

Segregation Along Highway Lines: **How the Kensington Expressway Reshaped Buffalo, New York**

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Journalist Charles Kuralt once remarked, “The interstate highway system is a remarkable thing. It makes it possible to go from coast to coast without seeing anything or meeting anybody.”¹ For its time, the American Interstate system was an accomplishment unrivaled across the modern world. The 42,500-mile network of new roads connected American cities in a vast web of highways, expressways and inner-city arterials. Although these new roads created an efficient transportation system across the American countryside, the construction of inner-city highways would inevitably reshape the urban environment for years to come.

As city planners rushed to integrate the growing number of automobiles in our cities, urban neighborhoods were cut up and rearranged around new highway lines. In Buffalo, New York, the Kensington Expressway cut directly through the city’s East Side, isolating the growing African American community there. Once home to a healthy community of Polish, German, and Italian immigrants, the construction of the Kensington Expressway gave way to a new type of neighborhood: the urban ghetto. Like many urban highways, the Kensington Expressway, accelerated the process of segregation in Buffalo. By creating a direct link from the growing suburbs to the downtown financial center, working and middle class suburban commuters could completely avoid whole sections of the city.²

The Foundation of the American Highway

In order to service the growing number of drivers, urban highways would need to be tied into a larger system of expressways, and interstate roads capable of sustaining

¹ Charles Kuralt, *A Life on the Road* (New York: Ivy Books, 1990).

² Neil Kraus, *Race, Neighborhoods, and Community Power: Buffalo Politics 1934-1997* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2000) 124.

travel between and across the American landscape. The Bureau of Public Roads-which would later become the Federal Highway Administration- was formed to address the growing transportation concerns in the United States. Forming the foundation of their policy, the BPR published Toll Roads and Free Roads in 1939, and a subsequent report titled Interregional Highways in 1944. As the first report of its kind, Toll Roads and Free Roads outlined a nationwide system of highways that would connect the vast areas of the United States. When the report was written, fears of national security penetrated the minds of highway engineers, who advocated for highway routes that could not only alleviate transportation concerns, but also serve as evacuation routes in times of war. It was clear that urban highways would be the most difficult to build, but in order to reach population centers, connections would have to be built through and around our cities³ Thus the Interstate System would not only connect the rural parts of the country, but it would also penetrate the very heart of our cities.

Deciding on the location of inner-city highways was no easy task, and highway engineers routinely clashed with concerned homeowners over the routing of new roads. In spite of the opposition, highway engineers forged on throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as countless cities were transformed by massive expressway projects. As Raymond Mohl describes in *The Interstates and the Cities: Highways, Housing and the Freeway Revolt*, “Larger cities would be encircled by inner and outer beltways and traversed by radial expressways tying the urban system together.”⁴ Evidently, the construction of these inner

³ United States Committee on Roads, *Toll Roads and Free Roads*, (United States Government Printing Office: Washington D.C., 1939) 4.

⁴ Raymond A. Mohl, “The Interstates and the Cities: Highways, Housing and the Freeway Revolt,” *Poverty and Race Research Action Council* (2002) 6.

city routes would result in the displacement of whole communities, and a host of disagreements among city residents caught between the bulldozer and the Bureau of Public Roads.

By in large, highway engineers reigned supreme in the early years of highway construction. Transportation pioneers like Robert Moses understood that urban highways would become, “the hardest to locate, the most difficult to clear, the most expensive to acquire and build, and the most controversial from the point of view of selfish and shortsighted opposition.”⁵ These “selfish” and “shortsighted” critics of urban highways would likely be the ones directly effected by its construction, yet Moses and many other highway engineers saw central highways as a necessary part of progress and the formation of modern cities.

Racial discrimination dominated the highest echelons of government planning. Robert Moses was perhaps the most outspoken critic of racial inclusion and his projects often hurt minority groups more dramatically than white Americans. In one interview, Moses even complained that, “They expect me to build playgrounds for that scum floating up from Puerto Rico.”⁶ The unapologetic rhetoric employed by Moses was common amongst many transportation engineers who saw the destruction of minority communities as the inevitable cost of American progress.

In Miami, an urban highway was relocated through the heart of city’s black community in Overtown, nicknamed the “Harlem of the South.”⁷ One Miami developer even depicted the goal of Miami’s highway as “a complete slum clearance effectively removing

⁵ Raymond A. Mohl, “Stop the Road: Freeway Revolts in American Cities,” *Journal of Urban History* (2004): 678

⁶ Robert Caro, *The Power Broker*, (Knopf: New York, New York, 1974).

⁷ Mohl, *Stop the Roads*, 683.

every Negro family from the present city limits.”⁸ In many cases, this type of overt racism manifested itself in the way of urban highways being built through minority communities.

Highways and Slum Clearance

By the time Interregional Highways was published in 1944, it had become clear that urban planners saw the urban expressway as a necessary addition to the interstate highway system. Interregional Highways closely examined the decay of America’s central business cores. BPR officials cited declining downtown areas, where “land values are often less than they were 20 years ago.”⁹ Furthermore, these downtown areas were often surrounded by “large areas of mixed land uses and rundown buildings,” which, as a result of poor zoning regulations, had developed into slum areas and blighted neighborhoods. In addition to the growth of an American transportation system, it was believed that by clearing these urban slums, city residents would receive a public good. By addressing the problems of urban slums, Interregional Highways placed highway construction within the larger context of slum clearance and community revitalization.

New highway legislation would act as both a catalyst for the revitalization of our urban centers, as well as, an opportunity to dismantle our nations slums. In the eyes of urban planners, the city highway would bring much needed traffic into the decaying city center, while also clearing out poor and blighted neighborhoods. Yet with all the accomplishments of American modernity, the inevitability of housing demolition loomed

⁸ Arnold Hirsh & Raymond Mohl, *Urban Policy in Twentieth Century America*, (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 1993)103.

⁹ The National Interregional Highway Committee, *Interregional Highways*, (United States Government Printing Office: Washington D.C., 1944) 53.

large in many American cities. At the height of highway construction, 37,000 city homes were being demolished each year.¹⁰ Those who were displaced by construction were often given a reduced price for their property and left without any receiving any relocation assistance.

As chief and commissioner of the Bureau of Public Roads, Thomas MacDonald understood the inevitability of urban highways. In a 1947 speech MacDonald declared that:

No matter how urgently a highway improvement may be needed, the homes of people who have nowhere to go should not be destroyed. Before dwellings are razed, new housing facilities should be provided for the dispossessed occupants. The question of housing should be accepted as one of the major planning problems when a city decides that it needs and wants an expressway.¹¹

By this point, highway construction had become associated with public housing concerns, and similar calls for relocation assistance grew among highway engineers. Unfortunately, federal housing relocation and assistance was never finalized as it was considered an overly expensive addition to the multi-billion dollar Interstate project.

The urban neighborhoods that African Americans resided in tended to be have the highest proportion of inadequate and decrepit housing, making their neighborhoods more attractive for slum clearance programs. In a way, urban slum clearance provided highway engineers with the justification they needed to implement widespread changes to urban landscapes. Of course highway engineers knew the inevitable consequences of building expressways through urban communities, but they were simply written off as “an acceptable cost of creating new transportation routes.”¹² Furthermore, the idea of slum clearance provided moral high ground for city planners and engineers. As Raymond Mohl

¹⁰ Mohl, “The Interstates and the Cities,” 2.

¹¹ Mohl, “The Interstates and the Cities,” 7.

