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# REPRINTS

Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux designed the first park system of its type for Buffalo, New York, beginning in 1868. Three separate parks were connected by broad, tree-lined parkways, complementing the radial street plan laid out by Joseph Ellicott in 1804. After Olmsted split with Vaux in 1872, he designed many other public and private landscapes in Buffalo. From the mid 1880s, John C. Olmsted assisted on his stepfather's Buffalo projects. After Olmsted Sr. retired in 1895, John maintained the firm's ties with the city. As this document indicates, at the end of the century, the integrity of Delaware Park, a pastoral landscape that was the largest of Olmsted and Vaux's three parks, began to come under attack. In May of 1897, John traveled to Buffalo to try to dissuade the park commissioners from erecting a new building for the city's historical society on a site overlooking the park lake. Under the headline, "Olmsted Threw a Brick at the Park Board," the *Buffalo Express* reported that the landscape architect condemned the proposed location in no uncertain terms. Furthermore, he suggested that by inserting monumental institutional buildings into the park landscape, which had been carefully crafted for the enjoyment of natural scenery, the park commissioners were turning their backs on the primary purpose of the park. John's words did not go down well with the commissioners, and his advice was soundly rejected. The president of the park board, William Hengerer, dismissed his objections as "silly." Eventually, the white marble, temple-fronted Neo-Classical edifice, the creation of French-trained local architect George Carey, went up on the site of a former carriage concourse above North Bay.

—Francis R. Kowsky, *SUNY Distinguished Professor Emeritus\**

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*Buffalo Morning Express*, May 5, 1897, page 9.

## **SAID THE SITE IS BAD Olmsted Threw A Brick At The Park Board**

### **Expert On Landscapes**

**Historical Society's Building Would Be Out Of Place  
In Delaware Park, The Architect Declared,  
And The Commissioners Held Up Their Decision**

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Maybe the Park Commissioners didn't get a Fitzsimmons blow right where it would hurt the most at their meeting yesterday afternoon. And then, again, maybe they did. The onlookers seemed to think so at any rate, and there was much chuckling and many sly digs when J.C. Olmsted of the famous firm of F. L. & J. C. Olmsted,



*A view of the historical society building constructed on a knoll overlooking the park lake. Courtesy of BOPC/Jim Mendola.*

landscape architects, read his report on the location of a site for the Historical Society's building, and incidentally declared that there existed within the very Park Board

\*Professor Kowsky's latest book, *Frederick Law Olmsted, Calvert Vaux, and the Buffalo Park and Parkway System*, will be published in 2012; see: [www.lalh.org/books/kowsky.html](http://www.lalh.org/books/kowsky.html)



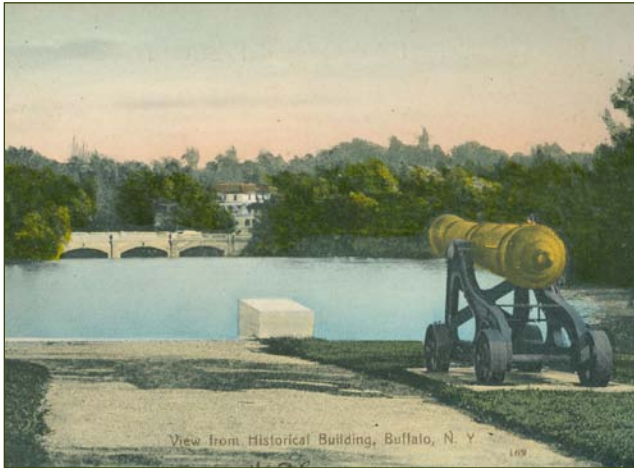
*Map of park lake side of Delaware Park in 1899, prior to the construction of the historical society building. Courtesy of BOPC.*

itself a lamentable lack of appreciation of the most important and fundamental principles of the Park. That was just what Mr. Olmsted said, and after he had said it the Board decided that it might not know so much as it had thought it did about locating historical society buildings, and concluded to postpone further considerations of the subject for two weeks. In the end, it is more than likely that a totally different site than that originally selected will be chosen for the fine new building which is to go up on park land.

