

LARKIN HISTORY (#34) - THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF THE OLMSTEDS AND THE LARKINS

I recently attended a fundraising luncheon for the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy, the organization evolving from the work of Frederick Law Olmsted and his son, Frederick, Jr. and stepson, John C. along with their partner, British architect/horticultural guru, Calvin Vaux. The Conservancy is charged with the responsibility of operating and maintaining the parks and parkways in Buffalo designed by these legendary urban park planners with particular focus on respecting the historic character of what truly is an incredible resource.

Influenced by the gardens Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. (FLO, Sr.) and Vaux had visited in England, France and Germany, as well as their extensive reading of books dealing with urban living and design, they both embraced the concept of healthiness despite urban congestion and pollution, by creating spaces which embraced the natural world. The book, "Olmsted in Buffalo and Niagara Falls," published in 2011 and authored by Lynda Schneekloth, Robert Shipley and Thomas Yots, best describes the philosophy of what is referred to as the "Olmstedian landscape:"



"At its heart is a vision about humans and nature that was shared by late 19th century transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau. They wrote of human's oneness with nature and extolled the spiritual experiences that one had in the natural world. Olmsted believed that nature was the home of humans and critical to their well-being. He argued and demonstrated that contact with the world of plants, open space, fresh air and water was essential. In the increasingly gray and hard world of the early industrial city, Olmsted promoted parks as a way to provide 'nature'." (p.7)

Olmsted and Vaux first met and became the designers when they won the contract in 1858 for creating New York City's Central Park. Having that significant project under their belts, they were further positioned by the effect of the end of the Civil War in the late 1860's. Francis R. Kowsky, in "The Best Planned City in the World: Olmsted, Vaux and the Buffalo Park System," (2013) points out that Buffalo was developing into an era of industrial prosperity that lasted into the mid-1900's. It became the world's largest coal and lumber distribution center; its diversity of products manufactured in Buffalo was enormous (including soap). It was positioned well to participate in shipping by rail or water, via the Great Lakes or the Erie Canal. It had become a hub for transporting goods originating from the Midwest and Canada with ultimate destinations on the east coast to be shipped to Europe or elsewhere, or to be transported to cities along the east coast. Buffalo was also an easy destination to receive components necessary for its own manufacturing as well as finished goods from the east or west.

"Olmsted and Buffalo and Niagara" provides a convenient timeline of the work of Olmsted, his sons and the subsequent corporation of which the sons were members along with other skilled horticulturalists and design architects.

It was 1868 when Olmsted and Vaux came to Buffalo to design a park and parkway system here. Already in place was buffalo founder, Joseph Ellicott's lay out of the radiating streets plan originating at what we now know as Niagara Square. FLO, Sr. had previously visited Buffalo in 1865. The first actual design completed was in 1870: Delaware Park. That year also saw completion of the designs for Front Park and Parade (now Martin Luther King) Park. Actual completion of construction for Front Park was in 1875 and for Delaware Park, was 1876. MLK Park construction was not completed until 1910. 1890 saw the design for Cazenovia Park completed followed by construction in 1895, after FLO, Sr.'s retirement. The lake was finished the next year. South Park design was completed in 1894 by the Olmsted brothers, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and John C. Olmsted, followed by construction of the conservatory in 1900. The golf course was added in 1915 (much to the distress of the ducks and geese!). Riverside Park had been designed in 1895 with construction accomplished in 1900. Later, in 1912, a southern section was added to the park.



Since John D. Larkin, Sr. did not return to Buffalo to live and start his soap manufacturing business until 1875, about the only finished project at that time was Delaware Park. But certainly, he had to be acutely aware of all this park and parkway construction going on. He certainly was one of the major players in the manufacturing industry described by Kowsky. But did he know the Olmsteds?

