on the east side of town that overlooked the city. This spot was also near the German community, a fact that Dorsheimer might have hoped would gain support for the park movement from that quarter. Olmsted told Dorsheimer, however, that he “did not consider this as good a ground for a large park as that about Chapin street.” Nonetheless, the idea occurred to Olmsted that a small pleasure ground could be located here and be “connected with the main park by a boulevard.”

During this whirlwind visit, it seems apparent that Olmsted formed in his mind the outlines of a three-part scheme that included one large and two smaller, widely separated parks that would be joined by broad tree-lined roadways. The origin of the Buffalo park and parkway system can surely be traced to that Sunday drive in early August 1868.²⁶

Olmsted also found Joseph Ellicott’s city much to his liking. He admired the way the system of broad radial thoroughfares was synchronized with a grid of smaller streets and how the entire plan conformed to the natural conditions. He also warmly approved of the prevalence of freestanding dwellings set back ten feet from the street line and “surrounded by a clear space of private grounds, more or less tastefully embellished.” Compared to New York, Buffalo possessed an agreeable suburban character, with only one-tenth the population density of the old-fashioned tenement districts of New York. Overall, Olmsted thought, “no equal number of people was to be found in any American town so healthfully housed, and having the use of so convenient arrangements of intercommunication.”²⁷ He looked forward to augmenting Ellicott’s excellent plan in accordance with ideas of his own.

OLMSTED’S RETURN VISIT TO BUFFALO

After his initial visit, Olmsted had ample time to mull over what he had seen while on the train from Buffalo

to Chicago, a city that, like Buffalo, was experiencing rapid growth. It was also a place that Buffalonians admired for its go-getter spirit, while at the same time they looked to New York to set an example in the arts and culture. In Chicago, Olmsted would continue talks that he and Vaux had begun concerning plans for establishing the suburban residential community of Riverside. Investors had recently acquired 1,600 acres of prairie land along the Des Plaines River and wished to transform it into a landscape of curving roadways, ample lots, and communal green space. Yet the trip would be unpleasant for Olmsted. By the time his train had traversed southern Ontario’s “dreary forest country, nearly all perfectly flat,” and arrived at Detroit, where he connected to a Chicago-bound train, summer had turned to winter.²⁸ Olmsted blamed the drafty Canadian carriage, which he compared to an icebox, for a severe cold that deprived him of his voice. Chilly temperatures and a blustery wind in Chicago only made things worse, and after spending a day on the open prairie inspecting the Riverside site he was forced to remain an entire day in bed. The delay left his last day so crammed with meetings that he and Bogart barely made their train late on Saturday evening, August 22.

They had promised Dorsheimer that on their way back east they would spend two days in Buffalo to make a more thorough investigation of the land for the proposed park than their cursory visit the week before had allowed. Having slept poorly on the train, Olmsted arrived late and tired on Sunday. To his dismay, he soon learned that his stay in Buffalo would involve more than the working mission and brief testimony before a citizens’ committee which he had planned for. Park promoters informed him that on Tuesday evening he was to be the featured speaker at a public meeting chaired by ex-president Fillmore. (Fig. 1.11) The audience expected “to hear an address on the matter of a public park from the distinguished architect of the New York Central Park, Frederick Olmsted, Esq.”²⁹ Still suffering from a bad cold and with little time to formulate his ideas, Olmsted felt unwilling and unready to make

a public presentation on his embryonic park plan. As he must have recognized, however, he had little choice but to comply with his hosts' wishes if he hoped to advance the likelihood of the project.

The next day, Monday, August 24, he and Bogart rode around the city surveying possible park sites. With the help of a locally furnished assistant, they dug a number of pits to test the soil conditions. Things went much more slowly, though, than Olmsted had thought they would. He and Bogart were able to finish only half their work before darkness overtook them and they had to go off to dinner with a small group of "editors and lawyers," presumably to discuss plans for the next evening's meeting.³⁰ During the day on Tuesday, the two visitors continued their assessment, making an entire circuit of the city on horseback. From these investigations Olmsted became fully acquainted with the terrain in the undeveloped part of town. "Mr. Olmsted's knowledge of the suburbs of Buffalo," Dorsheimer declared, "and their relation to the main portion of the city, and the avenues of approach to them, was not equaled by that of any resident, as he had made them an especial study."³¹

The meeting on the evening of August 25 marked the culmination of efforts by park advocates over the years to define a plan. At that time Olmsted made his ideas known to a gathering of some sixty or seventy people who came to the Delaware Street mansion of Sherman S. Jewett, one of the businessmen who had paid for Olmsted's trip. A lengthy account of the evening's proceedings appeared the next day in the *Courier*, undoubtedly prepared by David Gray, the paper's editor, in consultation with Joseph Warren, its owner and the man who served as secretary at the meeting.³² After the clink and rattle of glasses died down, chairman Fillmore asked Dorsheimer to give a brief history of the local park movement and to introduce Olmsted to the audience. His voice still hoarse from the lingering cold, Olmsted opened his remarks by saying that he "should not have consented to address such an assemblage" because he had had too little time to develop his ideas fully. Nonetheless, he proceeded to talk at length

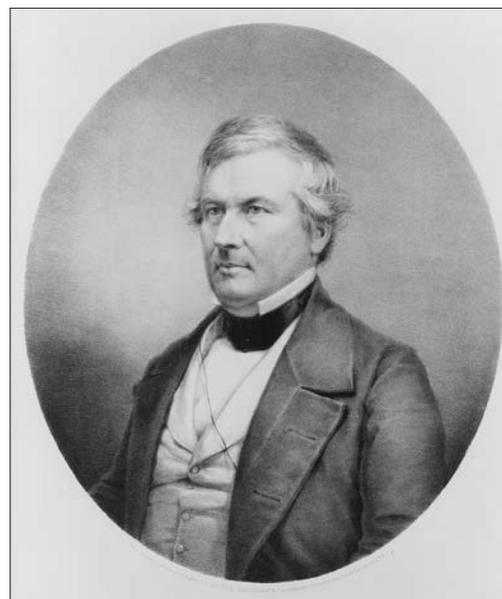


Fig. 1.11. Millard Fillmore (1800–1874). Lithograph by F. D'Avignon, c. 1850. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

about the plans that he had been turning over in his mind. Olmsted began by explaining that a park was "a work of art" that would take at least forty years to be realized and then went on to instruct his hearers in the true purpose and nature of urban pleasure grounds. "The object of a park, adjacent to a city," he said, "is to provide contrast, change, recreation and relief from the turmoil of the city." In order to realize this goal, "great breadth and openness of land are required to get rid of the sense of contraction produced by brick walls and paved streets." Moreover, the successful park must comprise a "variety of scenery, undulations of surface, freedom of motion, and a harmony of design." His words must have come as a revelation to those in the audience who thought of a park in terms of boisterous private picnic groves such as Westphal's Garden.

Olmsted then went on to unveil his novel idea, that the best course to pursue in Buffalo would be to create three parks rather than a single one, as New York and Brooklyn had done. The locales he enumerated were those that he had marked out on his day-long tour with Dorsheimer the previous week. They were the ground



Fig. 1.12. *View South from Fort Porter, 1850s*. Artist unknown. The painting shows the rear of James MacKaye's "castle" at the left and, in the middle distance, the open waterfront land that in August 1868 Olmsted and Dorsheimer considered as a possible park site. It would later become the Front. Courtesy Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

in the vicinity of Fort Porter, an area on High Street near the junction of Jefferson and Ferry streets, and the pastures north of the cemetery between Delaware and Main streets. Warming to his subject, he launched into a discussion of the merits of each of these sites. The first location he reviewed was the property on High Street astride a ridge some three miles back from the waterfront on the east side of town. This site, Olmsted said, afforded a first-rate view of the bustling city, with "a pleasant back ground of hills" in the distance. In fact, the panorama was so fine from there that he believed it was the ideal place to take a stranger "to show him the extent and the prosperity of Buffalo." Knowing that this area was being considered for the site of a new reservoir,

Olmsted suggested that the waterworks could be located within the thirty- or forty-acre park he envisioned here. In this case, he thought, the standpipe might be enclosed in an observation tower, which would be a capital location from which to survey the city.³³