Mr. Olmsted, who is the son of his father, the famous Frederick Law Olmsted, is a mild-mannered young man with yellow whiskers. He came to Buffalo yesterday morning at the request of the Park Board to advise as to

the various matters in connection with park landscaping. The first thing that Mr. Olmsted was invited to do was to pick a site for the Historical Society Building, and he had three places to choose from. The Committee on Grounds and Roads thought it likely that he would pick the site on the knoll by the carriage concourse overlooking Park Lake, for that was the site that the committee in its august wisdom had picked, and the committee knew a lot about the parks, and was older than Mr. Olmsted, anyway. Mr. Olmsted, however, demonstrated that he had a mind of his own, and when the Board met yesterday and asked him for his opinion on the subject, he gave them an opinion that was right from the shoulder, and apparently was effective.





*A view from the historical society building looking out over the park lake. All images courtesy of the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy (BOPC)/Jim Mendola.*



*A view from a pathway on the north side of park lake in Delaware Park.*



*A view from the Casino Building looking over the park lake at the Albright Art Gallery and historical society building.*

Gen. Graves, who was attending his last meeting as a Park Commissioner, called up the report of the Committee on Grounds and Roads, which recommended the site at the concourse. Ottomar Reinecke called up his minority report, which recommended the erection of the Historical Society Building adjacent to Agassiz Place. Then Bronson C. Rumsey made before the full board the offer which he had previously announced to individual members. With his brother, Dexter P. Rumsey, the Park Commissioner, offers to the City, to be used for park purposes, a tract of land adjoining the park and fronting on Elmwood Avenue, containing about one acre of ground. The tract is 200 by 250 feet in dimensions, and lies about 900 feet north of Forest Avenue on Elmwood. In making the offer Mr. Rumsey stated that it was his idea that this would be the most available site for the Historical Society Building, and proposed to give it to the City without charge.

Then the trouble began. Judge Smith of the Historical Society was given an opportunity to speak first. He urged the board to adopt the report of the Committee on Grounds and Roads. Andrew Langdon, president of the Historical Society, and member of the Park Board, spoke in favor of the concourse site, and said that the Historical Society was in favor of it. When Mr. Langdon had finished, Mr. Olmsted fired his mine. His report, which he read, was as follows:

**Buffalo, May 4, 1897.**

**William Hengerer, President of the Park Commission:**

Dear Sir: Our advice is asked upon the choice of a site in Delaware Park which it is proposed to grant to the Buffalo Historical Society for a public museum building. We understand that only three sites are now being seriously considered.

First, a tract of land over one acre in extent fronting west on Elmwood Avenue and contiguous to the present



