OUT OF THE SHADOWS: THE LEGACY OF BUFFALO’S FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN ARCHITECT

Project Summary Report

Prepared by Christine Parker, M.A. and Preservation Buffalo Niagara
November 2017
With Support Provided by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the First Niagara Foundation
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Cover image: “Landscape Development Plan for Addition to Houghton Park”  
drawn by John E. Brent, 1945
Project Overview
Out of the Shadows: The Legacy of Buffalo’s First African American Architect Project Summary Report (“Final Report”) has been completed on behalf of Preservation Buffalo Niagara with funding provided by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as part of their National Trust Preservation Fund as well as with funding from the First Niagara Foundation. The project was undertaken from December 2016 to November 2017 by consultant Christine A. Parker. This Final Report provides a summary of the work completed, a summary of survey findings, and recommendations to assist and propel historic preservation efforts and commemorative actions involving John Edmonston Brent and his designs.

Objectives and Scope
The objective of this project was to conduct research on the designs, accomplishments, and influence of architect John E. Brent on the City of Buffalo’s historic landscapes and built environment. In conducting this research, the aim is to provide an introduction to Brent’s design work, an inventory of associated buildings, and recommendations of future efforts. Research was completed by Christine A. Parker with Preservation Buffalo Niagara providing technical assistance and collaborating on the Final Report and its components.

Project Methodology
The project was completed with a 3-task approach:

1. Research
   Conduct research on the designs, accomplishments and influence of Architect John E. Brent on the City of Buffalo’s historic landscapes and built environment

2. Inventory & Survey Report
   Create an inventory of the buildings, landscapes, and other structures associated with the life of John E. Brent, including resources he designed as well as resources significant to his personal life.
   Prepare a Survey Report that includes said inventory as well as preliminary recommendations on how to best recognize, promote and protect his designed works still standing today.

3. Exhibit
   Compile and display an exhibit based on curatorial research on John E. Brent’s life and works and lead an opening lecture on the research and findings
Historic Context

To contextualize John Edmonston Brent, we must grasp the state of the United States during the Reconstruction period. A small but vigorous class of black landowners developed; hence, landowners came to depend on the Black craftsman for their construction needs. During this period opportunities for a new class of architects emerged. Schools in the South were established and began offering vocational and industrial training for African Americans. The urgency to educate the freed and enslaved persons promoted the establishment of African American schools and vocational training in the South to ease the inequality of the black craftsman, as well as apprenticeship opportunities in larger cities throughout the United States.

Brent’s exposure to the profession was through his father, Calvin Thomas Stowe Brent, the first African-American architect of Washington, D.C. After his father’s untimely passing, a fifteen-year-old John, under the advisement of his older siblings would enroll and attend Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute from 1904-1907. Two years later, he received a full scholarship to the Drexel Institute of Art, Science and Industry, graduating in 1912.

In the beginning of the 20th Century, Buffalo, New York was a bustling port city with new technologies, a robust economy, and talented architects designing and planning. What would attract young Brent to Buffalo? Perhaps the attraction of the architectural marvels of Louis H. Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Frederick Law Olmsted and Joseph Ellicott.

Brent arrived in Buffalo shortly after graduation and began his architectural career working as a draftsman with Max G. Beirel, Henry Osgood Holland, Paul Ford Mann, and Julius C. Schultz, among others. Brent achieved his New York State license as a registered architect after receiving his first and largest commission, the Michigan Avenue Y.M.C.A. located at 585 Michigan Avenue in 1926, making him the second African-American architect to design a Y.M.C.A. in the United States. Brent has smaller commissions from summer cottages in East Aurora, The Wales Hollow Y.M.C.A. Summer Camp, and a residence in Cheektowaga. Brent was appointed by the Department of the Interior to a planning and design team of architects for Howard University (1931-1934).

Upon his return, Brent was encouraged by Marlon Perkins, Executive Director and curator of the Buffalo Zoo to apply for a junior landscape architect position with the City of Buffalo and was hired in 1935 at the beginning of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) era. Brent’s tenure contributed to a plethora of landscape designs throughout Buffalo neighborhoods and the waterfront (today’s Canalside), including pools, softball and hardball diamonds, tennis courts, outdoor swimming pools, and 9-hole and 18-hole golf courses. His largest contribution to the Buffalo Parks Department was the Buffalo Zoological Gardens where he helped to transform the landscape into a modern facility. In March 2013, John Edmonston Brent was posthumously honored for his design of the Entrance Court of the Buffalo Zoo.
Survey Results
After researching the designs, accomplishments, and influence of Architect John E. Brent, a total of 105 resources were surveyed and inventoried. The majority of resources are extant, in varying states of preservation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of Resources</th>
<th>Association to Brent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Completed as a Draftsman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Completed as a Registered Architect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Completed for the US Department of the Interior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Completed for the City of Buffalo as a Landscape Architect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Completed for the City of Buffalo for the Department of Public Works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Completed for the City of Buffalo for the Parks Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Brent personal residences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Buildings extant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Buildings razed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>Landscapes/Infrastructure extant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Landscapes/Infrastructure razed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Landscapes/Infrastructure designed but not constructed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Brent drawing and still photo of the Michigan Avenue WMCA, 585 Michigan Avenue
Built 1926, demolished 1977
Home of Myron McGuire, DDS
482 Jefferson Avenue
A Brent commission built 1934, demolished 1999