¹² Mohl, “The Interstates and the Cities,” 3.

states, “Highway builders and downtown redevelopers had a common interest in eliminating low-income housing and, as one redeveloper put it in 1959, freeing blighted areas ‘for higher and better uses’.”¹³

For most marginalized social groups, organized protests were rarely more than a minor inconvenience for enterprising highway agencies. With highway funding secured,

Rather than negotiate or compromise on route location, most state and federal highway officials initially sought to forge ahead, the operative theory seemingly being to build expressways quickly before opposition coalesced and politicians caved in to an outraged public.¹⁴

By the time city members organized in the late 1960s, most of the highways had progressed beyond cancellation or had been completed in full, thus citizens would feel the permanent effects of urban highways for decades to come.

Highways, which were “peddled as redevelopment and progress,” were actually ripping through poor ethnic neighborhoods, without actually providing the funds necessary for the redevelopment they promised.¹⁵ The rhetoric that dominated urban highway construction was often centered around urban renewal and revitalization, yet it became clear that the highway was prioritized over the home. While construction firms benefited immensely from new government contracts, roadways ripped through city neighborhoods, and isolated the urban poor more profoundly than they were before the highway.

Academic Approaches to Highway History

¹³ Mohl, “The Interstates and the Cities,” 3.

¹⁴ Raymond A. Mohl, “Stop the Road: Freeway Revolts in American Cities,” *Journal of Urban History* (2004): 678

¹⁵ Helen Leavitt, *Superhighway-Superhoax* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), 19.

To be fair, highway engineers were not necessarily advocating something that they thought would be intentionally harmful. With the passage of the Federal-Highway Act of 1956, the landscape of American cities would be changed for decades to come. At the time, the 25 billion dollar Highway Act was the largest infrastructure project in U.S. history. These funds, as well as an ambitious Eisenhower administration, created an opportunity for highway engineers to change the layout of urban cities across America. Upon its completion, the 42,500-mile network of interstate highways was a prize of human engineering and the pride of American modernity. While some authors argue that urban planners intentionally targeted minority communities because of underlying racist sentiments, others saw highway construction as a progressive solution to the urban slum and the worsening living conditions of poor city inhabitants.

Some authors militantly oppose the actions of urban planners in the mid 20th century. In *Superhighway-Superhoax*, Helen Leavitt argues that a strong highway lobby encouraged the construction of an interstate system because of the enormous financial benefits. As she sees it, everyone from cement manufacturers to tire companies, staked their claim in the business of highway construction. Blinded by the lure of government contracts and huge profits, the conglomerate of various industries formed to create a powerful highway lobby. With their interests vested in automobile usage, the highway lobby pushed for legislation that would fund new roads. One of these special interest groups, known as the American Road Builders Association, or ARBA, boasted 5,300 members and was made up of highway contractors, construction firms, engineering colleges and even some members of Congress.¹⁶ Each of these groups pushed for pro-

¹⁶ Leavitt, *Superhighway-Superhoax*, 111.

highway legislation and fueled construction projects that would inevitably destroy “our churches, schools, homes and parks.”¹⁷

The profits were enormous and essentially endless given the scope of highway construction. By 1961, each million dollars that was spent on highways would require 485 tons of concrete and 600 tons of steel.¹⁸ Upon completion, the Interstate project required a combined total of 1.5 billion tons of aggregates, 35 million tons of asphalt and 48 million tons of cement.¹⁹ As billions of dollars in investment funding went into highway construction, industries that provided the manpower and materials necessary to complete these projects benefited immensely.

On the other hand, authors like Tom Lewis in *Divided Highways* believe that the adverse effects of highway construction were not purposeful and foreseeable, but instead, came about due to the narrow transportation approach focused solely on the automobile. As Richard Davies explains in a review of *Divided Highways*,

This is not a story of heroes and villains --- highway engineers and planners are depicted as dedicated public servants doing their jobs, but their narrow educations and crimped cultural assumptions... prevented them from anticipating many unintended but nonetheless destructive social, economic, and environmental consequences of what they wrought.²⁰

The American Interstate connected American cities more effectively than ever before, “yet to build it, tens of thousands of Americans were dispossessed of their land and saw their homes and neighborhoods destroyed.”²¹ For Lewis, highway construction was not a

¹⁷ Leavitt, *Superhighway-Superhoax*, 20.

¹⁸ Leavitt, *Superhighway-Superhoax*, 12.

¹⁹ Daniel E. Sullivan, “Materials in Use in U.S. Interstate Highways,” (United States Department of the Interior: Washington D.C.), 2016.

²⁰ Bruce Hartman, Review of “Changing Lanes,” by Joseph F.C. DiMento and Cliff Ellis, *Transportation Journal*, Winter 2014.

²¹ Tom Lewis, *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways* (New York, New York: The Penguin Group 1997), ix.

purposeful act of malice, but it nonetheless effected the lives of thousands Americans across the country.

In sum, Lewis views the Interstate as a representation of the American ideals that dominated the political landscape of the 1960s and early 1970s. As Lewis explains that, “It was a time when we valued speed and efficiency and allowed them to take precedence over natural beauty. We took little care in the way we imposed the roads on the landscape.”²² Much in the same way, Americans love affair with the automobile resulted in policies that neglected other modes of transportation. Americans, who has always valued their freedom of travel and enjoyed the comfort of their personal vehicles, favored the automobile over other forms of public transit. Therefore Lewis does not portray highway engineer as an agent of racial policy. Rather, Lewis concludes that policy makers and urban planners were somewhat blinded in their haste to construct roads, and as result, failed to account for the consequences which were associated with their massive projects.

Other authors examine how American’s “love affair” with the automobile resulted in altered city landscapes. The bland and monotonous expressway came to dominant the urban landscape as speed and efficiency soon overshadowed the physical appearance of our cities. City Planning Director Christopher Tunnard argues that, “In their search for professional legitimacy based on ‘science,’ planners had neglected aesthetics, potentially ‘their strongest weapon’ for winning the public over to their cause.”²³ As explained in *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways*, highway engineers of the 1960s

²² Lewis, *Divided Highways*, 294.

²³ Joseph F.C. DiMento and Cliff Ellis, *Changing Lanes: Visions and Histories of Urban Freeways* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press 2013), 92.

and 1970s failed to see that urban roads deserved a different design than those of the national Interstate.

Regardless of the conclusions we come to, it is undeniable that urban highways have reshaped American cities. These failures resulted in the complete alteration of city landscapes and the reinforcement of racial lines across American cities. Whether it was intended or not, minority groups were routinely at the center of such changes. As one historian quipped, “If future anthropologists want to find the remains of people of color in a post apocalypse America, they will simply have to find the ruins of the nearest freeway.”²⁴

Case Introduction

In the report that follows, I will be analyzing the past and present results of an inner city highway being built in Buffalo, New York. Specifically, this report will be centered on the construction of the Kensington Expressway in the 1950s and 60s. Although the historical need for a modern and effective system of roads and highways is understood, the planning process can be critiqued in a number of ways. Like many modern American cities, poor communities and minority groups were disproportionately affected by the results of urban highway construction in Buffalo.