The second place that Olmsted talked about that night was the one near Fort Porter. It, too, afforded a fine prospect. Here one might look out over the broad waters of Lake Erie. There "can be no finer back ground than the horizon of the lake," Olmsted remarked, and the view of the Canadian shoreline he thought "not uninviting." (Fig. 1.12) Also from this spot one could witness the dramatic rush and tumble of the lake waters funneling into the narrow channel of the Niagara River. This

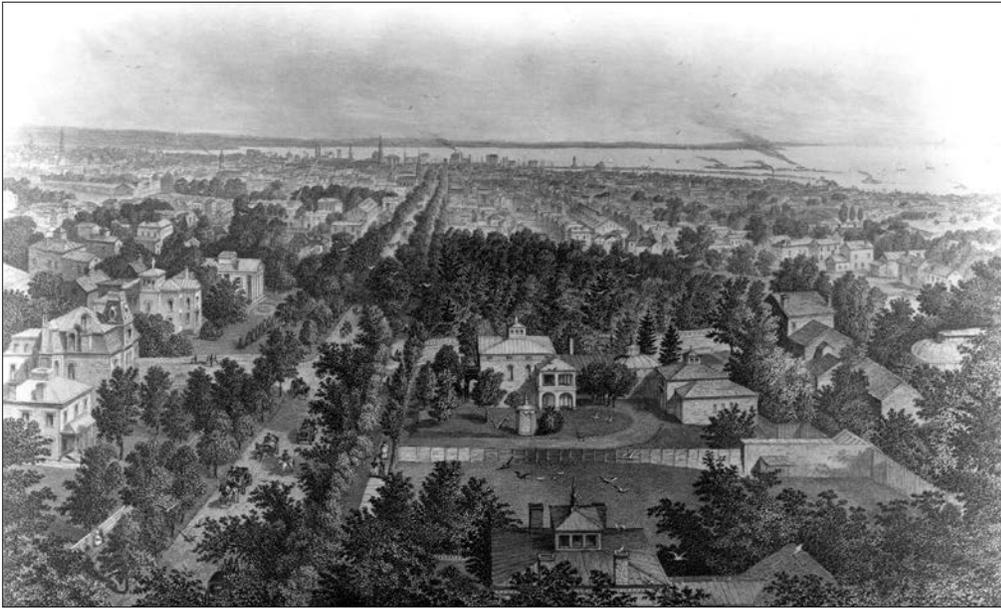


Fig. 1.13. Bird's-eye view of Delaware Street looking toward the lake and downtown from North Street. Steel engraving, 1875. Courtesy Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

thirty or forty acres, which already belonged to the city, could relatively cheaply be “turned into a magnificent marine parade and promenade.”

The largest of the three locations that Olmsted discussed was the area north of Forest Lawn Cemetery. Here it would be possible to achieve the “great breadth and openness of land” that he had spoken of at the start of his address. This farmland already possessed “variety of scenery” in its natural pastoral state, as well as “some of the finest forest trees” he had ever seen. They were “particularly perfect park trees,” he observed, the equals of which “could not be produced in fifty years.” Moreover, the soil seemed “particularly adapted to the growth of the finest trees,” and the creek could be dammed to create a new lake, which would be a “charming feature” of the landscape. All in all, he believed that on a tract of three to four hundred acres “a good deal of planting is to be done; but the land only requires improvement.”

After reviewing his program for the three green spaces, Olmsted addressed his audience on the subject of street access to the main park. From the center of town, Delaware Street was “a stately avenue requiring very little change to adapt it to a central approach to the park.” (Fig. 1.13) To connect the park on the East Side to

the large park, he suggested that the embryonic Jefferson Street (now Jefferson Avenue) be widened to form a suitable link, while from the baseball grounds at Fort Porter to the main park he proposed that a “broad avenue” be constructed running eastward to Rogers Street, then northward “to the woods east of Clinton Forest [another private picnic grove] and the creek [Scajaquada Creek], and thence along the creek to Delaware street.” The report in the *Courier* did not use the term “parkway” to describe these avenues that Olmsted spoke of, although surely Olmsted had used the term that night, for, we are told, he “explained in detail how these roads should be built.” Defining these streets in terms of the parkways he and Vaux had proposed a few years earlier for Brooklyn, Olmsted said they were to be from “180 to 200 feet wide, with a pleasure drive in the centre, flanked with trees and walks, and a traffic road on the side.” And surely Olmsted must have mentioned the fact that the Chicago proprietors were acquiring land for a parkway (to include a trolley line) linking Riverside to Chicago. Perhaps for an instant that evening he and his listeners foresaw a future summer day in Buffalo when carriages, pedestrians, and horseback riders would share sun-dappled, tree-shaded avenues on their

way to enjoy a carefree afternoon in a verdant landscape of meadow, stream, and lake.

Olmsted concluded his remarks by discussing the matter-of-fact issue of cost. Overall, he was of the opinion that in order to create the system he had outlined, the city would need to acquire approximately five hundred acres of land. But because the land in question had few buildings on it at present, it could be bought relatively cheaply—he threw out the figure of less than \$100 per acre. And he assured his hearers that the “expense of grading will be very moderate, and the roads can be constructed for one-third of the cost of those in New York and Brooklyn.” A further cost benefit was the fact that the park grounds contained good sources of stone. “All needed material is at hand,” he declared. And Olmsted affirmed his belief that the rise that inevitably occurred in the value of land around parks would result in higher property tax receipts from which the city could recoup all construction costs. He pointed in particular to the example of New York, where increased assessments had produced enough revenue to cover the interest on the bonds issued to construct the parks, and also gave other examples of how “parks pay a city even in a pecuniary way.”³⁴

PARK ADVOCATES AND OLMSTED’S PLAN

Olmsted himself was pleased with the way the meeting went. He wrote to his wife, Mary, that “the solid men of Buffalo” had given him a warm reception and that he had “talked for an hour with tolerable smoothness and I should think with gratifying results.” All in all, he told her, “I think it will go.” To his partner, Calvert Vaux, who was away in Europe, he likewise sent a positive account of the events in Buffalo. “I did a deal of talking, privately and publically, was cross-examined, etc., and got through very well,” he said.³⁵ Indeed, Olmsted had spoken so persuasively that his words signaled the beginning of an era of park building. “The clear state-

ments of Mr. Olmsted persuaded everyone present that a park was not only practicable, but that it was the duty of Buffalonians to take immediate steps to secure the co-operation of the common council and the legislature in establishing one,” proclaimed the *Courier*. To pursue this end, Fillmore appointed a committee composed of Dorsheimer, Warren, Sherman S. Jewett, Pascal Paoli Pratt, and Richard Flach. The newly constituted group asked Olmsted to submit a written report of his remarks and promised that they would petition the legislature in Albany to establish an official park commission. Olmsted forwarded his report to Buffalo at the beginning of October.

All of the men on the ad hoc committee had earlier advocated publicly for a park. Now armed with a definite plan, they looked with renewed enthusiasm toward finally achieving the outcome they had long desired. The generous host for the evening when Olmsted made his presentation, Sherman Skinner Jewett (1818–1897), had ties to many prosperous business enterprises. His principal source of income was his iron foundry, which manufactured kitchen stoves. He also served on the board of directors of several railroads. As a progressive member of the Republican Party, Jewett frequently opened his home to meetings of civic-minded citizens seeking the advancement of the city in some regard or other.³⁶ He was, however, especially devoted to the cause of parks and was later remembered as “always alive to anything which was intended to make the public breathing spots more attractive or more accessible to the common man.”³⁷ During his long tenure—he was board president from 1879 until his death in 1897—he was a steadfast supporter of Olmsted’s ideals. Pascal Paoli Pratt (1819–1905), like Jewett, was descended from early émigrés from New England. Richard Flach (1832–1884), like Dorsheimer, had ties to both the American and the German communities in the city. A native of Saxony, he had been trained as a baker before coming to America and settling in Buffalo in the late 1840s. Flach maintained a successful grocery business and was an active member of the Saengerbund choral society, the

largest of several German glee clubs. A Democrat, as were many German citizens, Flach at various times held office as both a state assemblyman and a city council member.³⁸

Joseph Warren had come to Buffalo from his native Vermont in 1853 after a stint as assistant editor of the *Country Gentleman* in Albany. By 1858 he had risen to the editorship of the *Courier* at a time when newspapers were both advocates of political parties and vital sources of information. Eventually Warren became the publisher of the morning *Courier* and the evening *Courier & Republic*, both of which were considered the official paper of the city. Always active in politics, Warren assumed the postwar leadership of the local Democratic Party, whose views the *Courier* consistently represented. Like the other men on the ad hoc committee, Warren lent his efforts to many civic endeavors, including the establishment of the state normal school, the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, the Young Men's Association, and the medical school at the University of Buffalo. Dorsheimer would eulogize him as "a promoter of all generous enterprises which promised to add to the prosperity of the city."³⁹ His papers took the lead among the press in advocating for the park project. "If his [Olmsted's] scheme, or something like it, shall be carried out," the *Courier* informed its readers while the city waited to receive Olmsted's written report, "the crowds of citizens with their families who throng Main street on summer Sunday afternoons, will not need to wheel their perambulators on the stone pavement, and let their children play in the shade of brick walls, neither will Delaware street be the extent of the city's driving ground."⁴⁰

This editorial, like most that appeared in the *Courier* at this time, undoubtedly came from the pen of the paper's editor, David Gray (1836–1888), Buffalo's most accomplished journalist. Born in Edinburgh, Gray spent his teenage years in rural Wisconsin, where his family had immigrated. In 1856 he came to Buffalo at the invitation of a relative who secured for him the position of librarian at the Young Men's Christian Union.