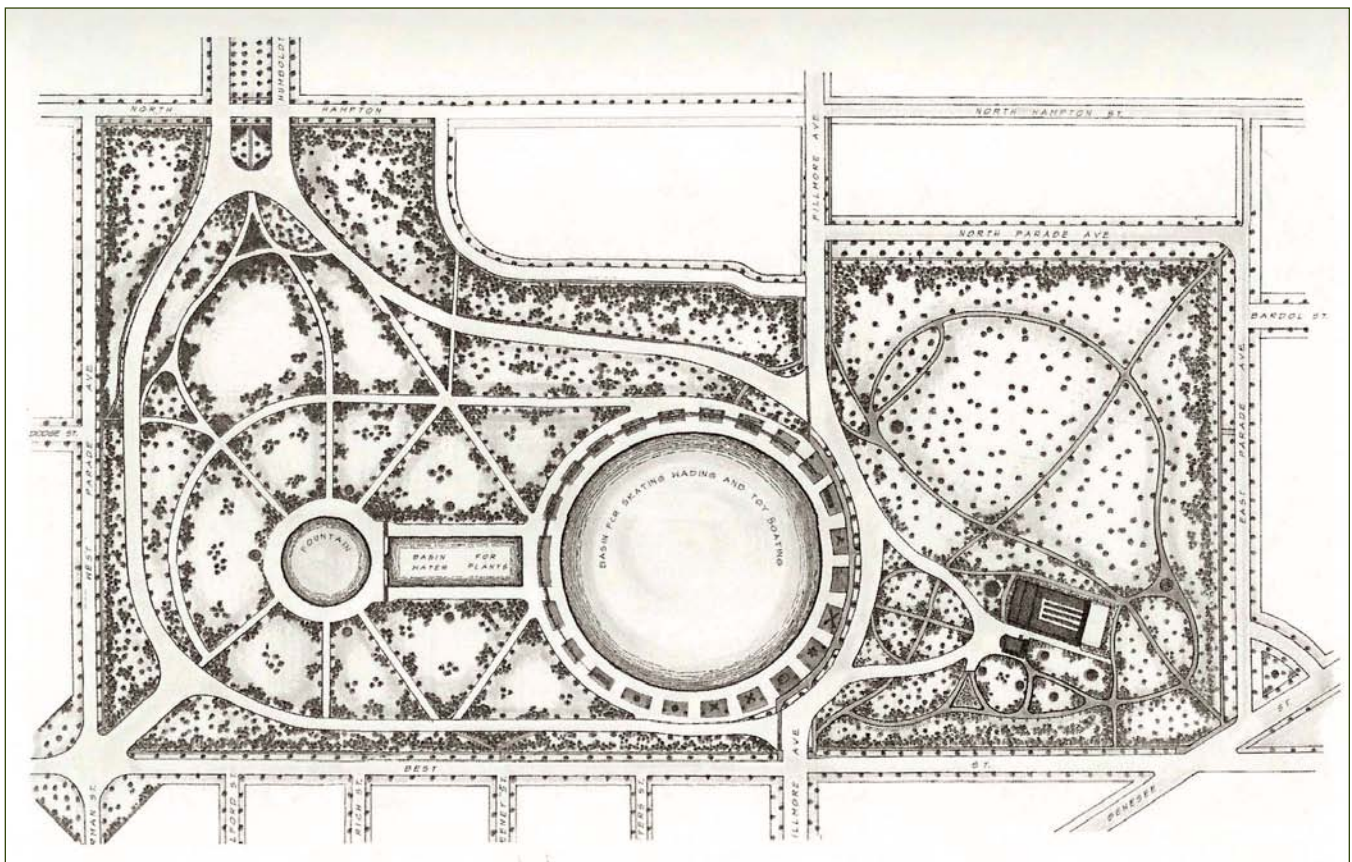
boundary of the Park, which Mr. Rumsey has most liberally offered to add to the park for the purposes of the Historical Society.

Second, a site facing south on Agassiz Place and adjoining Parkside Avenue and the east entrance to the Park.

Third, a site facing east at the carriage concourse on the knoll in the southwestern portion of the park and overlooking Park Lake.

The third site, that upon the knoll overlooking the Park Lake, would be so attractive that its advantages must inevitably appeal strongly to all interested in the success of the Historical Society's museum. We understand that this site has already received the unanimous approval of the Park Commissioners and would undoubtedly be eagerly accepted by the trustees of the Historical Society.

We sympathize with the motives which must influence the opinions of so many public spirited citizens favorably to this site and it is therefore with great reluctance that we feel compelled to give our professional opinion emphatically against it. No merely personal feeling of self-confidence in our opinions and desire to have our way would lend us for a moment to oppose the united judgment of a body of men who have demonstrated their successes in life the right to have their opinions respected. Nothing but a sense of duty and a deep conviction that the gentlemen in question do not fully understand or do not give due respect to the incomparable value of the park landscape would induce us to oppose a choice of this site. The landscape of which this site is a conspicuous portion was created upon comparatively bare and uninteresting land after most earnest study and years



*A map of Humboldt Park on the east side of Buffalo connected by Humboldt Pkwy in the northwest corner to Delaware Park. Courtesy of BOPC.*

of labor and effort at great cost of land and construction. It would be a most wasteful and deplorable thing to inflict a great and entirely unnecessary injury upon it by obtruding upon it a great building which, however handsome and costly it may be in itself, must be entirely inappropriate and subversive of the original desire and of the only justifiable purposes of the park.