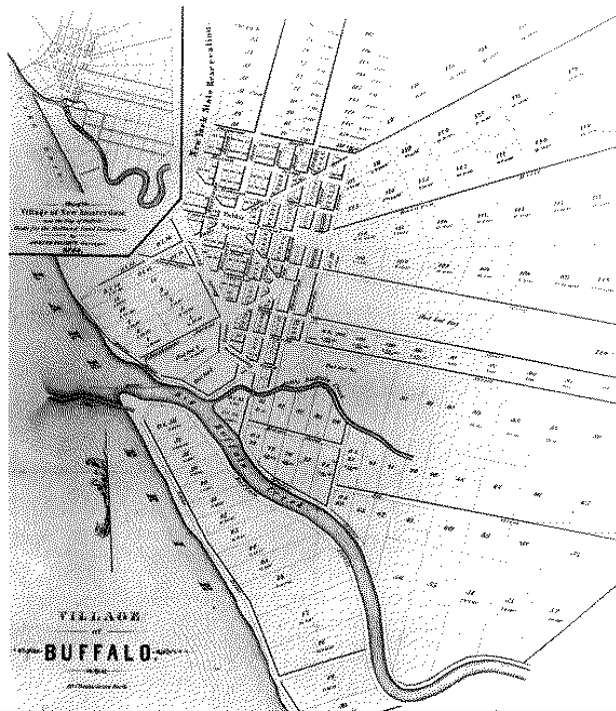
In order to adequately understand the effects of urban highway construction, it is important to understand the historical development of Buffalo as a city and an urban center. The following chapter will illustrate how Buffalo was designed in the 19th century and how its progression into a modern American city called for the further growth of its

²⁴ Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City*, (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2014) 2.

transportation system. Later in the paper, the construction and location of the Kensington Expressway will be analyzed in relation to the city's racial makeup and housing market.

Buffalo Historical Planning

In 1804, Joseph Ellicott sketched the first recorded designs for the city of Buffalo. Ellicott's sketches depict a city that is organized in a radial fashion, with much of the growth expanding in a semi-circle from the downtown area. Ellicott immediately understood that the city's natural geography would shape its growth. The Niagara River would bind Buffalo's Western border while Lake Erie expanded to the South and West of the city center. With Niagara Square at the center, and a number of boulevards spreading north and east, Ellicott's plans resulted in a design incredibly similar to the one we see today.²⁵



Plan for the Village of Buffalo, by Joseph Ellicott, 1804

Accessed via <http://history.buffalonet.org/1801.html>

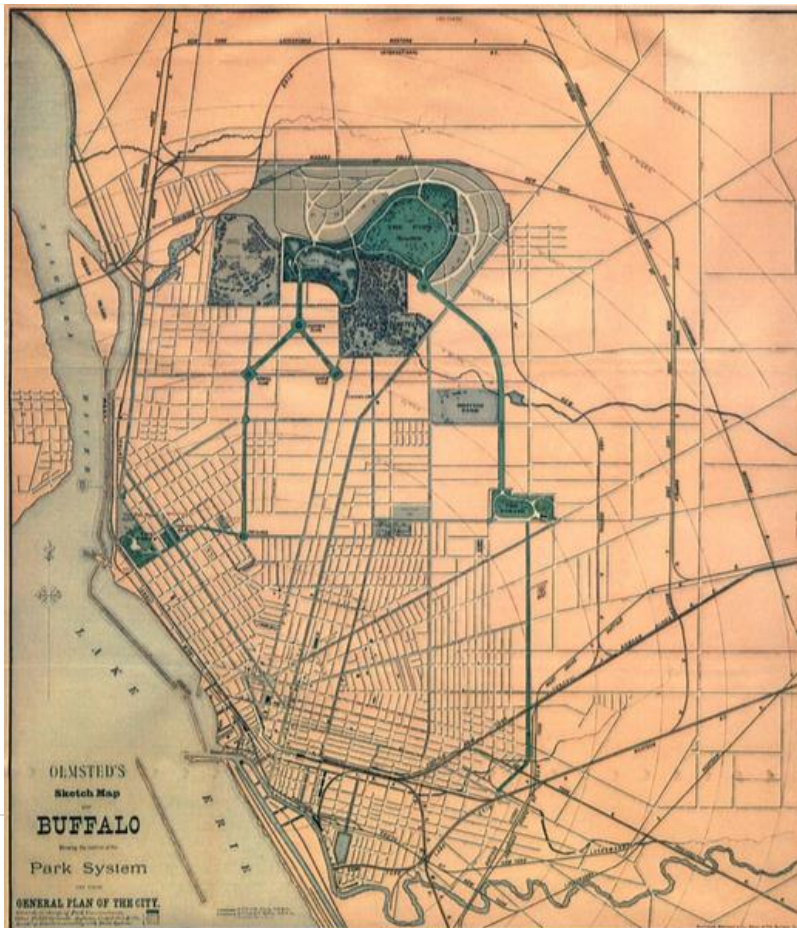
²⁵ Patrick Weissend, *The Life and Times of Joseph Ellicott*, (Holland Land Office Museum: Batavia, NY, 2002).

Started as a modest trading post, the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 showed the potential for growth in New York's "Queen City." By 1850, the population had grown to over 40,000, quickly doubling to 80,000 by the following decade. When Frederick Law Olmsted arrived in 1868, Buffalo had developed into the tenth largest city in America, and become a popular destination for travelers heading west. As an established landscape architect, Olmsted, and his partner Calvert Vaux, were hired to design a central park for the burgeoning city. Upon surveying the land, Olmsted proposed a mixed-use system of parks connecting the various communities throughout Buffalo. His envision sought to bring the city together via a system of public parks and interconnected parkways or streets.

Buffalo's Park System, by Frederick Law Olmsted, 1881.

Note the numerous parkways throughout the city.

Accessed via Buffalo State Digital Commons



One year later, in 1869, Olmsted's plans were accepted, and construction began on The Front (Front Park), The Park (Delaware Park), and The Parade (MLK Park). Central to his vision, Olmsted's parks would be connected by a number of wide streets, or parkways. These parkways were to be lined with tall elms and grassy medians, serving as a respite for homeowners who sought a quiet resting place. These picturesque parkways would become "a park within a park" and something that was regarded as uniquely "Buffalo" by many of its residents. With his plans in place, by 1876 much of the construction had been completed and Buffalo's park system was beginning to take shape.

Delaware Park, which would become Buffalo's central park, would be located just north of the city center. The "350 acres of meadow, forest and lake," would become the "jewel" of Buffalo as well as the eventual home of The Buffalo History Museum, The Albright Knox Art Gallery and the historic Marcy Casino and Boathouse. Delaware Park was designed as an outlet for city residents hoping to escape the hustle and bustle of city life, its open parklands and picturesque lakes providing ample space for large numbers of visitors.