Toward the end of 1859 Gray came to the attention of Joseph Warren, who made him associate editor of the *Courier*. In effect, the two men ran the paper. In April 1865 Gray accepted an offer from the Buffalo businessman William G. Fargo, whose partnership with Henry Wells had produced the Pony Express, to chaperone his son during an extended period of study and travel in Europe. Gray returned to his post at the *Courier* in April 1868, just in time for Olmsted's first trip to Buffalo.

Gray came back to Buffalo considerably matured by his experience and eager to resume his full-time career in journalism. Because Warren was now often away or busy with political affairs, he left the editorship of the paper to Gray. But Gray also had time to cultivate his avocation as a poet and to become a bright light in the cultural life of the town. "His acquaintance at home and abroad had become large," noted his biographer, especially among men and women of letters and of art, and no one in Buffalo, during these years, entertained more visitors of distinction than he."⁴¹ Gray enjoyed gathering local literati at his home on Saturday evenings, a cozy oasis of high-minded thinking in the generally arid intellectual environment of a boom city. Like his earnest friends, Gray was a strong supporter of the park movement. While in Europe he had enjoyed visiting attractive pleasure grounds in various cities. In 1866, writing back home from Geneva, he urged Buffalo's city fathers to "give us more parks and gardens and breathing-places." He maintained, as did Downing, Olmsted, and Dorsheimer, that such places exerted a refining influence on society, a stimulus that was sorely needed in the cities of the Scot's adopted country. "Perhaps, if the unwashed American had such places open to him, where he could lie, or sit, and drink beer, even," Gray asserted, "he would not stand, by day and night, at filthy bars, drinking in madness, damnation and death."⁴² Surely it must have been gratifying for him to frame the *Courier*'s eloquent support of the park movement.⁴³

The rival to Gray's *Courier*, the *Express*, was under the editorship of another well-rounded man of letters who would leave his mark on the city, Josephus Nelson



Fig. 1.14. David Gray (*right*) and Samuel Clemens. Detail of a photograph by Matthew Brady, 1871. Courtesy Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

Larned. Despite the fact that his paper was a Republican organ, Larned was a good friend of Gray's and an avid supporter of the local park movement. In the summer of 1869 Larned became the business partner of Samuel Langhorn Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, when the peripatetic writer moved to Buffalo to become part owner of the *Express*. Although Twain was in town at the very time when Olmsted, with whom he shared a love of natural scenery, was being engaged to lay out the new park system, he appears to have written nothing in the pages of the *Express* about this momentous local event.⁴⁴ This is all the more unexpected because Clemens was a close friend of Gray and a neighbor of Dorsheimer. (Fig. 1.14)

THE PRELIMINARY REPORT

In his report dated October 1, 1868, Olmsted outlined his philosophy of park planning and reviewed recent developments in urban park construction in London,

Paris, and New York.⁴⁵ The first thing to bear in mind, he said, was that "the main object we set before us in planning a park is to establish conditions, which will exert the most healthful, recreative action upon the people who are expected to resort to it. With the great mass, such conditions will be of a character diverse from the ordinary conditions of their lives in the most radical degree which is consistent with ease of access." He went on to enumerate three classes of park users: those who were free to leave work and home for several hours or even an entire day; mothers, children, invalids, and others who were "not methodically occupied by any regular business"; and people who were able to leave their place of work for only a short time during the day. He had conceived his plan for Buffalo to accommodate the diverse needs of all these people.

One can easily imagine Dorsheimer and his colleagues skimming the opening didactic discourse and settling in for a closer reading of what Olmsted intended specifically for their city. First, Olmsted reasserted that he had put aside the idea of creating one large park. Instead, speaking for himself and his absent partner, he said "we would recommend that in your scheme a large park should not be the sole object in view but should be regarded simply as the more important member of a . . . comprehensive arrangement for securing refreshment, recreation and health to the people." As he had done when in town, Olmsted proposed the creation of three parks and elaborated on the merits of each. The site near Fort Porter on the west side of the city and the site on High Street on the east side would answer the needs of the people in his second and third categories. These spaces were much smaller than the main park, but they could serve neighborhood residents out "for a short stroll, airing and diversion, and where they can at once enjoy a decided change of scene from that which is associated with their regular occupations."

The main park would be much larger than the other two, and because it was far from town, most people would visit it when they had longer periods of time to enjoy its many recreational opportunities. Here,

Olmsted affirmed, among the pastoral scenery, the true goal of a rural park could be easily achieved: “to present nature in the most attractive manner which may be practicable.” This park would be ample enough to evoke the sense of “contrast to the ordinary conditions of town life.” It was to encompass both the wooded banks of Scajaquada Creek west of Forest Lawn Cemetery and the gently rolling meadows north of the burial grounds. And now Olmsted inserted a new element into the agreeable pastoral landscape. “By the construction of an embankment about a half a mile below the road, which is a prolongation of Delaware street,” the report stated, “a body of living water might here be formed about twenty acres in extent with a very agreeable natural line of shore, the greater part of which would be shaded by beautiful groves of trees, already on the ground and most of which are now in their prime and of very desirable species.” Furthermore, putting a large park at this location would “neither interfere with nor be interfered with by any existing or probable line of business communication, the character of the topography of the neighborhood not having encouraged the formation of roads from either side through it.”

Access to and from the parks was a major element of Olmsted’s report. Reiterating the remark he had made on August 25, Olmsted proposed that from the center of town to the main park, Delaware Street could easily be transformed into “an approach of stately proportions.” In order to secure access to the main park from the west and east sides of town “without a journey long, fatiguing and discordant with the sentiment and purpose of recreation in view,” he elaborated on his proposal to upgrade several existing streets to parkways. Travelers along these residential greenways would find them free of commerce, so that their journey to and from the main park could be made “in the midst of a scene of sylvan beauty and with the sounds and sights of the ordinary town business, if not wholly shut out, removed to some distance and placed in obscurity.” Olmsted held out the promise that the “way itself would thus be more park-like than town-like.” These

lovely streets would themselves serve as small parks in the neighborhoods through which they passed. “Thus, at no great distance from any point of the town,” Olmsted explained, “a pleasure ground will have been provided for, suitable for a short stroll, for a playground for children, and an airing ground for invalids.” Concerned that traffic on these new arteries should always flow freely, he proposed that “at the crossing of important streets, the parkways might, for greater convenience in crossing and turning, be expanded in a circular or elliptical form.” These circles, with their radiating streets, recalled the central feature of Ellicott’s original plan for Niagara Square. Olmsted also suggested that these new features in the urban landscape might become striking focal points, “suitable positions for fountains, statues, trophies and public monuments.” Such “artificial” adornments he and Vaux wished to keep out of their parks. Finally, he wanted people to be able to travel to and from the city to the park by boat. “It would be practicable at slight expense,” he noted, “to make Scajaquada creek navigable for rowing craft and steam launches to the Park.”⁴⁶