There is now no lack of admiration for the beauty of the park, but we regret to say there is even among the Commissioners themselves a most lamentable lack of appreciation of the most important and fundamental principles of the beauty of its landscapes. That this lack of appreciation exists is very clearly indicated by the commonly expressed opinion that any costly and handsome public building or work of architectural or sculpture



*A view of the bridle path above the North Bay. Courtesy of BOPC/ Jim Mendola.*

adornment would assist in ornamenting the park and should consequently be accepted without question. This opinion is absolutely and wholly untrue and unreasonable in the case of Delaware Park. It would be perfectly correct and undeniable in the case of Humboldt Park as now being reconstructed. Why? In the case of Delaware Park a great area of land was taken for the express purpose of creating upon it beautiful, broad, quiet acres of great stretches of grassy land, wide waters, vast masses of

trees and shrubbery, as well as infinite beauties of plant growth and other natural details and all under a breadth of sky nowhere else to be so well enjoyed in a great city. Such a park attains its highest value in being a complete antithesis of the artificial conditions of the city. As the growth of the city gradually makes the country less and less accessible to most of its inhabitants, it becomes more and more important to keep the large parks as free from architectural adornments as due regard for the comfort in the use of them will permit. In the case of Humboldt Park, however, the growth of the city beyond it, comparatively small size of the park and an unfavorable local public opinion have compelled the abandonment of the natural landscape idea as the basis of the plan. Broad natural effects succumb to the convenience of the great numbers who insist upon making short cuts an all directions in spite of everything. Under such circumstances, formal art may well predominate over natural effects and this principle having been adopted there is no objection to the introduction of architectural and sculptural details as essential features of the design and not merely as conveniences to the enjoyment of the scenery.

In Delaware Park, on the other hand, natural landscape is absolutely the foundation of the design. Everything should be subordinated to it. No building should be permitted in it which is not intended primarily to aid the visitor in the enjoyment of the landscape. There is no other sufficient reason for a public park covering hundreds of acres. Seven parks of 50 acres each would be vastly more convenient and would afford far more frequent opportunities for outdoor recreation to the citizens than one park consisting of 350 acres necessarily situated far from the center of population. But no one of the 50-acre parks could possibly afford that one transcendent advantage of broad, placid, natural landscape. Each 50-acre park might afford a site or sites for magnificent public museums with all needed quiet and



any desired setting of lawns and trees and shrubberies; nor would such buildings necessarily ruin these 50-acre parks. They would simply lessen the available area for gardens or outdoor recreation and that would be all. But to introduce public museums into the landscapes of Delaware Park is to strike directly at the very soul of the park and the main reason for its existence.

The proposed museum is not and cannot be made to appear a necessary or reasonable feature of the park landscape. It must artificialize it and tend to reduce it to the scale and character of a small city park. If one such building can properly be introduced upon the park landscape no reason can be given for refusing sites to any other educational, charitable or semi-public association which offers to put up a costly and handsome building. If this process goes on the park will be ruined and the wisdom of those who assented to the original design utterly condemned. There has been and can be no change of public requirements which dictates the abandonment of the park to building purposes. Suitable sites can always be found for public or semi-public buildings where even greater numbers can visit them without paying car fares or losing so much time as is necessarily consumed in visiting the park. It is clearly not at all essential that the

proposed museum should command beautiful views in the park and be seen in the natural landscapes of the park. The beauty of its architecture should be displayed on a handsome site and there are some advantages in having it in the edge of or adjoining the park, but it should not obtrude upon the views in the park. The collections in such a museum do not require for their proper study and enjoyment that there should be beautiful views from the windows over a park landscape. Such views would compete with the collections—would distract the attention and confuse the mind of the student and visitor. That this is so is clearly indicated by the fact that in such museums the collections may be almost as well viewed at night by artificial light when there are no views outside; also by the fact that in some museums the windows are made so high that one cannot look out upon the landscape and even, in some instances, there are no windows but the collections are lighted by day from skylights only. As wall space is usually of great value in a museum such an arrangement, when practicable, is fully justifiable. Evidently it is of entirely secondary importance that such a museum should command beautiful views in the park.