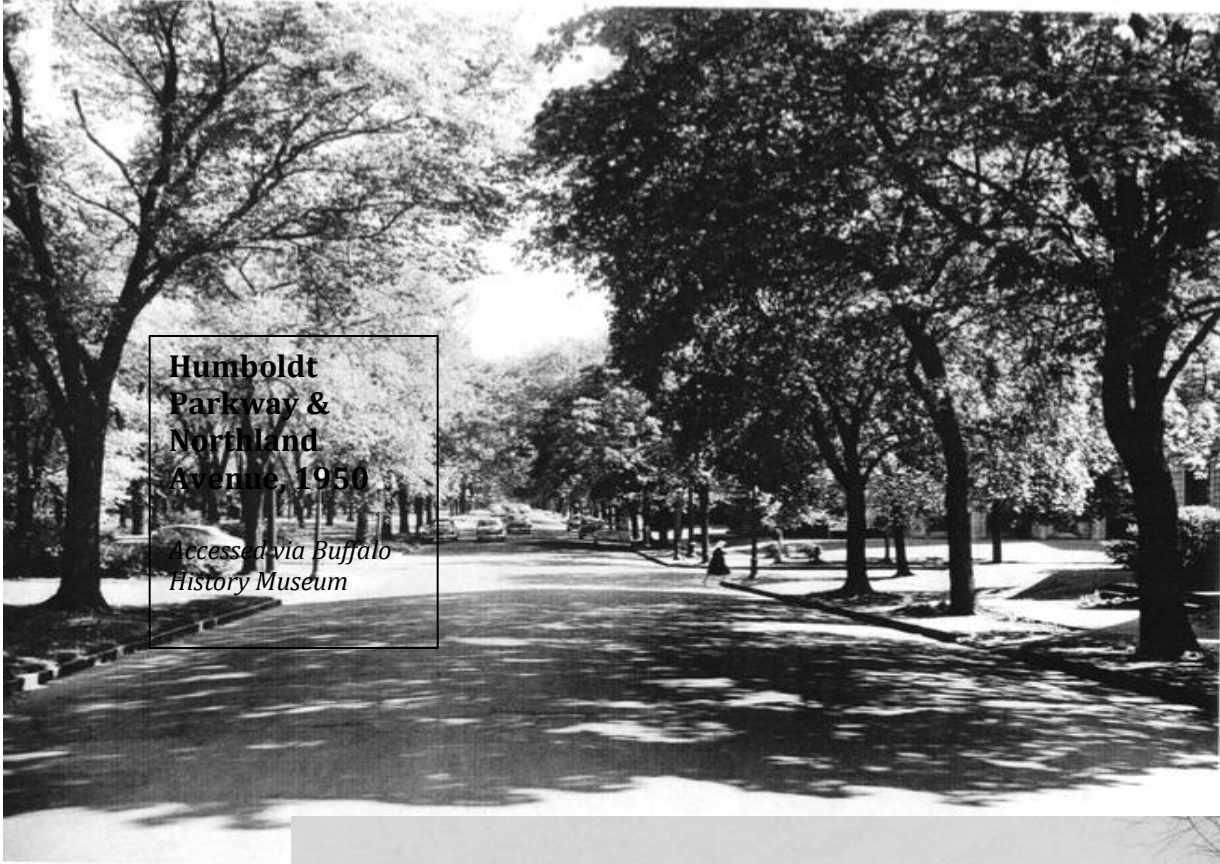
Additionally, Olmsted's plan called for a number of smaller parks, which were closer and more accessible to city inhabitants further downtown and on the east side of town. Front Park was constructed at the corner of the Niagara River and Lake Erie on Buffalo's Lower West Side. Olmsted had explained that Front Park "would be peculiar to Buffalo and would have a character of magnificence." Unique in its location, The Front would be a representation of Buffalo's geographic significance and an embracement of the city's population and natural beauty. According to the Buffalo Olmsted Park Conservancy, "Once

the park was opened in the 1870s, it quickly became Buffalo's most popular park with more than 5,000 visitors on the weekends and over 1,000 visitors on weekdays."²⁶

At the same time, the Parade, now known as MLK Park, was to be located in the heart of Buffalo's East side. The 56-acre park would serve working class residents throughout the East Side and would eventually become the home of Buffalo's Science Museum. Perhaps most importantly, The Parade would be connected to Delaware Park via the Humboldt Parkway. The Humboldt Parkway was a two hundred foot wide boulevard, characterized by its Victorian homes and six rows of towering Elm Trees.

Despite his achievements, almost all of Olmsted's parks were dismantled by a series of highways that destroyed the initial beauty he had sought to create. Delaware Park was virtually cut in half by the four-lane Scajaquada Expressway in 1961, forcing park-goers to navigate a series of bridges and overpasses. Similarly, with the completion of Niagara Thruway in 1964, Front Park was completely cut off from the waterfront, and encircled by multiple lanes of traffic, roundabouts and exit ramps. Visitors who wanted to enjoy the Niagara River were again rerouted over overpasses and burdened by the multiple lanes of high-speed traffic. Although The Parade survived the direct destruction that was apparent in Olmsted's other parks, the magnificent trees that once lined Humboldt Parkway were cut down to make way for the Kensington Expressway in 1956.

²⁶"The Front Park," The Buffalo Olmsted Conservancy. <https://www.bfloparks.org/parks/front-park/>



**Humboldt
Parkway &
Northland
Avenue, 1950**

*Accessed via Buffalo
History Museum*



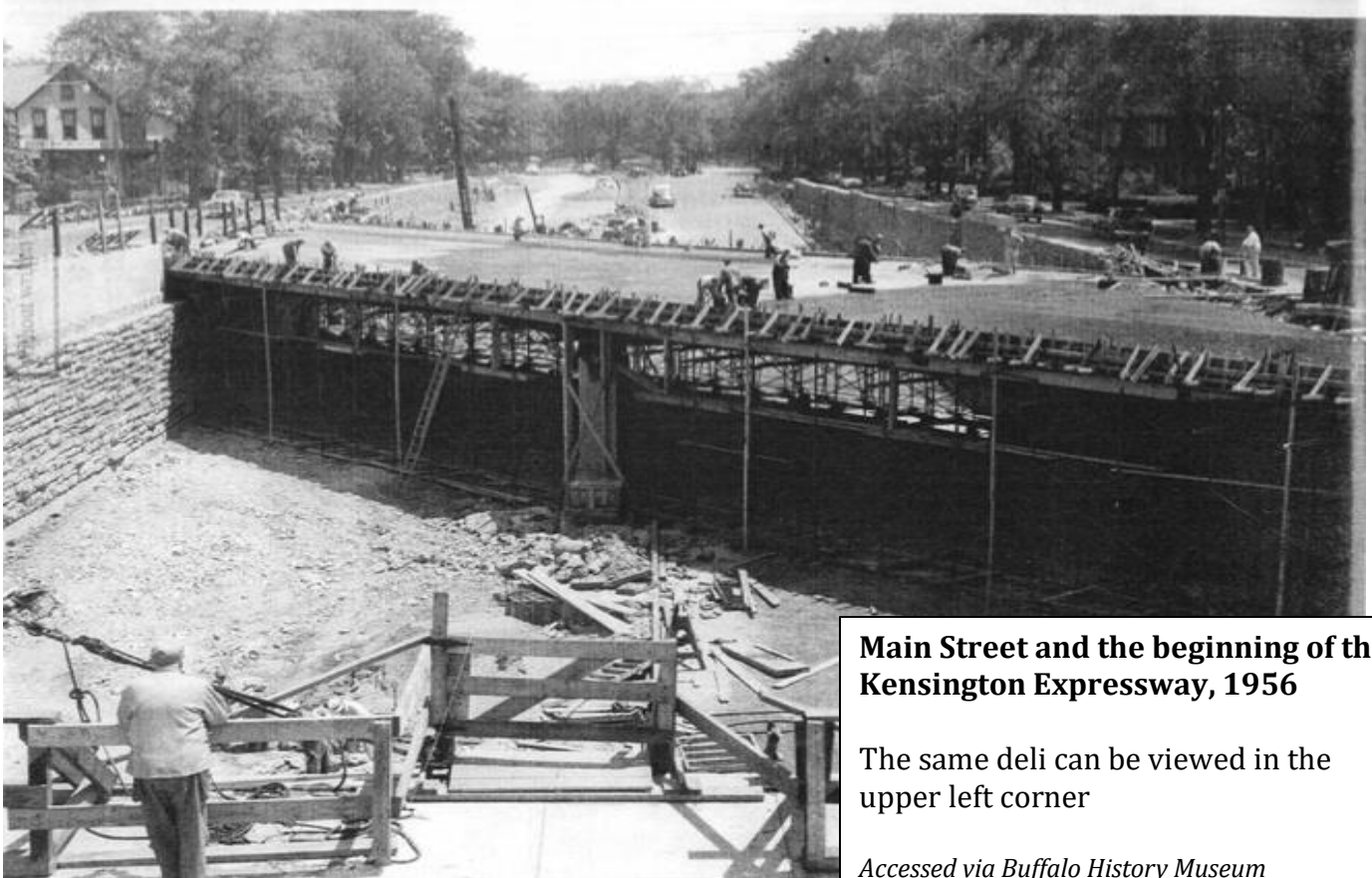
**Tree
Removal:
Humboldt
Parkway &
Kingsley
Street, 1960**

*Accessed via
Buffalo History
Museum*

Kensington Avenue, 1950

Note the position of the deli on the left side of the photograph

Accessed via Buffalo History Museum



Main Street and the beginning of the Kensington Expressway, 1956

The same deli can be viewed in the upper left corner

Accessed via Buffalo History Museum

Population Trends and Racial Segregation

Two major trends of racial migration occurred in the period between 1940 and 1970: the Second Great Migration and White Flight. The Second Great Migration refers to a period throughout the mid 1900s when large numbers of Southern blacks moved North to find stable jobs in industry. On the other hand, White Flight refers to the massive exodus of white homeowners, leaving their city homes behind for the promise of suburban life outside the city center. In order to adequately understand the effects of this racial shuffling, it is paramount that we view these two events not as unique changes, but as interconnected shifts in the makeup of our city.

