3.4 Olmsted and Vaux's Buffalo Park and Parkway System: The Parade and Fillmore Avenue

Figure 3.4 A peaceful, tree-lined pathway in the southeastern corner of Martin Luther King, Jr. Park (The Parade), along Fillmore Avenue. The greenhouse stands directly to the north (right).

For over three decades beginning in 1868, Frederick Law Olmsted and his successors were associated with Buffalo in planning its parks and urban development. In Buffalo, Olmsted and his partner Calvert Vaux first implemented a comprehensive series of parks and parkways that pioneered the concept of the metropolitan recreational system. Initially conceived between 1868 and 1870, it was substantially constructed by 1876, the national centennial year. Olmsted and Vaux's park system thoughtfully developed the city's original plan that had been framed by Joseph Ellicott in 1804. The Buffalo Park and Parkway system is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In August of 1868, at the request of William Dorsheimer, a prominent attorney and politician, Olmsted stopped in Buffalo on his way back to New York from Chicago where he and Vaux were engaged in laying out the suburban community of Riverside. Ten years earlier, he and Vaux had won the competition for the design of Central Park, the first extensive municipal park in America. After looking over Buffalo and its environs, Olmsted convinced Dorsheimer and his park advocate colleagues that Buffalo would be best served by a series of separate greenspaces, rather than by a single large park. He proposed three parks in the as yet unbuilt northern part of town. In the plan he developed later with Vaux, these were called The Park (the present Delaware Park), The Front (the present Front Park), and The Parade (after 1896 known as Humboldt Park, the present Martin Luther King, Jr., Park.) (Figures 3.4-3.6). Each of these sites, as their names implied, had a different character and purpose within what Olmsted and Vaux considered a citywide park system.

The Park, which was the largest of all, expressed most fully Olmsted and Vaux's concept of nature put to civic use. It consisted of 230 acres of rolling meadowland and a 46-acre lake. Encompassed by a belt of trees and tall shrubs to screen the park landscape from the city beyond—a characteristic of all of Olmsted and Vaux's parks that has largely disappeared in