Olmsted’s report gave park advocates the document they needed in order to proceed with the legislative process required to establish new parkland. Henceforth his firm’s report, which was published in full in Joseph Warren’s newspaper, would be treated as a text proclaimed by prophets.⁴⁷ And surely the lengthy article that ran in the paper not long after on Chicago’s plans to invest in parks—Olmsted and Vaux had been asked to plan South Park, which would provide recreational access to the Lake Michigan shore—was meant to remind Buffalo of the need to keep up with the city to which it often liked to compare itself. Likewise, it was reported in the local press, the Common Council in Albany had approved a park and parkway plan prepared by the partners that in some ways resembled the one for Buffalo.⁴⁸ Buffalo, however, was not found lagging. In mid-November the citizens’ committee forwarded Olmsted’s report to Mayor Rogers, who in turn formally presented it to the Common Council on November 23. The mayor

recommended that a special committee of councilmen and citizens be formed to have legislation enacted in Albany authorizing the city to acquire the land needed for the parks and parkways.⁴⁹ On December 28, 1868, the council, having heard the idea warmly endorsed by civic groups such as the Board of Trade, agreed. “Thus, we may consider the long talked of proposition for a public park in Buffalo as at least fairly on the road to realization,” stated the *Courier*.⁵⁰

APPOINTING THE BOARD OF PARK COMMISSIONERS

Taking responsibility for securing approval to institute a park commission was a newly elected legislator, Asher P. Nichols (1815–1880). Though new to Albany, Nichols was not new to local politics. A native of Vermont who moved to Buffalo from central New York in 1836, he was one of the first lawyers to set up practice in Buffalo. And like the other men with whom he was associated in the park movement, Nichols was a highly cultivated gentleman. “Few men are more familiar than was he with the classics of our language,” recalled a friend, who also noted that Nichols “had a keen sense of the beautiful in nature and art, and was a graceful interpreter of both.”⁵¹ One of his poems had even been read at the original dedication of Forest Lawn Cemetery in 1850. At the start of the new session in January 1869, Nichols introduced a bill to authorize the selection of grounds for Olmsted and Vaux’s park scheme and to “provide for the sustenance and embellishment thereof.”⁵² The bill easily won the legislature’s approval on April 14, 1869. A provision in the legislation, however, would alter the plan that Olmsted had outlined. Possibly to please the German community, the bill required that one hundred acres of park grounds (this could include parkways) be located east of Jefferson Street. This ruled out the reservoir site as the location for the East Side park Olmsted had proposed and removed Jefferson Street from consideration as a future parkway. During the same ses-

sion Nichols also introduced legislation authorizing the establishment of a large state psychiatric hospital in the city on lands that Olmsted had proposed be included in the western portion of the main park. This act was also approved by the legislature and would result in Olmsted and Vaux’s modifying the West Side approach to the main park. With the success of both of these major items to his credit, Nichols returned to Buffalo in May at the end of the legislative session to a hero’s welcome.

A major element of the new park legislation was the article establishing a board of park commissioners. These individuals, to be appointed by the mayor with the consent of the Common Council, would have the power to adopt a plan, authorize the purchase of property, and oversee the construction of the new park system. This process had worked well in New York and would allow the commissioners to pursue their work, funds in hand, largely independent of the Common Council. Five days after the legislative act establishing the parks was passed in Albany, the Common Council approved the slate of park commissioners that Mayor Rogers had submitted. They included Dorsheimer, Warren, and the others who made up the original citizens’ committee that had invited Olmsted to Buffalo the year before, plus seven other members.⁵³ On May 3 the commissioners held their first meeting at Mayor Rogers’s office. At that time, officers were elected, with Pascal P. Pratt named president. Other business included forming standing committees and ordering that twelve hundred copies of the law establishing the park commission be printed, five hundred of them in German. Before adjourning, Dorsheimer informed his colleagues that both Olmsted and Vaux would be in town the next day to meet with them.⁵⁴

At that event Olmsted and Vaux were asked to elaborate on their park proposal of October 1, which Rogers affirmed had “given universal satisfaction.” Earlier during the day, Olmsted revisited the Fort Porter site and the land north of the cemetery, presumably taking along Vaux, who was probably seeing the city for the first time. (Fig. 1.15) Vaux seconded Olmsted’s initial



Fig. 1.15. Calvert Vaux, c. 1868. Courtesy National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

choice of three to four hundred acres of land north of the cemetery as the locale for the main park. To his practiced eye, the area possessed four advantages: “fine meadow-land, beautiful streams, luxuriant foliage, and a splendid avenue of approach ready-made.” He also liked the Fort Porter site and, despite the greater expense it would take to create a park there, joined Olmsted in urging the commissioners to secure its fine view for future generations. A question arose, however, concerning the third park, on the east side of town. Since Olmsted had not inspected the ground east of Jefferson, he was not in a position to make a recommendation at that time as to the ultimate location of the third park. He still maintained, however, that it should be linked to the other two localities by a parkway. Concerning the next steps that the commissioners needed to take, Vaux advised them to follow the lead of their Prospect Park colleagues and prepare a report describing the land to be acquired “before the boundary lines were fixed.” As had been the case in Brooklyn, the Buffalo park commissioners had a preliminary report as their guide for an outline; the precise park boundaries would come

after more detailed proposals had been made. This led naturally to the board asking Olmsted and Vaux how much they would charge for making these plans. They replied that they would “furnish working plans at the rate of ten dollars an acre, or \$5000 for five hundred acres.” They would also provide a plan “from which the boundary lines could be fixed for the sum of \$1000, this amount to be credited on the ten dollars an acre, if they were afterwards called upon to supply working drawings.” Thus the board would be committed to pay \$1,000 for an outline plan for purchasing land for the parks; if they chose to work further with Olmsted and Vaux, they would agree to pay \$10 per acre for detailed plans, minus the \$1,000 paid for the outline plan. After a brief discussion, the commissioners agreed to these terms.⁵⁵

“THE LONG CHERISHED PROJECT”

Olmsted and Vaux spent the next four months developing the plan for the Buffalo park system. In early August 1869 they came to town to present their final product to the commissioners. During this visit Olmsted spent two days at Niagara, where on August 7 he toured Goat Island with Dorsheimer and Henry Hobson Richardson, who was in town for discussions about the plans for the Buffalo State Hospital and the new house he was designing for Dorsheimer.⁵⁶ (It was after the arrival of Vaux on the eighth that Olmsted first broached his idea of creating a park to protect the great natural wonder that straddled the U.S.–Canadian border.)⁵⁷ In Buffalo on August 9 the landscape architects attended a meeting at Mayor Rogers’s office where the commissioners, after some discussion, unanimously approved the partners’ plans.

A few days later the *Courier* devoted a long article, supplemented by maps, describing Olmsted and Vaux’s fully evolved park and parkway plan.⁵⁸ (Fig. 1.16) Subtitled “The Long Cherished Project Takes Form,” this first thoughtful analysis of the diverse elements of the

proposed park system surely came from the pen of David Gray, the best guide the citizens of Buffalo could have had for assessing the true worth of the momentous proposal. He began by explaining the initial difficulties that the plan's authors had to overcome. First among them was the necessity "that at least a part of the grounds should be close to the centers of population. But the only

large tracts of land available at reasonable expense were found to lie outside a circle of at least three miles from the churches." This dilemma was ingeniously overcome by the planners, who "even turned it to good account" by extending "two widely diverging arms or *antennae*" from each side of the main park to two lesser satellite parks. "On the west," Gray observed, "the minor park

commands the glorious river and lake view, but lies in the very midst of a rapidly populating portion of the city." A street railroad made it easily accessible from elsewhere. On the other side of town, Olmsted and Vaux had fixed a new location for the third park "at the threshold of the thickly inhabited German quarter of the city" a few blocks east of the site that Olmsted had originally proposed.⁵⁹ Gray believed that a new type of town landscape lay in the city's future. "Literally our park, when finished, will be an arc of health and beauty bent around a full half of suburban Buffalo," he wrote. Olmsted's biographer Justin Martin has likened the plan to a baseball diamond. With Niagara Square as home plate, he writes, "think of the parks as being placed in left field (the Front), center field (the Park), and right field (the Parade)."⁶⁰

Gray proceeded to discuss the individual parks, which for the first time bear the specific names that Olmsted and Vaux suggested, and parkways (as yet unnamed).⁶¹ The Front was Olmsted and Vaux's proposed name for the twenty-eight-acre park overlooking the lake and river, with Sixth Street (later Front Avenue, the present Busti Avenue), a street of large, attractive houses, forming