In his book titled *City on the Edge*, Mark Goldman sets the historical scene of Buffalo, New York, from its formation as a frontier town, to its development as an industrial center. Goldman's chapter titled "Buffalo at Mid-Century," depicts a city rife with racial tension and high levels of segregation. Corresponding with Second Great Migration, Goldman states that, "Between the end of the war and 1950, whites were leaving the city at the rate of twenty-two per day, a more rapid rate, according to the Urban League, than any other city in the country."²⁷ Interestingly enough, Goldman explains that this "white flight" was perhaps a blessing in disguise for blacks who were displaced as a result of demolition projects in the historic Ellicott District. When white families left the East Side in favor of suburban life, African Americans were able to buy their homes and relocate further uptown.²⁸

²⁷ Mark Goldman, *City on the Edge: Buffalo, New York* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2007), 154.

²⁸ Goldman, *City on the Edge*, 174.

Many communities of the Polish, German and Italian immigrants, who once called the East Side home, might have felt threatened by the inclusion of black residents in their neighborhoods. Streets like Padarewski Drive, Sobieski Street, and Woltz Avenue, bare the names of their previous occupants and remind many locals of the Polish and German immigrants who once called the East Side home. Neighborhoods with names like old Polonia and Kaisertown have been all but forgotten and neglected. Historically, African Americans had lived in Buffalo's Ellicott District, but by the 1940s, slum clearance programs had begun to force them further uptown, encroaching on the once white East Side. One State surveyor remarked, "a field trip about the City revealed the tell-tale 'for sale' signs in many of the border or transition areas marking the change in occupancy from white to nonwhite."²⁹ Although it is difficult to prove, it is most likely that resentment towards black migration, as well as massive suburban growth, spurred the movement of whites out of Buffalo's East Side.

Henry Louis Taylor Jr. addresses the problems faced by Buffalo's black communities in his report titled "African Americans and the Rise of Buffalo's Post-Industrial City,"³⁰. His research found that more than 75,000 blacks moved to Buffalo from 1940 to 1970, increasing the proportion of black Buffalonians from 2.4 percent to 20.4 percent of the overall population. Furthermore, during the same period of 1940 to 1970 "an astounding 198,000 whites left Buffalo."

It was during this period that sociologists designed a way to measure a city's level of segregation. The segregation index, which it came to be called, "calculated the percentage

²⁹ New York State Temporary Housing Rent Commission, "People, Housing and Rent in Buffalo," (1956): 38.

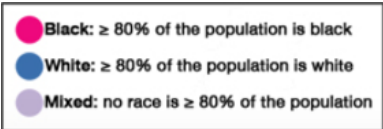
³⁰ Henry Louis Taylor Jr., "African Americans and the Rise of Buffalo's Post-Industrial City, 1940 to Present," *Buffalo Urban League* (1990): 8.

of people in a city who would have to move in order for every neighborhood in the city to have the same racial composition.”³¹ Many Northern cities reached close to ninety percent on the segregation index and cities like Buffalo “were among the most segregated cities in the country.”³² Even today, segregation has persisted in Buffalo and it is widely considered one of the most clearly segregated cities in America. Poverty has persisted as well, particularly for black Buffalonians, 36.4 percent of which live in poverty compared to only 9.4 percent of the white population.³³

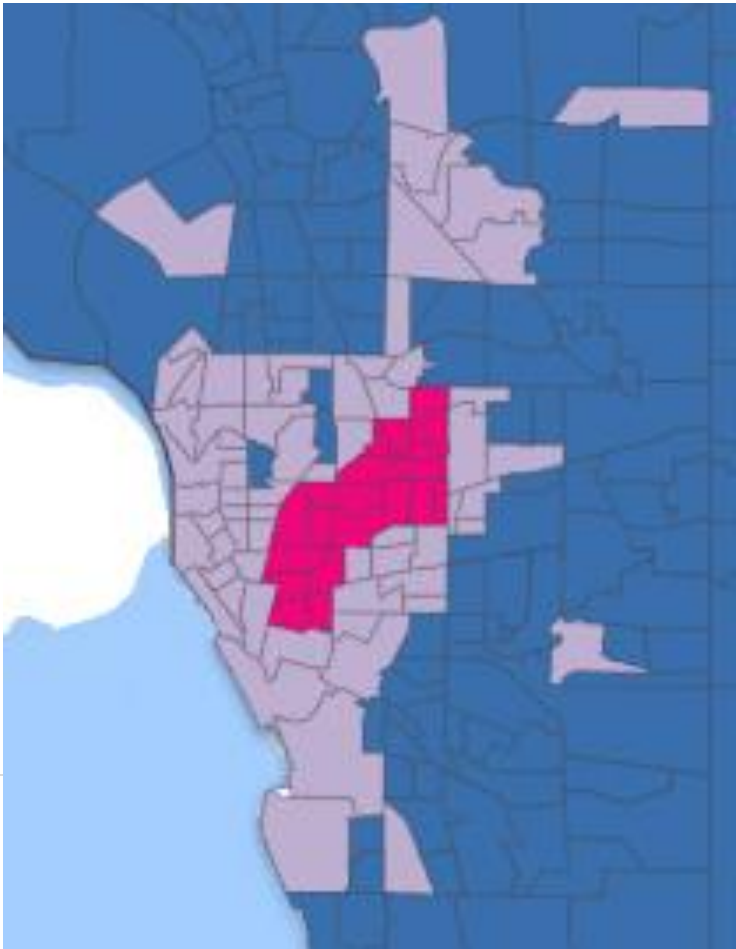
³¹ Carl H. Nightingale, *Segregation: A Global History of Divided Cities* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 354.

³² Nightingale, *Segregation*, 354.

³³ “America’s Most Segregated Cities.” Michael Sauter and Thomas Frohlich, September 2016. <http://247wallst.com/special-report/2016/09/08/americas-most-segregated-cities-2/5/>



Segregation in Buffalo, New York, 2016
24/7 Wall St. analysis of U.S. Census data



With large numbers of whites leaving the Buffalo city center for the suburbs, the East Side became the focal point of Buffalo's black community. The large numbers of white residents leaving Buffalo, coupled with the migration of Southern blacks to the city, resulted in African Americans being overly represented in many parts of the city. With growing numbers of white families choosing to live outside of the city, those who could not afford to relocate were forced to remain. Those who were left behind were predominately poor and black, and with the removal of whites from the city center, segregation rose throughout the East Side.