The first reference I explored was based on a reference in Daniel Larkin's biography of his grandfather, JDL, Sr. He mentioned that JDL, Jr. had been a member of a businessman's club, the Ellicott Club, which met at the Ellicott Square Building. The Buffalo History Museum had some old members' books with information about the club going back to 1896. It lasted only ten years, till the Buffalo Club and Saturn Club wooed most of its members away. The Museum possessed only a few isolated members' rosters, but JDL, Sr. was listed in the 1902 and 1906 books. A William D. Olmsted was also listed, but I find no evidence that he was related in any way to FLO, Sr. A William Olmsted's name was included in the 1897 members list, but again, nothing to suggest that he was related to FLO, Sr.

The Saturn Club was created in 1885. A John B. Olmsted was a charter member, but does not appear to be the son, of FLO, Sr., i.e., John C. Olmsted. A George Olmsted was also a member along with John B. in 1909. John D. Larkin, Jr. (JDL, Jr.) shows up in 1907. His brother, Crate Larkin, joined in 1924 and also is listed in books for 1925 and 1929.

The Larkin family was a little more involved with the Buffalo Club, formed in 1867 by Millard Fillmore and others. Records show JDL, Sr. joined the club in 1909; his son, JDL, Jr., in 1905; son, Harry, in 1911 and grandson, JDL III became a Junior member in 1928. No Olmsteds were members of the Buffalo Club that I could find.

Another name that repeatedly showed up in the clubs' records was William Letchworth. When I wrote a previous article about JDL, Sr. and the Senecas, I questioned whether these two men might have known each other. Letchworth had had the body of Mary Jemison disinterred from the Seneca Indian cemetery on Buffum Street because the graves were being desecrated. He had her moved to his property in what is now Letchworth State Park, and near property she had owned, in order to protect her remains. In that article, I noted that JDL, Sr., was concerned about the ongoing pillaging of the cemetery and the illegal sale of pieces of the cemetery to non-Indian people. This had been occurring despite an agreement between the Senecas and the government in 1838 at which time they signed a treaty to move out of their village here and relocate to a reservation in the southern tier, providing that the property would always be preserved as their sacred ground. JDL, Sr. purchased the burial ground in 1909 and proceeded to clean it up and restore it. On June 29, 1912, JDL, Sr., in a short ceremony, dedicated a monument – a large boulder to which a bronze plaque had been attached commemorating the Indians who had been buried there, including Red Jacket and also Mary Jemison. He then executed a deed conveying the land to the City of Buffalo on the condition that it always be maintained as a park.

I bring this up now because I recently learned from the book, "Olmsted in Buffalo and Niagara," that the Seneca Indian Park is included as part of the Olmsted Park Conservancy, and specifically is considered part of Cazenovia Park though it is not connected to it. That suggests that that Park is now under the protection and care of the Olmsted Conservancy. However, I have been unable to learn when this transition occurred though I tried to contact the Olmsted director. Though this transaction would not have involved JDL, Sr. or FJO, Sr. directly, it is still an interesting connection.

Much more directly related, however, is Dan Larkin's mention, at p. 57 of the Biography, that JDL, though working hard at his fledgling business in 1877, still left his office at 5:00 to go home to be with his family, often hitching up "his fine horse and carriage" to take his family to Delaware Park. Obviously, he was using the Park exactly as Olmsted had contemplated.



Adjoining Delaware Park was the elaborate 200-acre grounds of the Buffalo Psychiatric Hospital (then known as the Buffalo State Hospital for the Insane). Olmsted's work on the design of Delaware Park was underway, but the city's decision to place the hospital adjoining it, required FLO, Sr. to forego the West entrance, instead designing the beautiful "Y" shaped parkway from the South. In fact, FLO, Sr. had initially envisioned what was to become hospital grounds, to be part of the Park. According to Kowsky, FLO, Sr. and Vaux were consulted by the hospital's state appointed managers about the design of the grounds because they had had past experience with landscaping mental hospitals. Five months later, in May 1871, H.H. Richardson was hired as the architect. His huge Romanesque-style plan suggesting a flight of birds, according to Kowsky, surrounded by the Olmsted designed farmlands, lawns, meadows, gently winding roads and capped with the meandering Scajaquada Creek, created the calming atmosphere that would be therapeutic for the patients. Fortunately, the Larkin family had no occasion to use the State Hospital facilities.



