

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The landscape of the former Buffalo State Insane Asylum, which today is the Richardson Olmsted Center and the Buffalo Psychiatric Center in Buffalo, New York, is a significant as a surviving example of a 19th century designed, therapeutic landscape by landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and Calvert Vaux. Olmsted, Vaux & Company worked in collaboration with the design of the Asylum structure by Henry Hobson Richardson. The association of this asylum with the redirection of care for the insane toward therapy is of import. The design of the landscape by recognized masters of landscape architecture, Olmsted and Vaux is significant.

Beginning in 1869 Olmsted, Vaux & Company shaped the civic design of the thriving City of Buffalo through site selection, layout and design of three parks and connecting parkways. Directly following this city shaping of parks and parkways, They were commissioned to work with architect H. H. Richardson at the Buffalo State Insane Asylum. This self-supporting mental health institution with park-like grounds for patient enjoyment and therapy and cultivated acreage for crop production was sited in 1870 to the north of the city center adjacent to the grounds laid out for “The Park,” now Delaware Park and Forest Lawn Cemetery. The Asylum landscape and buildings were designed as an integrated complex. Olmsted and Vaux contributed to the orientation and siting of Richardson’s Kirkbride-style asylum building responding to the land and the future visual and spatial organization. Sited at an angle, the stepping wings of the asylum building framed a more public area to the south along Forest Avenue. The stepping

wings also separated the northern acreage to define a more private therapeutic, service, and agrarian landscape that stretched to the Scajaquada Creek. The relationship between the landscape and building complex was integral to the overall character of the Buffalo State Insane Asylum and to defining a therapeutic setting for patient care.

The design of the therapeutic landscape at the Buffalo State Insane Asylum was rooted in the concept that a one’s physical and social environment could cause or cure mental illness. Therefore, calm, peaceful safe surroundings designed for these progressive mental institutions were believed to be curative and therapeutic for patients. Thomas S. Kirkbride was a leading figure in progressive mental health organization that promoted these concepts in the second half of the 19th century. The pastoral or park landscape design style of that day and these landscape architects fashioned a therapeutic landscape of gentle topography, curvilinear drives, open lawns, informal trees and shrubs that was choreographed as a sequence of spatial and visual relationships.

Laid out in 1872, the grounds of the Buffalo State Insane Asylum developed and evolved over time to the present through distinct time periods. Limited improvements were made in the 1870s and early 1880s with the entry drive, walks, and perimeter fences. Circulation routes and vegetation patterns were improved from 1881 to 1899 in addition to the construction of a railroad line and multiple service buildings.

By 1927, continual improvements had led to the full development of the campus landscape with numerous character-defining features. However, that same year, the northern agricultural lands were conveyed to the City of Buffalo for the development of an educational institution, Buffalo State College, now known as SUNY College at Buffalo. Between 1927 and 1949 the landscape character of the asylum began to shift with the loss of the northern lands. By the 1950s, emerging medical technologies for the care of mental health patients moved in new directions, away from the therapeutic landscape model. This resulted in degradation and disuse of the landscape, as new buildings were erected in areas of the therapeutic landscape which altered the original spatial organization and views. Other additions, buildings, and alterations to the landscape were undertaken without regard to the historic landscape character, leaving the campus today with no clear unity with the style of historic features.

Today, the landscape of the site retains remnants of the original Olmsted and Vaux therapeutic design with segments of curving drives, open lawns and vegetative scenery that date to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Larger patterns of the historic landscape remain discernible to the trained eye. Some historic trees remain with segments of historic drives and walks, including the curved entry drive, that form a skeleton of the former design.

Distinct zones are evident that indicate former and existing land uses and hold variable levels of historic, character-defining landscape features. As outlined on the *2008 Landscape Zones Plan*, areas of the site contain varying levels of remaining historic landscape features. Zones are ranked accordingly based on overall integrity and the density of remaining historic features. Zone A, shown in blue, encompasses the

most intact portion of the original Olmsted Vaux landscape design, spanning the area between the Richardson asylum building and Forest Avenue. Zone B outlines the area in which modest remnants of the therapeutic landscape are located, while Zone C contains a few features of the historic service and therapeutic landscape. Zone D, outlined in orange, is a large area where virtually no remnants of the historic asylum landscape are found today. This delineation of zones aids in understanding the overall low landscape integrity, and the enduring patterns of selected historic features that form a basis for preservation guidance.

The landscape of the Richardson Olmsted Complex is significant as an example of the humane treatment of the mentally ill that signaled a medical advance toward the use and incorporation of therapeutic landscapes for patient treatment. Additionally, the landscape is recognized as a master work of Olmsted and Vaux, and a collaboration with Richardson. The former asylum landscape is also a contributing resource to the larger context of Buffalo park and parkway system.