St. Bartholomew’s Roman Catholic Church
34 Grider Street
Built 1923, Brent worked as a draftsman under Robert North

Memorial Gates of the Humboldt Park Cottage Garden
Brent’s drawings of Memorial Gates of the Humboldt Park Cottage Garden, circa 1949

For the full inventory of John E. Brent associated resources, please see the Appendix.
Exhibition
The exhibition, Out of the Shadows: John Edmonston Brent, A Buffalo Architect, has been designed as a traveling exhibit. Including a total of seven canvas panels, the exhibit highlights the different spheres and periods of his life, focusing on his family, education, drafting career, personal commissions, and work for the City of Buffalo. The panels tell the story of Brent’s career and private life by using original photographs, drawings, and renderings.

Out of the Shadows: John Edmonston Brent, A Buffalo Architect, was on display at the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library’s Central Library throughout the month of November 2017, and included opening remarks on November 2 and a curator talk on November 12. This central location allowed the exhibit to be open accessible to the public so to further impact and educate the public about Brent’s lasting legacy.
**Recommendations**

Without a doubt, the John E. Brent story is a compelling story that needs to be told. Since most of the work that he is more directly associated with designing and constructing has been demolished, it is a challenge to develop preservation based recommendations within the traditional preservation tool kit. Therefore, these are our preliminary recommendations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Partner(s)</th>
<th>Funding Source(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Provide local landmark status to the house that Brent and his family lived in and with which their time in Buffalo is most associated | Current home owner  
Family of Brent  
COB PB  
District Council Person | n/a               |
| 2. Re-open the Olmsted National Register Nomination to include direct reference to John E. Brent and the work he developed within the Olmsted Park system, including the Buffalo Zoo | Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy  
City of Buffalo | n/a               |
| 3. Work with City of Buffalo Park’s Department to identify a location for a Brent Monument | COB Parks – Andy Rabb  
COP Arts Commission – Emmerson Barr  
District Council Person  
Council President | TBD               |
| 4. Declare John E. Brent Day in Buffalo                                        | Mayor Brown  
Council President | n/a               |
| 5. Develop a curriculum for Buffalo Public School children (elementary and high school) | Buffalo Architecture Foundation | First Niagara Foundation |
| 6. Work with The Buffalo History Museum to explore erecting Historic Markers at John E. Brent related sites | The Buffalo History Museum | TBD               |
| 7. Explore re-opening additional National Register Nominations (in New York or other states) to included John E. Brent’s contributions | NYSHOP  
NPS | TBD               |
Bibliography


City of Buffalo. 1935. Civil Service Record, Civil Service Division, 1001 City Hall, Buffalo, New York.


City of Buffalo. Civil Service Record, Civil Service Division, 1001 City Hall, Buffalo, New York.

City of Buffalo. Department of Public Works Office of Planning and Design, 616 City Hall, Buffalo, New York.

City of Buffalo. Department of Licensing and Permits, 301 City Hall, Buffalo, New York.


"Secrecy Important, “Holdout” a Problem." *Curtiss Fly Leaf*, July 1941; p. 3-4.


Appendix – John E. Brent Inventory

Please see included spreadsheet.
Appendix – John E. Brent Inventory
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Original Location</th>
<th>Current Use</th>
<th>Current Status</th>
<th>Construction</th>
<th>Rent/Ownership</th>
<th>Date of Bond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humboldt Park - fountain</td>
<td>3300 Bailey Avenue</td>
<td>Buffalo</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>Extant</td>
<td>In Use with modifications</td>
<td>1912 - 1915</td>
<td>Landscape architect, City of Buffalo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1935 - 1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Luther King Park - playground</td>
<td>219 Glenwood Avenue</td>
<td>Buffalo</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>Extant</td>
<td>In Use with modifications</td>
<td>1912 - 1915</td>
<td>Landscape architect, City of Buffalo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1935 - 1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Park - comfort station, pool</td>
<td>3000 Hertel Avenue</td>
<td>Buffalo</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>Extant</td>
<td>In Use with modifications</td>
<td>1912 - 1915</td>
<td>Landscape architect, City of Buffalo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1935 - 1959</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Appendix – John E. Brent Inventory**

- **Owner - Single residence**
  - Humboldt Park - New fencing and repairs
  - Houghton Park - New work on the wading pool
  - Houghton Park - New Concrete walks about pool (#2)

- **Residential**
  - Lincoln Park - Improvements
  - Masten Park Playground - details of recreation area
  - McMillian Park - new drainage lines
  - Fosdick Masten High School - proposed parking area

- **Local foot traffic**
  - Battery Park - comfort station to Picnic Shelter House
  - Schiller Park - New fencing surrounding swimming pool (#2)
  - McMillian Park - new drainage lines
  - Central Park - Comfort station, pool

*Source: [John E. Brent Inventory](https://example.com)*