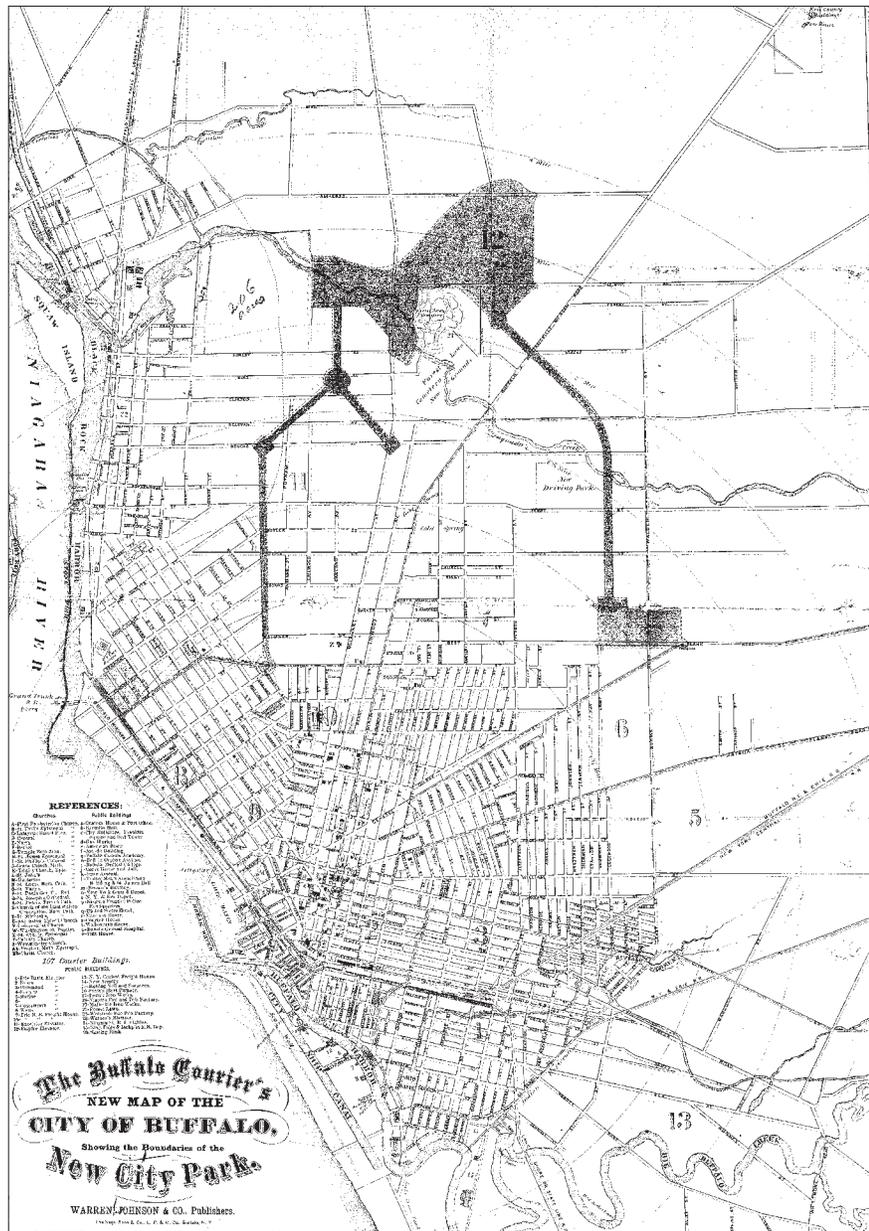


Fig. 1.16. Warren & Johnson & Co., "The Buffalo Courier's New Map of the City of Buffalo. New City Park." *Courier*, August 1869.

the park's eastern boundary.⁶² Along the western border, toward the water, down below a step slope, scores of barges slowly plied their way along the malodorous Erie Canal, and smoke-belching locomotives chugged by on the busy mainline. "In laying out The Front," Gray explained, "the idea of Mr. Olmsted is to make of it a sort of *esplanade*, trees to be planted so as to conceal the unsightly features of the view and enhance those which nature has made beautiful." Gray also noted that efforts were already under way to get permission from the federal government to lay out walks and a drive within the grounds of adjacent Fort Porter to serve as a pleasant appendage to the park. In addition, Olmsted and Vaux's plans called for the creation of a traffic circle at the northeast entrance to Fort Porter, where Massachusetts and Niagara streets converged on Sixth Street. This high ground (later known as the Bank), Gray wrote, was "an invaluable spot for the magnificent river and Canadian view it commands." Eastward along the line of York and North streets toward Rogers Street, two blocks of venerable Prospect Place would be newly landscaped and integrated into "the grand scheme." At the juncture of Rogers Street, where one would turn ninety degrees northward toward the main park, the plan called for a six-acre landscaped circle. "This circle or *Rond Point*, as the Parisians call it," noted the well-traveled Gray, "will form an agreeable invitation to the further charms of the Park, of which, we daresay, the growing district lying in the angle north of North and west of Delaware streets will duly feel the attraction."

Traveling one-hundred-foot-wide Rogers Street, which Olmsted and Vaux proposed to rename The Avenue (known today as Richmond Avenue), one arrived at the juncture with Bouck Avenue (now Lafayette Avenue), a major crosstown thoroughfare. At this point Olmsted and Vaux's plan contained a dramatic element that had not figured in Olmsted's earlier proposals. Henceforth known as the West Side Park Approaches, it consists of an arrangement of three parkways two hundred feet wide and three spacious traffic circles that on the city plan resemble an inverted Y. (A fourth parkway, Humboldt

Parkway, joined the Park to the east side of town.) Circles linking converging streets to the approaches are located at the ends of the extended arms—Bidwell Place (now Colonial Circle; the original name commemorated Daniel Bidwell, a Civil War general from Buffalo) on The Avenue, Chapin Place (now Gates Circle; the original name commemorated William Payson Chapin, another Civil War hero from Buffalo) on Delaware Street (now Delaware Avenue), and Soldiers Place, the widest circle at the crux of the Y. From there, the "stem" (the present Lincoln Parkway) terminates at the main entrance to the Park. These approaches funnel traffic from Delaware Street on the east and The Avenue on the west to the main park entrance. (See Fig. 2.1)

The most easterly of these West Side circles, Chapin Place, marked the juncture of Bouck Avenue and Delaware Street and was "intended to provide a dignified and picturesque termination" for that existing thoroughfare as it came from the center of town. Beyond Chapin Place, Delaware became an ordinary thoroughfare of greatly diminished cachet. It was nevertheless an important traffic route to the north and would cross the park landscape near its center. At this spot, Olmsted and Vaux proposed sinking the road below grade, as they had done with crosstown roadways at Central Park. "The difficult problem—how to dispose of a thoroughfare too important to be blockaded, so that its passage shall not mar the solitude and beauty of the park, is, we think, very happily solved," Gray noted.

Still today, Olmsted and Vaux's Park Approaches introduce the drama of anticipation for those arriving at Delaware Park from downtown. Travelers along Richmond Avenue or Delaware Avenue see the scale of the streetscape change as they enter Colonial and Gates circles. These spacious foyers to the full-blown parkways proclaim the remaining stage of the parkward journey. From each of these roundabouts, two-hundred-foot-wide angled parkways converge on the grandest open area of all, Soldiers Place. After that one proceeds northward along Lincoln Parkway to the park. The cumulative effect of the approaches is still, as David

Gray said long ago, to “enhance the visitor’s idea of the importance and dignity of that to which he is thus graciously invited.”

The West Side Park Approaches, like Ellicott’s earlier city plan, owed their origin to France. Gray recognized the similarity to Napoleon III’s Paris, observing that something “remotely similar in effect was obtained by the Parisian architect who laid the approaches to the famous and beautiful Bois de Boulogne; for, to our Park, Soldiers’ Circle will hold some such relation [as] . . . is held by the superb space in the centre of whose converging avenues towers the Arch of the Star.” Paris was certainly the inspiration for this grouping of parkway approaches to the main park, and it may well be that Vaux had suggested them, for he had been in the French capital just prior to joining Olmsted in working out the Buffalo plan.

Having taken his readers to the main park, Gray proceeded to enumerate the attractions that they could expect to enjoy one day in its 305 acres. The first feature of the Park he discussed was the lake, which would be formed by damming Scajaquada Creek. “A patch of swamp land, with high and agreeably wooded banks, already marks out the forty or fifty acres which nature obviously meant to lend to art for this very purpose,” he noted. Moreover, the valley of the Scajaquada was such that “islands, promontories, and an artistic line of shore” could easily be created there. Gray was proud to report that Olmsted had said that “nowhere in his parkmaking experience has he found facilities so ample and cheap for the artificial introduction of water into landscape.”