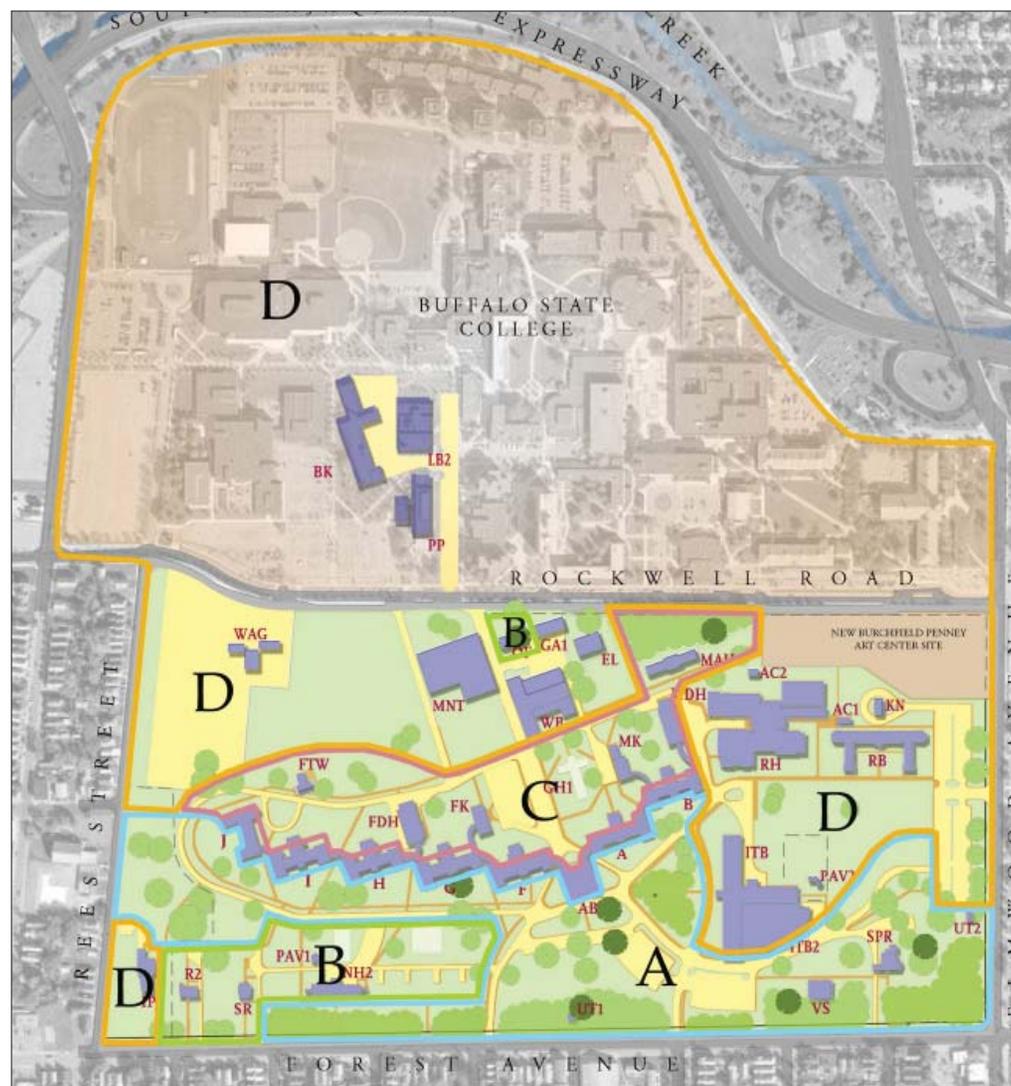
The period of significance for the Richardson Olmsted Complex landscape spans from 1870 when the site was first selected to 1927 when the northern agricultural lands were divided off for the development of the Buffalo State College. Throughout this document, multiple references are made to 1926, which is the last year the northern lands were part of the asylum, and 1927, when they were ceded to the college. The 1926 date is important to understand the complete development of the asylum landscape; however, the end of the period of significance is 1927, when the lands were sold. The period of significance is based on the span of time during which the property attained the significance and retained its historic landscape character.

The Richardson Olmsted Complex Cultural Landscape Report provides guidance for future landscape treatment in harmony with the past as part of the ongoing stewardship of this historically important property. Specifically, the one area of discernible Olmsted Vaux design is highlighted for sensitive treatment, a collection of historic trees is noted and the intact historic perimeter fence and post are indicated, along with remnants of drives, curbs and specific details. Using the information gathered, recommendations are provided for the overall landscape character and the remaining character-defining features, organized as a series of charts. As new uses for the property are determined, an array of future needs can be addressed considering historic landscape character.

The landscape preservation treatment recommendations outlined for the Richardson Olmsted Complex focus on bolstering historic landscape character and protecting historic trees while accommodating current and new future use through changes in built elements, vegetation, and furnishings, among others. In general, recommendations focus on:

- Respecting remaining historic features through sound stewardship
- Enhancing limited historic character through replacement or recapture of character-defining features as possible within the reuse program
- Considering appropriate new development that reflects historic landscape character

Implementation of the recommendations will provide an appropriate setting for the Richardson building and a unique, engaging and sustainable place for the enjoyment patients, visitors, and Buffalo residents while fulfilling the mission and goals of the Richardson Center Corporation.



2008 Landscape Zones Plan

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