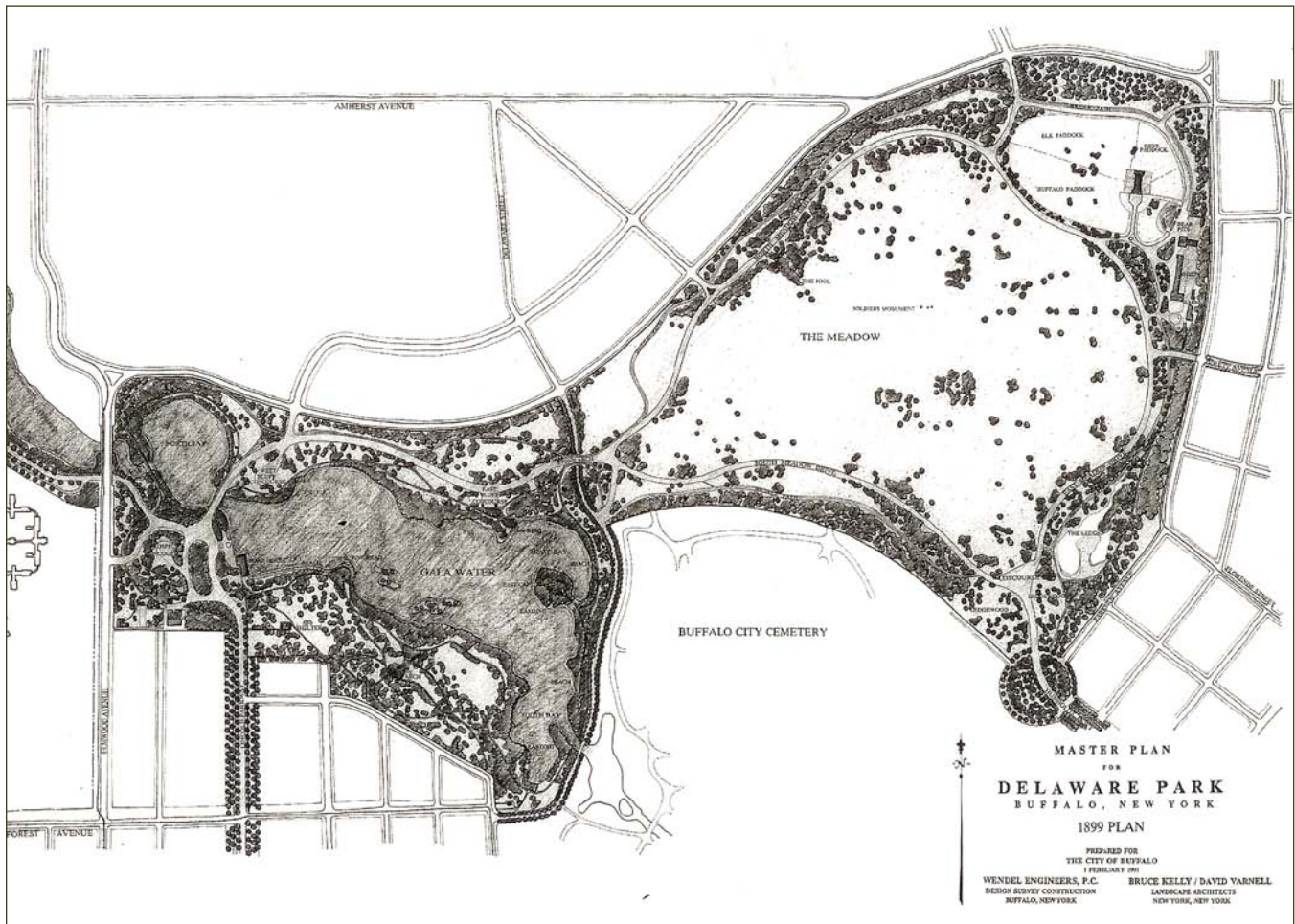
Now it is a generally recognized architectural desideratum that a public museum should be isolated from all



*Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society building today; a Japanese garden was constructed in front in 1971. Courtesy of the BOPC.*



*A view of the park lake and Casino Plaza with the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in the background. Courtesy of BOPC.*



1899 plan of Delaware Park. Courtesy of National Park Service, Olmsted National Historic Site.

city sights and all other works of architecture by dense plantations of trees. There is nothing especially appropriate in discovering an architecturally beautiful huge public building in the midst of park woods. It is our business to acquaint ourselves in a general way with some of the more obvious requirements of architecture and we fail to find anything inappropriate or regrettable in the surroundings of the Rumsey site or the Agassiz-place site as they are likely to develop. On the contrary, there is every assurance that all outside conditions will be entirely favorable.