From the lake, one would proceed north and east of the creek to the meadowland that Olmsted had praised as a park ready-made. “Its surface is undulating and, what is a supremely fortunate circumstance, it is already fairly supplied with woods of nature’s planting,” Gray remarked. “Such trees as the oaks, elms, beeches and maples, which now adorn the Park of Buffalo, New York [City] would gladly have purchased for her Central Park at a price greater than the land will cost us, trees and all.” Buffalo would gain thirty years’ progress toward real-

izing the fully matured park with these trees in place. Finally, Gray praised Olmsted and Vaux’s idea to unite two existing stone quarries (which would be an inexpensive source of material for park construction) on the site into a sunken rock garden. He likened the proposed “quaint and effective” treatment of these “unsightly excavations” to the ancient stone quarries near Syracuse in Sicily, which he had visited during his travels.

From the Park to the East Side pleasure ground, Gray told his readers, Olmsted and Vaux now proposed laying out another parkway two hundred feet wide. Leaving the Park at its southeast corner, this parkway turned southward in a “noble curve” before straightening out and proceeding south parallel to Jefferson Street.⁶³ This mile-long boulevard was to become Humboldt Parkway, one of the most beautiful streets ever to grace an American city. The new parkway would terminate at the Parade, the sixty-two-acre park near the German quarter at Best Street and Genesee Street.⁶⁴ The name referred to a drill field that would be a feature of its design. This ground would also be open to “game players of various kinds, from the baseballists of America to the Turners of the Fatherland.” In addition, the park would be planned as a place of “popular reunion.” Parties of picnickers could gather here under the shade of a fine grove of trees while, said Gray (who spoke German), a large pavilion would provide diversions of the “popular and *gemuetlich* character.”

Before completing his preview of the park system, Gray pointed out that all three locations would be easily accessible by means of public transportation. Street railways at the time ran along Niagara Street to the site of the Front, along Main Street to near the site of the Park, and along Genesee Street to the site of the Parade. Moreover, both the New York Central and the Erie railroads intended constructing suburban rail systems that would provide commuter service to the North Side parks and the neighborhoods that were sure to grow up around them. There already existed in the city “a strong tendency to suburban residence,” Gray observed.⁶⁵ When the trains were up and running, he predicted, Buffalo

would have a “perfect railway system—a circumnavigation of the city’s limits such as London enjoys in her Metropolitan railway, and like that which New York has so long log-rolled and hoped for.” Thus the designers had ingeniously coordinated their 495-acre park system with the city’s nascent urban transit network while at the same time, thanks to the new parkways, providing more affluent residents the pleasure of going to and from the parks by carriage or on horseback. Gray noted that “by this plan a much larger portion of the city’s suburbs is beautified and improved, than would have been the case had the park been laid out in a single block.” In particular, he foresaw the vast rectangle of mostly open land that lay between The Avenue and Delaware Street becoming desirable residential real estate along with the more exclusive addresses bordering the parkways. To Gray’s educated eye, the multifaceted plan that Olmsted and Vaux had presented to the city, integrating passive and active recreation, natural scenery, and democratic socializing with improved urban conditions, was a stunning success. “One of Buffalo’s vague and almost hopelessly cherished dreams,” he informed his readers, had now been given concrete form.

THE ANTI-PARK MOVEMENT

By the time Gray’s article appeared in September 1869, the commissioners were already at work appraising the lands the city would need to acquire to realize the Olmsted and Vaux plan. Yet even as they toiled, opposition to the grand project was building in certain quarters of the city. In early October a delegation of disgruntled citizens appeared before the Common Council to voice their objections to the proposed park system. Their spokesman, Dr. Edward Storck, an up-and-coming leader of the German community, labeled the plan a “scheme which did not originate in any great public necessity, or from any great public demand,” and one that was “out of all proportion to the size, wealth and needs of the city, either present or prospective.” The existing streets

and public squares were good enough for furnishing “pure air and exhilarating drives.” Storck and the anti-park group, as they came to be known, also believed that the grand project called for “enormous expenditures of monies needed to be raised by assessment of real estate” that was already taxed enough. Finally, the *neinsagers* were angry because they had “not been consulted or afforded an opportunity of being heard.” For that reason, they called for a public referendum on the matter.⁶⁶ A few days later, Councilman George Orr from the Thirteenth Ward on the south side of the city continued the assault on the parks, adding to Dr. Storck’s list of objections the city’s recent decision to purchase Clinton Forest for \$40,000 to donate it to the state for the new mental hospital.⁶⁷ To Orr, parks and boulevards were an extravagance that would serve the pleasure of a few and were no reason to increase taxes, which were already sufficiently burdensome. He endorsed the call for a referendum, but the majority of his colleagues on the council voted instead to deal with the issue as a committee of the whole at a future date.⁶⁸

Park advocates were not deterred by these obstructionists. On November 8, 1869, Mayor Rogers submitted the commissioners’ report inventorying lands selected for the parks and approaches.⁶⁹ Perhaps with the anti-park faction in mind, he reiterated that this major public works project would “stimulate many useful trades and occupations.” In addition, the new parks’ location beyond the established wards would “bring into use a large unoccupied region.” This, too, would be a boon to the workingman, for Rogers foresaw that with the service of the Belt railway line, “mechanics will find cheap homes in the vicinity of the parks.”⁷⁰

THE DEBATE OVER THE PARK SYSTEM PROPOSAL

A special session of the Common Council convened on the afternoon of November 25, 1869, to discuss the proposed park plans. The anti-park forces confronted the

pro-park advocates in an attempt to relegate Olmsted and Vaux's plan to the dustbin once and for all.⁷¹ Olmsted and possibly Vaux were in attendance, as well as Dorsheimer and the other park commissioners. When Olmsted was asked to speak, he again reassured the council that experience in other cities had shown that "increase in taxable valuation of property would more than pay the interest on the cost of the parks." He also mentioned that what distinguished the Buffalo park plan from those of other cities was that "the Buffalo plan had been adopted with deliberation and care." As a result, "the geography and interests of the entire city had been considered, and also its future growth and needs."

The council then subjected Olmsted to a round of questioning about the plan. One councilor asked him to justify the three locations and the parkways that linked them, since New York and Brooklyn each got along with one large park and no boulevard approaches. "It was desirable that the lines of approach should be agreeable," Olmsted replied, "in order that families could speedily reach park-like grounds, and as soon as possible experience the healthful change from city surroundings to sylvan sights and sounds. The small parks were desirable, because thousands could often go to them, who could not reach the main park." And though he could not say precisely, he believed that the added expense of the boulevards would be "quite insignificant" compared to that of laying out normal city streets.⁷²

A more sinister line of questioning concerned how Olmsted came to choose the park sites. Councilman Orr was especially interested to know where Olmsted had been taken first when he came to town the previous year, and if it had not been "where the land speculators resided." He suggested that there was a "beautiful location" for a park at the Limestone Hill area in his own Thirteenth Ward in South Buffalo, which had been left out of the plans.⁷³ Olmsted denied any influence of land speculators on the park choices, adding that the first places he had been shown had not pleased him. At Olmsted's own suggestion, his host had driven in the direction where the park maker had "thought he saw

favorable indications" for the site of the main park. "The country about Buffalo was not generally favorable for a park; it was unattractive," he added, uttering an enduring truth and reinforcing the aesthetic correctness of his selection. Pressed further, Olmsted stated that when he had been escorted around town by Dorsheimer, he had been told that his host was acting on behalf of a "voluntary committee" of private citizens who wished to see a park created in their city. Olmsted had asked Dorsheimer specifically if "there were any property interests to be consulted" and was told there were none. Dorsheimer and his associates were concerned only that "the most eligible location" should be acquired.⁷⁴