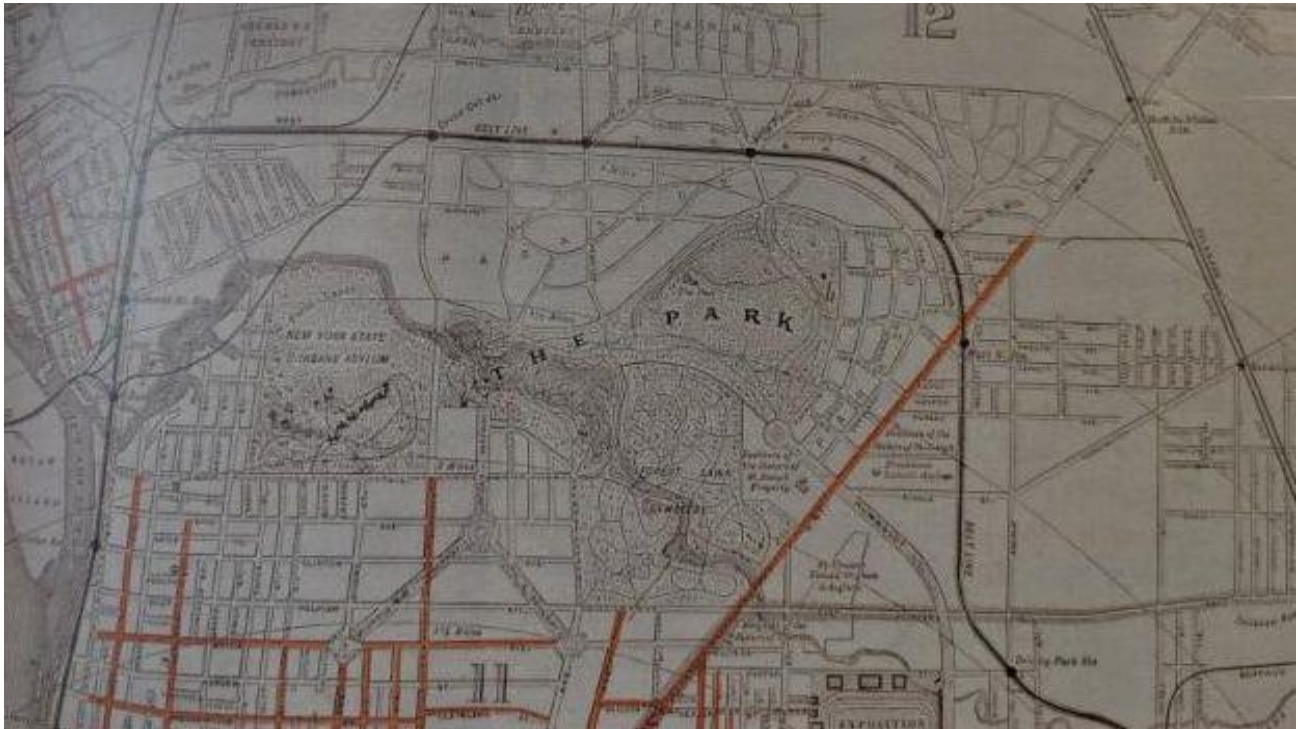
Extending the park-like atmosphere of this area, however, was the enormous Forest Lawn Cemetery. Again, tying together this huge area of park, hospital and now, cemetery, was the quiet, calming Scajaquada Creek. Gentle hills, beautiful trees, the sounds of birds all contributed to the serenity of that remarkable place. It was there in 1885 that JDL, Sr. and his wife, Frances, placed their daughter, six-year-old Edith, and two years later, their three-month-old son, Hubbard. They would follow years later, along with others from their family, where they continue to lie in placid serenity, surrounded by family. Adolph Strauss, not the Olmsteds, designed the cemetery. However, the men knew each other and respected each other's work. They were compatible neighbors.