The southern part of the park being nearest to the city will always be the most crowded. Heretofore the crowd has been densest in and about the picnic grove of old for-

est trees just east of the Lincoln Parkway entrance. The ground west of this entrance have been comparatively little resorted to, owing mainly to the small size of the trees. The fact that is commanded only a distant view of the park lake has also made it less popular. It is also hidden from the entrance and is more distant from existing street cars. All these unfavorable conditions are soon to disappear. The lake is to continue down stream far beyond this locality; the trees are approaching a dignified size and already give much shade; the new drive down the shores of the extension of the park lake and the new Elmwood Avenue entrance drive will bring the locality into great prominence; the street cars in Elmwood Avenue



will make this section of the park even more accessible than any other and the new greenhouses will facilitate flower gardening effects (which may be introduced without undue injury to the general landscapes of the park) which will surely make this part of the park especially attractive to most visitors. In short, it is obvious that this is soon to be one of the most crowded portions of the park. Any reduction of its area would therefore be a great mistake of park management. In view of this important practical consideration we strongly advise the Park Commission not to give away a big building site in this part of the park and thus sacrifice the happiness of thousands of citizens in the enjoyment of what will soon be the most ornamental and the most favorite part of the park, merely to secure for the proposed museum a slight advantage of situation which cannot be given without greatly injuring the park landscape.

Respectfully,

F. L. & J. C. Olmsted

There was a pause after Mr. Olmsted had finished reading, and then Gen. John C. Graves suggested that the report be received and filed. That was done, and then Dr. Joseph C. Greene, on behalf of the Historical Society, spoke for the concourse site. Judge Smith could hardly wait for Dr. Greene to finish, he was so anxious to talk at Mr. Olmsted. So soon as he got the opportunity he began to ridicule the landscape architect's suggestions. He declared that to adopt them would reverse the whole previous action of the Board. As for spoiling the beauty of the park, what right had persons of aesthetic tastes to have opinions on such subjects?

David F. Day followed Judge Smith. He acknowledged that the situation was the most embarrassing one he had been confronted with since he was a member of the



*View of Delaware Park. Courtesy of Ethan Carr.*



*A view of the Ivy Bridge in Rumsey Woods at Delaware Park. Courtesy of BOPC.*



*View of the meadow in Delaware Park. Courtesy of Ethan Carr.*



Board. It involved the direct interests of the parks, the interests of the Historical Society and the interests of the public. Mr. Day gave way to Commissioner Reinecke, who said that he thought the situation was simply the outgrowth of a difference of opinion. Gen. Graves remarked that it would cost a lot to build the building on the Rumsey property, and the Board would have to plant grass there, too. Andrew Langdon said that Berlin, Birmingham, Rome, Rochester, Paris, Poughkeepsie, Constantinople, Chicago and other art-centers had buildings in the middle of parks, and he didn't think that young Mr. Olmsted knew more than the men who laid out the famous parks of those places. Bronson C. Rumsey came to the defense

of the park. He agreed with Mr. Olmsted's conclusions. He declared that the erection of the building on the site proposed would establish a precedent that could never be stopped, and that the young men of this generation would be sorry some day if such action were to be taken now. Britton Holmes thought the Historical Society should take a look at the Rumsey property, and finally, on motion of Commissioner Day, all action on the matter was postponed for two weeks and a message sent to the Corporation Counsel asking an opinion on the legality of the acceptance of the offer of the Rumseys. Gen. Graves keeping up a fire of objections until after the vote was announced. ■



*View of the lake (known today as Hoyt Lake) in Delaware Park. Courtesy of Ethan Carr.*