When Dr. Storck rose to speak as the secretary of the anti-park committee, he was conciliatory but firm in his opposition. He tipped his hat to Olmsted as an experienced professional in the design of parks and said that he did not believe that Olmsted had colluded with land speculators in any way. Neither did Storck think that the commissioners had been dishonest in their intentions or their dealings. What Storck, a resolute Republican who often gave speeches in German and English on behalf of the party's candidates, objected to was spending public funds on "a doubtful luxury" before other, more basic needs of the city were met. "If new city buildings were erected, if the gas monopoly were broken up, if the water-works were put in condition to properly supply the city, first," then the citizens he represented "would not object to anything done for the interests of the city." Addressing Storck, who had come to Buffalo in 1848 as a refugee from the failed liberal uprisings in Germany, Councilman George Newman from the Third Ward kindly observed that they were both young and "probably both anxious to get along in the world." He thought that what would help Buffalo would help them both. "The fact was," Newman lamented, "Buffalo was behind the age. She needed a little Chicago enterprise . . . and a cessation of the cry that we couldn't afford this or that." (Fig. 1.17)

The conciliatory tone was broken by Councilman John Sheehan from the predominantly Irish Eighth

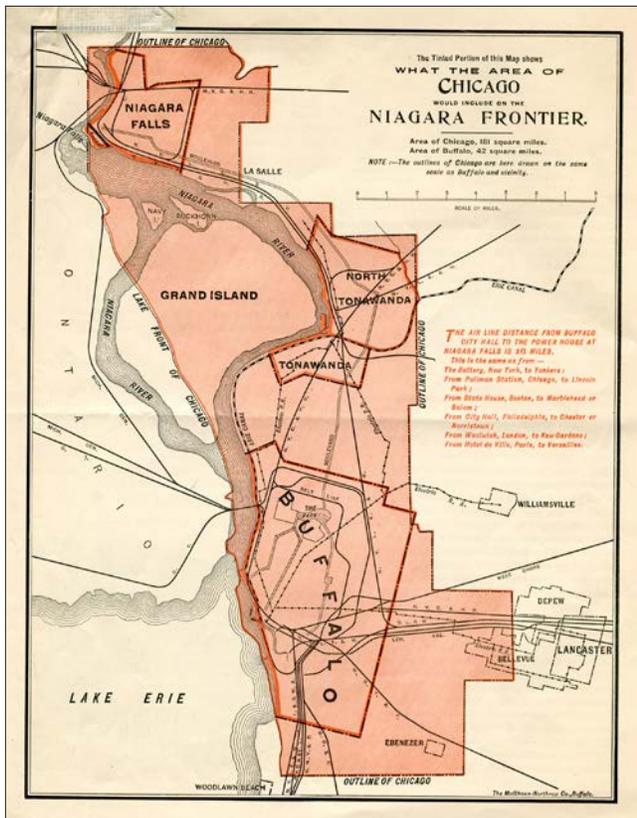


Fig. 1.17. Buffalo frequently compared itself to Chicago; on this nineteenth-century map, the outline of Chicago is superimposed on the Buffalo–Niagara Falls area. *Buffalo and Niagara Power* (1894). Courtesy Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.

Ward. His constituents favored the park proposal, and Sheehan let it be known that “he didn’t wish a German faction to come into the Council and attempt to dictate what it should and should not do.” The council, he asserted, would not be “bullied” by the Germans. Furthermore, he branded Storck a demagogue. Councilman Orr heatedly reminded Sheehan that the Germans paid more taxes than any other “nation” in Buffalo. Councilman John Gisel seconded this contention, claiming that German residents of the East Side accounted for 45 percent of the taxes in the city. Furthermore, he said that Sheehan had no right to speak of them as a nationality solidly opposed to the park. Differences of opinion existed among them on the subject. He himself was leaning toward approval. If the council

would delay the vote for a few days, he was willing to go to his constituents to discuss the matter. “Workmen would not oppose the park if they understood the lightness of the tax,” he said, “and that it would bring labor to them.”

A plausible reason for the opposition of some of the Germans may have been the fact that there already existed places, notably Westphal’s Garden, Teutonia Park, and Spring Abbey, where German families went for recreation. These establishments featured eating, drinking, music, dancing, sports, games, and socializing.⁷⁵ Olmsted himself had enjoyed such occasions when he had gone to see the thriving German immigrant communities in western Texas during his trip through the South for the *New York Times* in 1854. Perhaps for many of Buffalo’s Germans, Olmsted and Vaux’s notion of visitors relaxing their stressed faculties amid scenes of pastoral beauty was an Anglophone concept that was too esoteric to attract widespread support among them.

Debate continued among several councilmen, but the discussion became so “spicy” that the *Courier* was forced to omit a complete report of it. Finally, a vote was called by Elias Hawley, the quiet and erudite councilor from the Eleventh Ward (the location of the Front) on the motion that “the city declares its intention to take the land for the park.” The measure carried by a tally of twelve to seven. Announcement of the victory “was hailed with great applause” from both supportive councilmen and their allies who had come to watch the proceedings. The *Courier*’s progressive-minded publisher, Joseph Warren, and its urbane editor, David Gray, must have been among those cheering triumphantly.⁷⁶

Before Olmsted came to Buffalo in August 1868, he had little knowledge of the city. Yet, like the future Napoleon III planning in exile the modernization of Paris, a city he had never lived in, Olmsted brilliantly perceived the future needs of the place. In this he had the advantage over Napoleon III and Haussmann in that he did not have to confront the problem of destroying existing urban fabric. Perceiving that the city should

have more than a single municipal park, Olmsted took into account the original plan of Joseph Ellicott and extended it into unbuilt areas. And while Olmsted's choice of park sites incorporated some locations that others had already suggested, he considered all of them elements in a coherent and comprehensive urban scheme in which thoroughfares new and old were of equal importance with the new parks. To local citizens who had been seeking ways to advance the physical progress of their city, Olmsted and Vaux's fully evolved park and parkway system must have seemed both commonsensical and audacious.

INITIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE PARKS

Once the city had committed itself to the historic decision to hire Olmsted and Vaux, it lost no time in implementing their plans for the citywide park system. Preliminary work began promptly in the spring of 1870, with actual construction commencing in September of that year. By the summer of 1874, a diligent corps of laborers (many of whom were veterans of the war) had completed Buffalo's parks and parkways in their basic form. Over the coming years, fledgling trees and shrubs would grow to maturity, additional plantings would impart lushness and variety of color and texture to the landscape, drives would be surfaced, and pretty structures and buildings would be erected.

In order to accomplish their intentions, the partners suggested that the city hire two professionals to direct the work on the ground. The first was George Kent Radford (1827–1918), a British civil engineer who had been in partnership with his architect brother, Edward, before both of them emigrated to Toronto in the early 1850s. There George became manager of the Toronto waterworks and, in 1854, won a competition to construct a new intake system. In 1858 George Radford decided to go back to England, where he stayed until Vaux met up with him during his 1868 trip abroad and offered him employ-

ment in New York. There Radford would be associated with Vaux and his partner, Frederick Clarke Withers, on architectural projects and with Olmsted and Vaux on landscape ventures. Olmsted would soon come to regard him as the best engineer in the country. Early in 1870 the Buffalo park commissioners followed the firm's recommendation and hired Radford to be the park system's chief engineer. Radford, who enjoyed socializing with others of British extraction in Buffalo, remained at his post for three years before returning to New York in the spring of 1873.⁷⁷ The time he spent in Buffalo was crucial to the later success of the new park system.

The second person the commissioners hired on Olmsted and Vaux's recommendation was William McMillan (1831–1899), a man who would have a profound and enduring influence on the Buffalo parks. (Fig. 1.18) Over the many years of his tenure, McMillan's devotion to the welfare of the park system was truly heroic. A native of Inverness, Scotland, McMillan came from a family that embraced generations of gardeners. After obtaining a degree in engineering in his native land, he came to New York in 1852 to study horticulture with his uncle

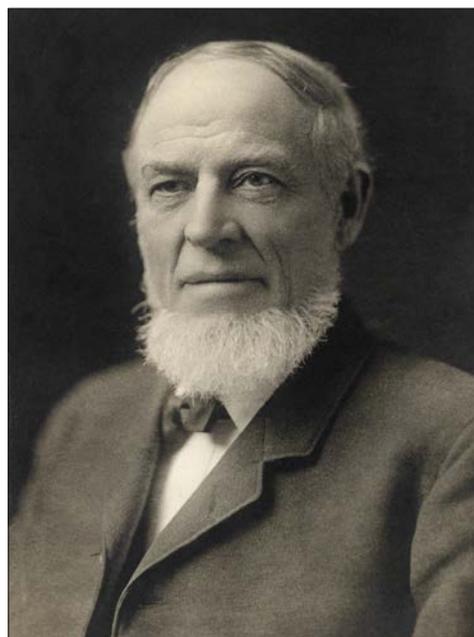


Fig. 1.18. William McMillan (1833–1899). Courtesy Donald McCarthy.