The plan for which the city had commissioned Olmsted was not limited to these dramatic, large projects. They were hired to do what had never been done before – design a comprehensive park and parkways system for the entire city. Accordingly, parkways connected parks with traffic circles adorned with plants and fountains or sculptures, which were to spread out throughout the city. Much of this was completed and to this day, contribute much to the grace of Buffalo.

Included in this plan was a "suburb" of sorts to adjoin Delaware Park. FLO, Sr. designed two neighborhoods, one to the north and the other to the east of Delaware Park. The area to the east became known as Highland/Parkside or Parkside East and was comprised of lots that were defined by streets with a gentle curve to the northwest from Humboldt Parkway to Amherst Street. Streets between Main St. and the Park tended to be straight except for Jewett Parkway which had a nice curve. The

neighborhood extended across Main Street between Forest Avenue and Griffin St. By Nov. 1885, the streets were laid out and construction began.



JDL, Sr's right-hand man, Darwin Martin, who had been instrumental in persuading JDL, Sr to hire Frank Lloyd Wright to design the Larkin Administration Building in 1901 (completed in 1906), personally hired FLW in 1904 to design a home for him in Parkside East. FLW selected the lot, a 1.4-acre parcel on the corner of Jewett Parkway and Summit Avenue. The house is described at length in the "Darwin D. Martin House State Historic Site Master Plan/ Final Environmental Impact Statement," dated June 29, 2001. "A true collaboration between architect and client... The house is generally viewed as an outstanding demonstration of the 'Prairie Style' principles of residential design of which Wright was the prime exponent." (p. 52)

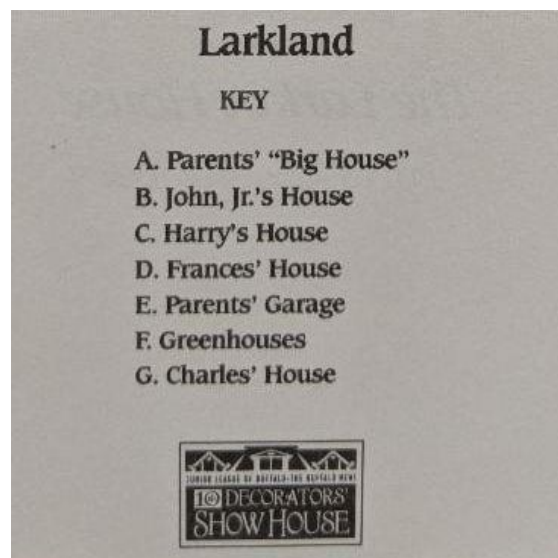
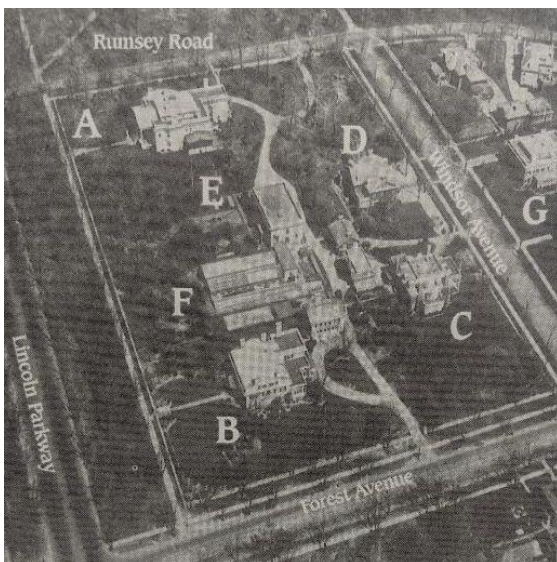
The site was also developed with several other FLW designs: The Barton House, designed for Darwin's sister and brother-in-law, a pergola which connected the Martin House to a conservatory; a carriage house, a greenhouse and a Gardner's Cottage. Together they comprise probably the finest residential work of FLW. Almost fully restored now, the complex draws thousands of visitors every year from all over the country and indeed, from all over the world. JDL, Sr., being Darwin's employer but also his good friend, was undoubtedly involved with this extraordinary architecture in the Olmsted neighborhood.