Traffic Concerns and Early Planning Processes

Like many industrial cities in the postwar America, Buffalo experienced a dramatic rise in automobile usage following World War II. By 1946, Buffalo's Department of Public Works had accounted for a daily total of "70,000 vehicles traveling on routes between downtown Buffalo and the northeast section of the city." From Niagara Square, the traffic arteries expanded to the North and East. The main routes for automobile travel had become overly congested, and routes like Genesee Street, Main Street, Kensington Avenue and Broadway Avenue were simply unable to account for the increased travel. Furthermore, automobile usage was expected to increase exponentially. As the report suggests, "Motor vehicle registration figures for Erie County alone show an increase of almost 40% during the seven year period between 1946 and 1952."³⁴

³⁴ "State Motor Vehicle Registration, by Years, 1900-1995," Federal Highway Administration, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/summary95/mv200.pdf>

In a 1954 article written by the Buffalo Courier Express, Russell Tyron, director of the City Planning Commission, expressed that the traffic situation in Buffalo had reached the “now or never” stage.³⁵ Tyron concluded that if city officials failed to act, the city would be at risk of losing more of its residents. Additionally, Russell Tyron and the rest of the City Planning Commission saw the Kensington Expressway as a way to reverse the steady stream of city inhabitants to the suburbs. Tyron would go on to say that “many people would move back into Buffalo’s residential neighborhoods with elimination of the traffic blight.” The problem of outmigration for the city limits was viewed strictly as a problem of traffic congestion and ease of living. One Buffalo Courier correspondent concludes an article with the unapologetic statement that:

On too many occasions in the past, improvements of one kind or another have been held up because of opposition from residents in this or that section of the city. Hardship and inconvenience are the price citizens have to pay for getting these improvements.³⁶

As a result of the swelling traffic concerns in the downtown area, the urgent need for a new system of roads and highways was unquestioned. In their haste to solve congestion problems, city officials quickly allowed highway engineers free reign when deciding on new expressway routes.

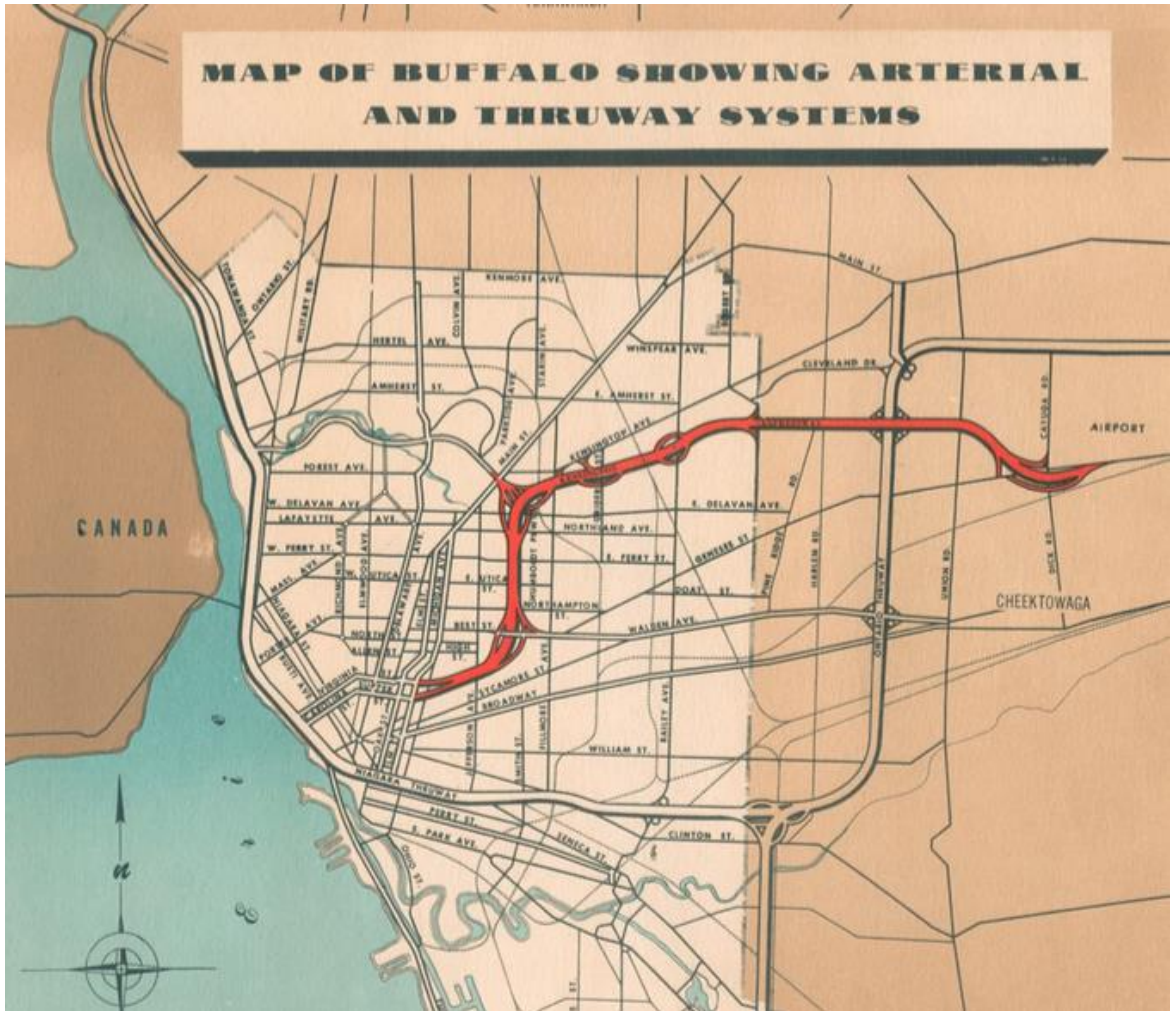
One report titled, “Kensington Expressway Arterial Improvement Downtown Buffalo to Airport”³⁷ was published by the New York State Department of Public Works in December 1953. The report, written by the engineering firm Madigan-Hyland, became the basis of the final product some fifteen years later. The Kensington Expressway would be

³⁵ Scott Hayden, “On the Square,” *The Buffalo Courier Express*, February 27, 1954.

³⁶ Scott Hayden, “On the Square,” *The Buffalo Courier Express*, February 27, 1954.

³⁷ Madigan-Hyland Engineers, “Kensington Expressway Arterial Improvement, Downtown Buffalo to Airport,” (The Engineers: New York, 1953)

constructed in accordance with the larger interstate highway system, and would connect downtown Buffalo with the Niagara Thruway via the Scajaquada Expressway to the West as well as the Interstate 90 to the East.



Proposed Route for the Kensington Expressway, 1953.

