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Buffalo. Art & Architecture

A Brief History of Buffalo

The history of Buffalo is rich with innovation, extending back to the early nineteenth century. The city's origins as a thriving transportation and industrial center point to what Buffalo has become today: a longstanding home to creativity, culture, and design.

Buffalo's foundations date to 1804, when Joseph Ellicott completed plans of the Village of Buffalo for the Holland Land Company. Though the village suffered tremendous losses during the War of 1812, the map of present-day downtown remains similar to Ellicott's original layout. With the postwar reconstruction, Buffalo's economy and future prospects were revived by the 1820s, due in no small part to its selection in 1822 as the western terminus of the Erie Canal.

The largest undertaking of its time in American civil engineering, the Erie Canal opened in 1825 with fanfare and excitement. Stretching from Albany to Buffalo, the inland canal made it possible to travel to New York City by water, expediting both freight shipments and passenger travel at dramatically lower costs. Generating prosperity and expansion in the various ports along its waterway, the canal had a colossal impact on the socio-economic development of the city of Buffalo, which was chartered in 1832.

Along the waterfront, the most significant innovation of the time was Joseph Dart's creation of the first steam-powered grain elevator in 1841. These grain elevators could unload 1,000 bushels per hour, radically reducing the port time of cargo boats and securing Buffalo as the nation's largest grain port. Still towering along the banks of the Buffalo River as a testament to technological innovation, these massive grain elevators served as inspiration for the European founders of modern architecture.

The 1840s also saw the development of another steam-powered machine in the Buffalo area: the railroad. While the canal had offered a fast means of transportation, the railways, which workers had begun to lay in the mid-1830s, were quick to surpass ships in speed. The first railway lines were relatively short, connecting Buffalo to Albany, Black Rock, and Niagara Falls. Initially conceived as a means of passenger transportation, the railroads soon facilitated the trade of lumber, coal, grain, and flour, accelerating Buffalo's industrial growth. The extension of these lines throughout the late-nineteenth century increased Buffalo's accessibility to other cities and industrial centers, including New York, and launched an influx of immigrants to the Buffalo area.

Alongside the growth in civic infrastructure and the prosperity of the port, Buffalonians continued to explore different forms of commerce. Brewing was a budding industry in the 1860s, led by the city's principal brewery, the John Schusler Brewing Company. The Larkin Soap Company set the standard for mail-order companies, becoming the largest of its kind in the world by the 1900s. The soap manufacturer must also be recognized for leaving the city with another important legacy. In need of new administrative facilities, the company's chief financial officer, Darwin D. Martin, brought to Buffalo the then relatively unknown Chicago architect, Frank Lloyd Wright. Martin had discovered Wright through his brother, whose house had been designed by the young architect. Martin's enthusiastic support of Wright's designs made the Larkin Administration Building the first of seven projects that the architect would build in Buffalo.

With the increasing success of its various industries, the city's population ballooned from 10,000 inhabitants in 1832 to twenty-five times that amount in 1890. By the early twentieth century, Buffalo had become one of the largest cities in the United States. As a railway and trans-

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portation hub, Buffalo was second only to Chicago. The city's Central Terminal, completed in 1929, was designed by Fellheimer & Wagner, the architects of New York City's Grand Central Terminal.

Buffalonians, in turn, invested in their growing city through the development of various architectural, cultural, and community projects. The mid-1800s saw the construction of landmark religious and educational institutions, such as St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral, which was designed in 1849 by renowned architect Richard Upjohn, and the University of Buffalo, founded in 1846. The Buffalo Gas and Light Company, the first gas company in New York, was also established mid-century, which allowed Buffalo's streets to be illuminated at night. To offset the increasing congestion of the burgeoning city, landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted and his firm worked from 1868 to 1898 on an elaborate interlocking system of parks and parkways that provided islands of tranquility amid Buffalo's industrial traffic.

In 1901, the centerpiece of Olmsted's landscaping, Delaware Park, became the site of the Pan-American Exposition. Attracting nearly eight million people to Buffalo, the fair featured the latest technological innovations, including an Electric Tower that was illuminated by night with thousands of colored bulbs. Unfortunately, the exposition's optimistic message of modernism and innovation was overshadowed by the fatal shooting of President William McKinley. While the incident cast a shadow over the fair, the Pan-American Exposition remains an important testament to the city's achievements.

One of the innovations on display at the exposition was a two-horsepower "horseless carriage" driven by entrepreneur and businessman George Pierce. After the fair, Pierce's newly opened automobile company, the Pierce Arrow Motor Company, became popular in Buffalo and throughout the United States. Though automobiles were initially a prohibitive expense for the general public, car manufacturing soon became an integral aspect of Buffalo's commerce and trade. The aerospace and steel industries developed alongside the automotive industry

in the early to mid-1900s. Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Company, one of the first aviation related companies in Buffalo, grew to become one of the world's largest aircraft manufacturers. Relocating from Scranton, PA, the Lackawanna Steel Company also thrived in Buffalo. The company had been brought to Buffalo in part by financier John Albright, who would later donate money for the founding of the Albright Art Gallery.

During both World Wars, Buffalo's economy prospered with its expanding steel, automotive, aerospace, and ship-building industries, and the city became a thriving hub for retail and wholesale distribution. A number of important architectural and cultural projects were realized as a byproduct of the city's continued success. Two significant examples include the construction of Kleinhans Music Hall, completed in 1940 by architects Eliel and Eero Saarinen, and the expansion of the Albright Art Gallery, designed by Gordon Bunshaft and renamed as the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in 1962. Regarded as one of the most acoustically perfect music halls in the world, Kleinhans was made possible by the generous gift of clothier and fashion retailer Edward L. Kleinhans and his wife Mary Seaton Kleinhans. The Albright-Knox expansion was financed by donations from Seymour H. Knox Jr. and his family, who had made their fortune in the development of five-and-dime stores.

Buffalo today is indebted to its industrial history, which brought wealth and prosperity to the city and allowed it to grow into a center of art and architecture. From the renovation of the Larkin Exchange Building to the reopening of Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center in the newly restored Asbury Delaware Church, Buffalo's programs of preservation have revitalized historic landmarks for public use and enjoyment. As Buffalo looks to the future, its next generation continues in the tradition of its civic and industrial leaders to sustain a vibrant civic life through the continual development of new architectural and cultural initiatives.