

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Another Voice: Front Park is once again a place of inspiration

By Alan J. Bozer

One of Buffalo's vaunted Olmsted parks recently took strides back in time and got automobile traffic out of the park. Baird Drive is gone from Front Park! The park is no longer a cut-through en route to the Peace Bridge. Through the advocacy of the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy and others, the approach to the bridge now goes around and leaves the "Front," as intended, for park users.

Once again, as Frederick Law Olmsted wrote in 1876, "a ground ... is secured to the public ... which commands a broad prospect over the lake, and an interesting view of the Niagara River and the Canadian Frontier." The Front, though its view is still obscured to some extent by a tangle of highway ramps, still inspires with its panoramic view, in Olmsted's words, of the "crowding upward of the lake waters as they enter the deep portal of the Niagara." The ramps don't allow a full view – when seen from a good vantage like the observatory of City Hall, the lake still empties beneath the Peace Bridge to the river, just as Olmsted described it. Still, the spectacle over Lake Erie's winnowing of a sunset from the Front is worth the visit, though the restored park itself is reason enough.

Getting too close to the Front's western balustrade in the late 1800s originally brought a downward view of "discordant features of a railroad, canal and tow-path shanties," while today noisy, diesel-belching 18-wheelers hurry below on an expressway amid modern traffic. But stand a few feet back and the view is sublime and the noise a muted rumbling. The view triumphs.

But how did we Buffalonians allow a road to be built through our Front Park in the first place? Once 50 acres, unappreciative city leaders stood by while authorities took land – 10 acres for the Bridge Authority here, 12 acres for the Thruway Authority there, and then Baird Drive thrust through the remnant. Public land is cheap if it is looked upon as vacant and undeveloped, and the parks had no champions 60 years back.

The "public trust" doctrine now benevolently protects parklands. When government came to take away from Martin Luther King Park in the early 1980s, the conservancy's predecessors organized to protect the parkland. The law was against them and they lost, but the call to defend was heard; the law has now changed to favor park preservation, and the public has organized. The conservancy labors to preserve and to restore our parks. It is in the forefront, for example, of the effort to restore Delaware Park to its unitary character and to remedy the taking that resulted in an expressway dividing it.

Front Park restoration continues. The view is great – come down to the Front and see for yourself!

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