James McMillan, who maintained a nursery business in Flushing, Long Island. William later was employed as a gardener with his brother George at Prospect Park in Brooklyn, where he got to know Olmsted and Vaux. When the work in Buffalo began in earnest, Olmsted recommended that the commissioners hire George for the post of superintendent of planting. But when George died unexpectedly, Olmsted vouched for William to take his place. In September 1870, at the age of thirty-nine, William McMillan took up his duties as superintendent of planting; he would remain to oversee the management of the parks until 1897. During this time he guided the planting and maintenance of the landscape and scrupulously guarded the Olmsted and Vaux design philosophy. Described as reserved to the point where “very few men ever got sufficiently close to him to get a glimpse of his personal inner self through his rough and unbending exterior,” McMillan possessed a true love of nature and expert horticultural knowledge. One who knew him condensed his contribution to a simple sentence: “Mr. McMillan was to fill in and round out the bare lines that Mr. Olmsted had drawn.”⁷⁸

McMillan’s devotion to duty included resisting “political influence when it came to making appointments” within the parks department, a traditional haven for patronage. Instead, McMillan ran the department “irrespective of the wishes of individual members of the Park Board and sometimes irrespective of the wishes of the board itself.” One of his longtime colleagues called him “a man of unimpeachable integrity and inflexible will,” who insisted that everyone who worked for him “should do his duty.” And although he “never overlooked a fault or a failure,” he never spoke a harsh word. “The time will come,” remarked his associate, “when the people of Buffalo will recognize the greatness of his work.”⁷⁹ Modern scholarship has confirmed this judgment. Only at Prospect Park in Brooklyn did Olmsted and Vaux have the opportunity of seeing their plans so faithfully translated into physical form as they were in Buffalo under the firm hand of William McMillan.⁸⁰ After working with McMillan for many years,

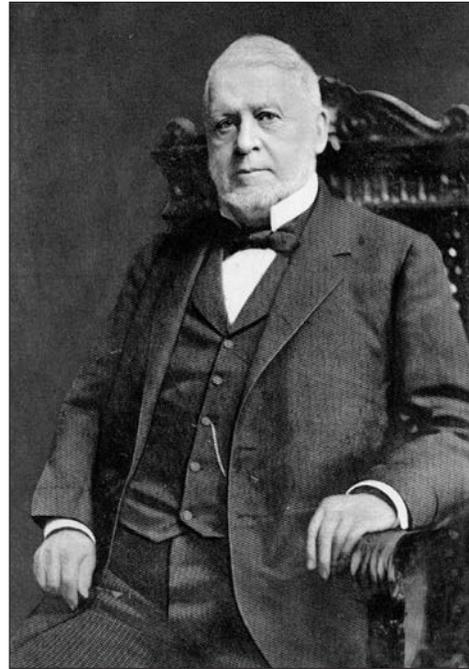


Fig. 1.19. Pascal Paoli Pratt (1819–1905). From *Memorial and Family History of Erie County*, vol. 1 (1906).

Olmsted and his sons praised their colleague as a man of “unusual zeal, industry and competency” whose effectiveness was “such as is rarely practicable on our public works.”⁸¹ Truly, it would be more appropriate to confer on this extraordinary man than on anyone else the moniker “the Father of the Buffalo park system.”

Responsibility for overseeing general progress on the parks rested with the first commission president, Pascal Paoli Pratt. (Fig. 1.19) A “man of futurity,” Pratt, whose uncle, the second mayor of Buffalo, had given the city Prospect Place, had been a park supporter from the very beginning. He would guide the commission during its crucial first decade. By the time he was elected president of the park commission by his fellow commissioners in 1869, Pratt had achieved wealth and fame. His various business ventures included a nationally known hardware business and the founding of the Manufacturers and Traders Bank (the present M&T Bank). As the owner of an iron manufactory that employed eight hundred workers, Pratt was well versed in the art of

directing men and apportioning money and resources. Moreover, like many of the businessmen with whom Olmsted associated, Pratt appreciated the fine arts and natural beauty. His Gothic Revival mansion on Main Street held a large collection of paintings, and together with Dorsheimer and others he had founded the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy. Pratt kept a special place in his generous heart for the new parks that Olmsted and Vaux had laid out on paper, and the presidency of the park commission was the only public office he ever consented to assume.⁸² The organization of operations that Pratt put in place for the Buffalo parks, in the words of one biographer, “is probably unsurpassed in any of the cities of the United States.”⁸³

A “PROPHECY OF FUTURE ATTRACTIONS”

For an undertaking of such magnitude, the construction of the new park system went relatively quickly.⁸⁴ By the end of 1873 the commissioners felt proud enough

of their efforts to issue in their *Fourth Annual Report* a series of lithographs illustrating some of the main features of the parks. (Fig. 1.20) In May 1874 Olmsted visited to check on the progress of the work and certainly must have been pleased by what he saw. Several weeks later he returned to take part in a much-publicized tour of the park system organized by the commissioners to show Common Council members and other city officials what had been accomplished.

Olmsted may well have felt both professional satisfaction and some personal jubilation on this excursion. Together with the commissioners of Brooklyn’s Prospect Park, the Buffalo park board had been the most hospitable group he had worked with. One of its members, William Dorsheimer, had become a close friend, and William McMillan had proved a most excellent park superintendent. The early summer trip to Buffalo also came at a time when Olmsted had recently emerged from a dark period in his private life. In January 1873 his beloved father had died. “The value of any success in the future is gone for me,” Olmsted wrote dejectedly to a friend.⁸⁵ Not long after, his stepmother turned against



Fig. 1.20. South bank of the lake, view from the north bank. Lithograph, 1872. *Annual Report of the Buffalo Park Commissioners* (1873).

him and initiated legal proceedings contesting her husband's will, which had promised Olmsted a considerable inheritance. At fifty-one, with five children to care for and a new business just getting under way, he could ill afford to lose the bequest or engage in prolonged legal wrangling. Worries over money were exacerbated by uncertainty over the wisdom of splitting with Vaux, whose architectural practice was in the ascendant, and by the onset of the Long Depression, which followed in the wake of the collapse of the investment bank of Jay Cooke & Company in September 1873. He also missed his friend Richardson, who had left New York for Boston after winning the competition to design Trinity Episcopal Church. Olmsted had also suffered a bout of temporary blindness. But by the time he met his friends and appreciative colleagues in Buffalo in June 1874, his health and outlook had brightened considerably. A big boost had come that spring, when Congress engaged him to design the grounds around the Capitol in Washington. This was a job that Olmsted regarded as one of the most important of his career. Unfortunately he had no chance in Buffalo to discuss his good fortune with Millard Fillmore, the man who, nearly twenty-five years earlier, had been responsible for engaging the illustrious Downing to beautify Washington. The ex-president had died the previous March.

The outing, which took place on the afternoon of June 24, 1874, can truly be said to have marked the end of the initial phase of the park system's history.⁸⁶ With McMillan and Rogers, now secretary of the park commission, in the lead wagon, a large procession, includ-

ing the four-horse "turn-out wagon" of the American Express Company, toured the entire park and parkway system.⁸⁷ Afterward the group retired to the picnic grounds on the south bank of the lake in the Park for a modest lunch and a round of speeches. Following the salads and sandwiches, all present offered a toast to Olmsted, the honored guest, who then rose to speak. As reported in the local press, he congratulated the citizens of Buffalo for having accomplished so much at a relatively small cost and promised his listeners that the real worth of their investment "would be found to be beyond value." As to the party's immediate surroundings, the Park, he said, possessed "the best grove, the most beautiful lake and the most perfect meadow of any park in the country. Its natural beauty, only waiting to be developed, excelled that of any pleasure ground." All this would be fully revealed in time, for at present the landscape held "only a prophecy of its future attractions." Dorsheimer also spoke, recounting the history of the park movement. His closing remark—"the Park would always be a place of resort for those who, weary of labor, came here, away from the society of men, and into the sacred presence of Nature and Nature's God"—received a hearty round of applause. For Olmsted, Dorsheimer, and others present who had been supporters of the parks from the beginning, the highlight of the day must have been the remarks of Edward Storck. In a "short and pithy" speech, the one-time champion of the anti-park movement conceded that the park system should "go on and that it would prove to be for the interest and pleasure of the citizens of Buffalo."⁸⁸