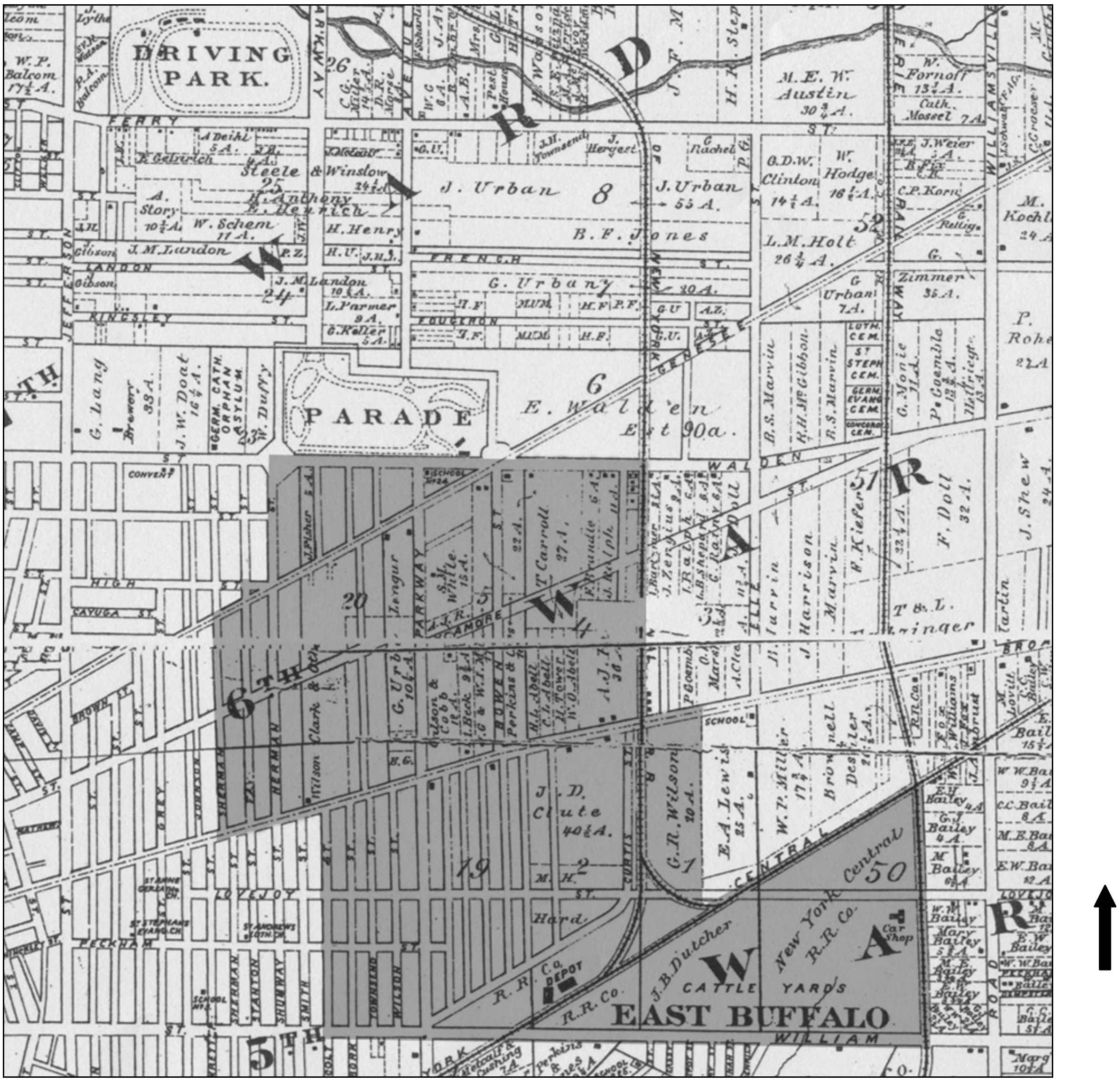

Figure 3.5 The approximate boundaries of the Broadway-Fillmore Avenue shaded in gray on the *1880 Illustrated Historical Atlas of Erie County, NY* (New York; F.W. Beers). Note The Parade to the north. Present Fillmore Avenue, on the south side of the park, is identified as "Parkway." Note the New York Central Railroad to the east. The railroad extended through the eastern edge of the Broadway-Fillmore neighborhood. Not the large parcel to the east, the E. Walden Estate; Walden Avenue begins at Genesee Street.

Buffalo—The Park was to be a place that offered city dwellers the pleasures of passive recreation. Here strolling, picnicking, boating, riding, and relaxing were to be enjoyed in an atmosphere of artfully contrived natural scenery. Olmsted and Vaux believed that the contemplation and passive enjoyment of nature promoted mental and spiritual well being.

The other two parks of the system were much smaller than The Park. The Front comprised 35 acres on the high bank overlooking the opening of the Niagara River. From a broad terrace, one could view a panorama of lake and river scenery. In addition, a promenade, music pavilion, ball field, and later in its history, waterfront playgrounds and boating facilities, made The Front a popular spot. It was one of the few places where citizens could have access to the waterfront for recreation.

The Parade was located inland, considerably east of the water. As its name suggested, this greenspace was designed more for active recreation than was The Park. It included a parade ground and an area for children's games. A two-story wooden refectory building—the most elaborate of all the many park structures that Calvert Vaux was to design—was another attraction. On weekends, it accommodated large crowds who from all across the city who came here to socialize and dance. Inspired in part by beer gardens Olmsted had seen in Germany public parks, The Parade House was especially popular with the nearby neighborhood that was home to many German immigrant families. Later in the nineteenth century, Olmsted's successors remodeled the park, cutting Fillmore Avenue through its center from north to south and creating an immense circular wading pool that forms the major surface feature of the park today (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6 Wading pool in Martin Luther King, Jr. Park, looking southeast toward Best Street. Note the tower of St. Mary's of Sorrows in the left background.

Little is left in Martin Luther King, Jr., Park from its earliest days. By the 1930s, a casino had been added, a greenhouse had replaced the refectory, and the Museum of Science had been erected in the northwest corner of the park. In the 1980s, the city constructed the Science Magnet School behind the Museum of Science. However, historian Martin Wachadlo believes that he has discovered a remnant structure that may have been designed by Calvert Vaux in conjunction with The Parade House. Located at 1119 Genesee Street is a wooden barn that in its proportions, materials, and design, which features external chamfered bracing, resembles the sort of “Stick Style” structures that Vaux planned for public parks (Figures 3.7-3.8). Wachadlo speculates that the building might have formed a section of a long carriage house that appears on early park maps adjacent to the Parade House. When the Parade House was demolished in the early twentieth century, it is possible that this ancillary structure was sold and moved to its present site from the nearby park.

Of equal importance to the new parks were the parkways and avenues that Olmsted and Vaux planned to connect them to one another. These tributaries of the parks extended in a wide arc across the northern part of the city so that one could travel the six-mile distance from The Front to The Parade under a canopy of green. At 200 feet wide, the major parkways were much broader that the normal streets of the city and provided separate lanes for different types of traffic. Areas of turf planted with rows of overarching elms created park-like thoroughfares that were reserved for residential development along their borders. The residential parkways in Buffalo were among the first to be constructed in an American city.

Olmsted and Vaux anticipated that their park system would be eventually extended to benefit the southern part of the city. Fillmore Avenue (named for Millard Fillmore, who, as a resident of Buffalo after his presidency, aided the park movement) was eventually designated a parkway leading south from The Parade to South Park, the plans for which Olmsted, who had terminated his partnership with Vaux, outlined in 1887. Although not as grand as the earlier parkways such as Lincoln and Chapin, Fillmore Avenue was laid out through the Broadway-Fillmore area with double rows of elms on either side of a wide roadbed (Figure 3.9).