Accessed via Madigan-Hyland Engineering Report for the Kensington Expressway Arterial Improvement Project

Although highway engineers were eager to implement their plans, they acknowledged the effects it would have on homeowners and community centers throughout the eastern part of Buffalo. Local engineers knew that in order, “To build a project through an area of this kind, must of necessity, cause the removal of some of these homes.” In fact, in the preliminary estimate of costs, highway engineers believed that over 1,200 residences would be displaced if the route were to be completed as planned.”³⁸

³⁸ Madigan-Hyland Engineers, “Kensington Expressway Arterial Improvement, Downtown Buffalo to Airport,” (The Engineers: New York, 1953)

December 5, 1953

KENSINGTON EXPRESSWAY
PRELIMINARY ESTIMATE

<u>Section and Location</u>	<u>Miles</u>	<u>Cost of Construction</u>	<u>Cost of Right-of-Way</u>	<u>Total Cost</u>	<u>Number of Residences Displaced</u>	<u>Number of Other Bldgs. Displaced</u>	<u>Total Buildings Displaced</u>
<u>Inside City of Buffalo</u>							
Section I	1.8	\$ 6,400,000	\$ 5,500,000	\$11,900,000	350	41	391
Section II	0.6	4,442,000		4,442,000			
Section III	1.2	5,250,000	2,000,000	7,250,000	49	10	59
Section IV	1.5	<u>5,238,000</u>	<u>3,658,000</u>	<u>8,892,000</u>	<u>171</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>185</u>
Subtotals	5.1	21,328,000	11,158,000	32,484,000	570	65	635
<u>Outside City</u>							
Section IV	1.7	5,517,000	1,344,000	6,861,000	37	1	38
Section V	1.4	<u>4,865,000</u>	<u>667,000</u>	<u>5,532,000</u>	<u>32</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>37</u>
Subtotals	3.1	10,382,000	2,011,000	12,393,000	69	6	75
Totals	8.2	\$31,710,000	\$13,167,000	\$44,877,000	639	71	710
City Share		50% Inside City Right-of-Way Cost				\$ 5,578,000	
State Share		{ 50% Construction Cost		\$15,855,000)			
		{ 50% Inside City Right-of-Way Cost		5,578,000)		23,444,000	
		{ 100% Outside City Right-of-Way Cost		2,011,000)			
Federal Share		50% Construction Cost				<u>15,855,000</u>	
Total Estimated Cost						\$44,877,000	

“Kensington Expressway Preliminary Estimate,” December 5th, 1953

Accessed via Madigan-Hyland Engineering Report for the Kensington Expressway Arterial Improvement

Even though demolition of homes

was wrote off as an inevitable cost of a more efficient system of streets, highway engineers saw the wrecking ball as a possible solution to deteriorating neighborhoods and urban blight. As the Madigan-Hyland engineers explained, “If this project is to be an asset to the city and surrounding area, it must be designed in a manner that will increase real values of the immediate neighborhood, as well as serve the through traffic purpose for which it is purposed.” Therefore it appears that urban planners understood the dramatic and permanent effects of their projects on local residents and neighborhoods. Like many

scholars have argued, the language of highway engineers in Buffalo placed urban highway construction within the larger context of community revitalization.

Housing in Black Buffalo

As American cities continued to grow throughout the mid 1900s, housing shortages worsened in many cities. The relationship of white suburban growth, with black urban migration was directly linked, as blacks were able to buy the properties previously owned by suburban whites. However the solution to Buffalo's housing shortage was only temporary. The New York State Temporary State Housing Rent Commission believed that the housing changes experienced in 1950 Buffalo:

has not made available an adequate supply of housing...to a growing nonwhite population since it provides only a residual shelter no longer wanted or bid for by whites rather than a direct response to the effective demand of nonwhites.³⁹

In the eyes of the New York State Housing Rent Commission, the homes that blacks moved into were unattractive to their white counterparts because of their poor quality, and thus, not a long-term solution to the city's housing concerns.

The disparity in housing was clear, over 37 percent of nonwhite homes were considered substandard while only 3.3 percent of white homes were considered substandard.⁴⁰ Housing discrimination was rampant throughout the city. Even though nonwhites occupied poorer housing stock, they routinely paid higher rent prices when compared to white renters in similar occupancies.⁴¹ Nonetheless, black Buffalonians began

³⁹ New York State Temporary Housing Rent Commission, "People, Housing and Rent in Buffalo," (1956): 36.

⁴⁰ New York State Temporary Housing Rent Commission, "People, Housing and Rent in Buffalo," (1956): 38.

⁴¹ New York State Temporary Housing Rent Commission, "People, Housing and Rent in Buffalo," (1956): 44.

to solidify their communities throughout the East Side, acknowledged by the fact that nonwhite home ownership increased by 89 percent between 1950 and 1955.⁴²

TABLE 15
Average Monthly Gross Rent of Substandard Units by Number of Rooms and by Mean Income and Color of Occupants, Buffalo, New York, April 1955

<i>Income Group and Number of Rooms</i>	<i>Average Monthly Gross Rent</i>	
	<i>White Households</i>	<i>Nonwhite Households</i>
Under \$3,000		
3 rooms	\$36.50	\$44.00
4 rooms	37.50	49.50
5 rooms	37.00	41.00
\$3,000-\$4,999		
3 rooms	38.50	53.50
4 rooms	37.00	46.00
5 rooms	53.00	55.50
\$5,000 or more		
4 rooms	38.00	39.50
5 rooms	50.00	56.50

Source: Program Analysis Section of the Temporary State Housing Rent

Geographically speaking, black Buffalonians mainly occupied the neighborhoods on Buffalo's East Side, which, somewhat questionably, became the very site of the new

Kensington Expressway. In 1950, 94 percent of the nonwhite population resided in eight census tracts, accounting for two thirds of the total nonwhite population.⁴³ These census tracts were all located in the city's East Side, and serve as an indicator of the city's level of segregation.

Cost of Rent for White and Nonwhite Households in Buffalo, 1955.

Accessed via: NYS Housing Rent Commission

⁴² New York State Temporary Housing Rent Commission, "People, Housing and Rent in Buffalo," (1956): 38.

⁴³ New York State Temporary Housing Rent Commission, "People, Housing and Rent in Buffalo," (1956): 37.

The Kensington Expressway Construction Timeline

To return to Dr. Taylor's study, he explains that the "out-migration of whites transformed Erie County into a metropolitan area with an inner city and an outer city."⁴⁴ The formation of an inner and outer city created the need for a new transportation system, one that could connect with the growing number of commuters living outside of the city center. Construction of the Kensington Expressway through Buffalo's East Side, was planned in 1946 and finally completed in 1971, some 25 years later. By the time of its completion, the neighborhoods most directly affected by the construction were poor and black.

Although alternative routes were considered, city officials and highway engineers ultimately decided that the Humboldt Parkway would be carved up and repurposed as an expressway connecting the downtown core to growing suburbs around the airport and the Town of Cheektowaga. The construction of the 33 Highway, known locally as the Kensington Expressway, became a massive undertaking that would result in the loss of historic neighborhoods, as well as hundreds of homes, businesses, churches and schools.

The Humboldt Parkway, as mentioned earlier, was part of Olmstead's original plan for the city. These tree-lined parkways were unique to Buffalo and sincerely admired by visitors and residents alike. However, parkways are formally considered parklands, and thus fall under ownership of the city, therefore city officials would be saving money if they were not required to purchase the land from private owners. Additionally, when construction began on the first part of the Kensington Expressway, city officials had no

⁴⁴ Taylor, "African Americans and the Rise of Buffalo's Post-Industrial City."

difficulty in acquiring the right-of-way for land that they had already owned. The first section of the highway would connect with the Scajaquada to the West, following the route of the Humboldt Parkway to the Western edge of MLK Park. To connect further downtown, city officials would be required to purchase, and inevitably demolish private homes from Walden Avenue, south to Cherry Street.

By 1956, the City Planning Commission had unanimously voted to adopt the New York State's plan to construct an "expressway linking Downtown Buffalo with the Municipal Airport and the State Thruway."⁴⁵ A Western New York district engineer for the Department of Public Works named Charles Waters was amazed when he learned of the new expressway route. Previously, routes had been designed along Hinman Avenue on the West Side but none had ever progressed beyond the planning stages. When his office was presented with the new plans, Waters admitted, "he thought the change was a mistake."⁴⁶ Nonetheless, construction on the Kensington Expressway was to begin within one year, following the approximation of property values and the removal of buildings caught in the construction path.

⁴⁵ Forrest Read Jr., "Scajaquada Route in New State Plan," *The Buffalo Courier Express*, February 18, 1956.

⁴⁶ Forrest Read Jr., "Scajaquada Route in New State Plan," *The Buffalo Courier Express*, February 18, 1956.