As a matter of fact, any doubt became erased about JDL, Sr. having a relationship with the Olmsteds when I read in the Kowsky book that JDL, Sr. himself along with several other investors had formed several land companies referred to as 'Villa Park.' In 1886, they contacted the Olmsted firm about their desire to develop a portion of the Olmsted neighborhood to the west of the Parkside community. "In the late summer of 1886, the Olmsted firm forwarded their draft for the area showing 'a handsome arrangement of streets and playgrounds.'" Plans were revised again and again when, unexpectedly in 1889 another group made an offer which was accepted. But here, for sure, there was direct connection between the Olmsteds and JDL, Sr.

Two other houses with connections to JDL, Sr. were also built in the Olmsted neighborhood to the south of the Park. Walter Davidson began working for the Larkin Soap Company as early as 1906, says Patrick Mahoney in his book, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Walter V. Davidson House: An Examination of a Buffalo Home and its Cousins from Coast to Coast." (2011) His wife was the daughter of James H. Isham, who was a buyer for the company. Located on Tillinghast Street, and built in 1904, it can be certain that the connection to Olmsted as well as to FLW would have been known to JDL.

The other house designed by FLW in the Olmsted neighborhood was the Heath House, built on Soldiers Place in 1904. William Heath was married to Mary, the sister of JDL, Sr., Frances. He became an owner and officer at the Larkin Soap Co. Again, it would have been impossible for JDL, Sr. to be unaware of the Olmsted connection of the Heath residence.

And then there is the issue of the last residence of JDL, Sr. and his wife, Frances. JDL, Sr. was a family man. He wanted his family to run his businesses including the Soap Company as well as Buffalo Pottery. He wanted his family to live near him. So in 1909, JDL Sr. purchased a block of land adjoining Delaware Park and extending from the Rumsey estate to the east to Lincoln Parkway, then just a bridge path on a gravel road from Windsor St. to Forest Avenue. This area was part of the Olmsted neighborhood south of the park leading down to Soldiers Place. From there the road split into a vee to connect with Bidwell Place and Chapin Place.



It was here in Rumsey's Woods, adjoining Olmsted's jewel, Delaware Park, that JDL decided to build the nesting area for his beloved brood. Eschewing FLW's "modern" architecture, JDL, Sr. chose to build Georgian Revival styled mansions. In addition to his own, he also built for four of his children - John, Jr., Frances, Harry and Charles. JDL, Sr.'s home was built at the corner of Lincoln Parkway and Rumsey Road, adjacent to the Park. The home at the corner of Lincoln Pky. and Forest Ave. was for John, Jr. and his wife, Edna. Eventually, it became known as Buffalo Seminary Larkin House.

The compound evoked a sense of quiet wealth and propriety. Each house had a garage over which the chauffeur's family lived in its own apartment. Steam heat was provided through tunnels to all the houses from a single boiler. Similarly, electricity

was furnished to all the houses from a single source. The complex included green houses and other structures to serve all the families. The houses were completed by 1915 with deeds tendered to the respective children two years later. No expense was spared for the parents' mansion. It was made of white brick with marble trim. The porte cochere was made of glass and wrought iron. White woodwork was painted with seven layers of paint with each layer of paint rubbed smooth with pumice. Unfortunately, after financial crises in the 1930's, the mansion was torn down. The other four houses remain. The compound was certainly a tribute to the legacy of the Olmsteds. (Information is from the 1981 Decorator's Show House booklet, "A History of the Buffalo Seminary Larkin House.")

I believe I can now say with certainty that Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and his two sons knew John D. Larkin, Sr. Further, I submit, their legacies, long after their deaths, continued to be intertwined, enhancing the respect and pleasure this community experiences as a result of their efforts and talent.



- From the Desk of Sharon Osgood