Aerial Photograph of the Kensington Expressway Route, 1953.

Accessed via Madigan-Hyland Engineering Report for the Kensington Expressway Arterial Improvement Project

Planning Problems

When construction began in 1957, problems surfaced almost immediately. Concerned homeowners voiced their opinions contesting that “it isn’t fair to remove [us] from homes which [we’ve] occupied for years” and that “it would impose a tremendous

hardship on elderly people who haven't followed the younger generation to the suburbs."⁴⁷ Others contended that the Kensington Expressway would create a "barrier" dividing East Side neighborhoods in half. More believed that the new expressway would accelerate the number of city residents leaving for the suburbs.

The actual purchasing of private property became an increasingly painful process. Routinely homeowners complained that the uncertainty of the Kensington route had made it difficult for them to plan ahead. Attempting to alleviate these concerns, State District Engineer Elmer G. H. Youngmann promised homeowners that they would be given a six-month notice prior to the acquisition of their property. The state would purchase some 540 buildings, along 427 parcels of land, carrying an estimated value of six million dollars.⁴⁸

Furthermore, communication between city officials and relocated homeowners was poor. One deli owner, named Frankie Puccio expressed her concerns over the lack the communication between the city and private owners. After an initial valuation of her property, a city agent explained that someone would return in two or three weeks with an offer, however she explained that "it's more than a month now and nobody's come back."⁴⁹ Mrs. Puccio explained that the lack of communication is "hard on a business person, not knowing when they're going to take the property. We can't buy too far ahead for the store." Without knowing when they would be forced to relocate, or how much they would receive for the properties, owners were left in the dark throughout much of the planning process.

⁴⁷ Scott Hayden, "On the Square," *The Buffalo Courier Express*, February 27, 1954.

⁴⁸ "Kensington Expressway Construction Year Away," *The Buffalo Courier Express*, June 10, 1956.

⁴⁹ "Some Owners Unhappy," *The Buffalo Courier Express*, June 26, 1957.

Although that vision might have intended to aide impoverished areas, the lasting effects certainly deserve further analysis. In the closing remarks of their introduction, consulting engineers for Madigan-Hyland state that

Areas which presently suffer from critical traffic congestion obtain a further increase in values because of the withdrawal of traffic from the existing city street system to the expressways... The overall result is a stimulus to new development and rejuvenation of depressed sections.

In the eyes of highway engineers, the removal of traffic congestion would result in higher property values along previously crowded streets like Genesee, Main, Kensington and Broadway. To be fair, in many cities, traffic removal served as a catalyst for community growth and the revaluation of city properties, because city inhabitants were able to reclaim their local streets from busy automobile routes. However, such cases were only successful when there was sufficient foot and local travel to sustain local businesses and community organizations.⁵⁰ Such was not in case in Buffalo, as more and more homeowners left the city for the suburbs, the Kensington Expressway became the nail in the coffin for enterprising communities on the East Side. With a high-speed expressway in place, eastbound routes along Genesee Street and Broadway Avenue have essentially become obsolete.

Although city planners sought to accommodate the increasing number of drivers in Buffalo, the massive Kensington Expressway project might not have been so necessary in the end. By 1940, the population of the city had plateaued at 575,000, and has since

⁵⁰ Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, England: 1988).

steadily declined to a low of 260,000 in 2012.⁵¹ Without the anticipated growth in the Buffalo's population, the Kensington has only served to further alienate the East Side from the rest of the city. As Geoff Kelly woefully explains in a 2010 article for ArtVoice,

The Kensington today carries about 70,000 vehicles per day. In other words, traffic volume between downtown and the northern and eastern suburbs is about the same as it was in 1958. The region's population hasn't grown to fill the capacity created by the state's highway engineers. It hasn't grown at all. This city incurred all the negative impacts of an urban expressway, and it turns out we didn't even need it.⁵²

In their haste to alleviate traffic problems, city planners gave highway engineers the green light on any project that they believed could solve Buffalo's growing traffic concerns. Yet, once their plans were set in place, white flight, suburbanization, and the decline of the industrial city created a city much different, and most importantly, much smaller than the one previous planners had expected. As Kelly suggests, city residents, particularly those on the East Side, essentially were left with a permanent monument to the automobile: a multi-lane concrete valley built through the heart of their community.

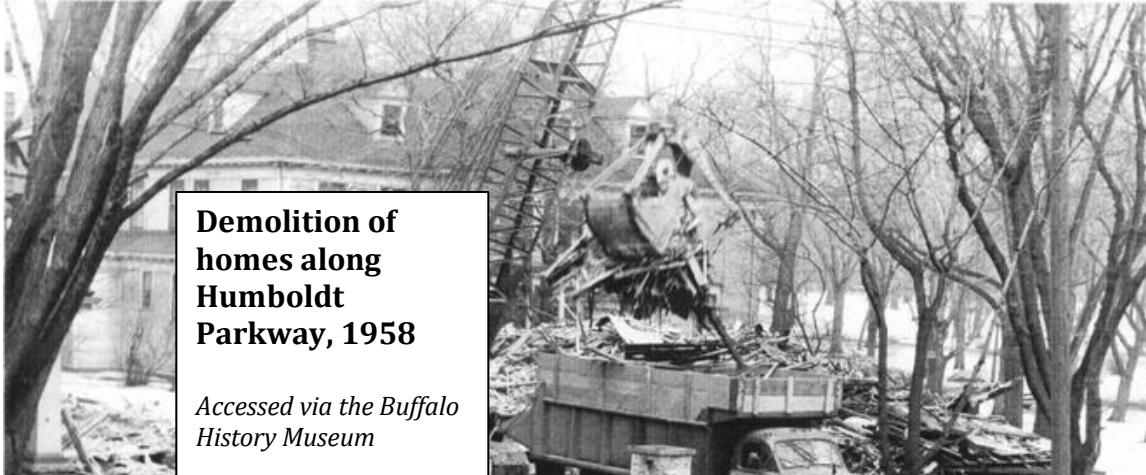
**Concrete Valley:
Kensington
Expressway along
Humboldt
Parkway, 1960s**

*Accessed via the Buffalo
History Museum*



⁵¹ "Population History of Buffalo from 1830 to 1990," <http://physics.bu.edu/~redner/projects/population/cities/buffalo.html>

⁵² Geoff Kelly "Bury This Big Mistake," ArtVoice Magazine (2010), http://artvoice.com/issues/v9n9/bury_this_big_mistake.html



Demolition of homes along Humboldt Parkway, 1958
Accessed via the Buffalo History Museum



Tree Removal along Humboldt Parkway, 1958
Accessed via the Buffalo History Museum

Conclusion

The construction of the Kensington Expressway was devastating to a once multi-ethnic and multi-racial community in Buffalo's East Side. The outmigration of white Buffalonians coupled with the inward migration of Southern African Americans altered the racial makeup of Buffalo throughout the mid-20th century. Although white suburbanization began prior to the Kensington Expressway, the creation of an inner-city highway not only accelerated the flow of residents out of the city center, but it also isolated the growing number of African Americans on the East Side.

Unlike many of the urban highway projects throughout the United States, it is difficult to prove that the planners of the Kensington Expressway were intentionally targeting Buffalo's black community. Nonetheless, Black Buffalonians experienced the effects of the highway more dramatically than other groups who had begun to relocate out of the East Side before the construction began. As excavators destroyed the once beautiful Humboldt Parkway, residents of the East Side lost a community landmark and were left a concrete valley separating them from the rest of the city. The Kensington Expressway became the permanent divide between Black Buffalo and White Buffalo, creating a city segregated along highway lines.

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