



**BOPC Position Statement on proposed Lodge and existing intrusions on Goat Island,
Niagara Falls, NY
February 2017**

Issue: Governor Cuomo announced the second phase funding of the Buffalo Billion program in his 2017 State of the State address in January. The new program includes a proposal for a 100-guest room hotel on Goat Island at Niagara Falls State Park.

Goat Island is a very significant Olmsted landscape; the first state park in the nation, and an international travel destination spanning generations. There is concern that any commercial intrusion of this magnitude would be detrimental to the Olmsted character, environmental sensitivity, and historical integrity of this landscape.

History: Niagara Falls is one of the seven natural wonders of the world. The area around the Falls became increasingly commercialized during the Civil War period and the vast power of the flowing waters attracted considerable heavy industry to the area.

Frederick Law Olmsted (Olmsted) was overwhelmed by the natural beauty and majesty of the Falls when he visited, but appalled by the development on the banks of the Niagara River. He urged public access to the natural setting of the Falls instead of the “pay per view” commercial practices of the time, and he advocated to preserve the site for future generations.

Goat Island, which had never been cleared of the old growth forest, was singled out in particular by Olmsted because of the uniqueness of its vegetation: “The great variety of the indigenous perennials and annuals, the rare beauty of the old woods and the exceeding loveliness of the rock foliage, I believe to be a direct effect of the Falls, and as much a part of its majesty as the mist cloud and the rainbow.”

According to historic accounts, Olmsted visited Goat Island in July 1869 with William Dorsheimer and H.H. Richardson. They spent their first two days exploring the island, and on the third day Olmsted led his friends to the magnificent view of the Falls, saving this pinnacle experience until after they had enjoyed the beauty, sights and sounds of the rapids. This visit and Olmsted’s interest in the Falls spurred the “Free Niagara” movement in which prominent literary and public figures promoted the concept of a Niagara Reservation free of commercial and industrial intrusions, and which would be open to the public without charge.

In 1879 the New York State legislature commissioned Olmsted and James T. Gardner to survey the Falls and to prepare the *Special Report of NYS Survey on the Preservation of the Scenery of*

Niagara Falls. The effort culminated in 1885 in the opening of the state reservation at Niagara Falls. Olmsted and Gardner recommended that as much land as possible bordering on the Falls be acquired by New York State to protect the characteristic Falls environment, and restore native plantings. Olmsted proposed a landscape management concept designed to husband the resource of the Falls and repair what damage had been done to the land by industrial, commercial and tourist uses up to that time. “Within certain limits at Niagara,” he stated, “there are probably a larger number of distinct and rare qualities of beauty in combinations of rock, foliage, mist, sky and water, than in any other equal space of the earth’s surface.” It was these scenic qualities he aspired to preserve – the “distinctive charms of Niagara scenery,” as Olmsted called them.

In 1887, Olmsted and Calvert Vaux issued a supplemental report detailing plans to restore the Falls. Their intent as expressed in the report, was "to restore and conserve the natural surroundings of the Falls of Niagara, rather than to attempt to add anything thereto." Olmsted stated, “The objective of the plan was to provide, as amply as practicable for great throngs of people...to preserve and develop a particular character of natural scenery of great scale, avoiding as much as possible all manifestation of art, human labor, or human purposes.” The report further stated, “What is mainly important is that the one purpose for which the State invites the Reservation to be visited, namely, the enjoyment of certain passages of natural scenery of a distinctive character – shall plainly control all the arrangements it makes.”

Their solution was to concentrate all buildings in the upper grove of Prospect Point, except for a few shelters – and to construct a system of all-weather walks and drives that would provide access to the scenery while disturbing it as little as possible. Above all, they sought to preserve the beautiful forest and lush vegetation on Goat Island. Olmsted and Vaux specifically admonished the State not to allow the reservation to become cluttered with buildings or statues or other objects that would detract from the unparalleled natural beauty of the place. “Having regard to the enjoyment by visitors of natural scenery nothing of an artificial character should be allowed a place on the property, no matter how valuable it might be under other circumstances and no matter at how little cost it may be had...”ⁱ

Actions: The Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy has long advocated for, and at various points in time provided comment on, the preservation and restoration of Olmsted’s historic landscape features in Niagara Falls State Park. The BOPC has engaged on issues including the reconstruction of the Stone Arch Bridge to Goat Island and the Section 106 process for the rehabilitation of the Robert Moses Parkway. It is appropriate from that interest and history for BOPC to provide comment on this proposed development project.

Position: It is the position of the BOPC that wherever and in all ways possible, the original design intent and actual historic conditions of Olmsted designed landscapes should be maintained and restored in all Olmsted parks and landscapes in Western New York and throughout the country. This includes the entirety of the State Park on Goat Island, originally known as the Niagara Reservation.

The BOPC, in accordance with its mission and its founding principles to protect and restore the Olmsted landscapes for future generational enjoyment, cannot support or endorse further development on Goat Island that would impact the natural or historic features of the landscape. This includes any development proposal that imposes negative environmental or historic adverse impacts.

Despite prior development on Goat Island to accommodate the tourism industry, the principles of preservation remain intact, and therefore all the more reason to preserve and restore the island in a natural state consistent with Olmsted's vision. It is the opinion of the BOPC that no further construction of roads, imposing infrastructure, utilities, or buildings should be imposed upon this great natural resource and world-renowned preserve. Concurrently, BOPC notes that existing intrusions, such as parking lots, have resulted in the degradation of historic topography, vegetation, circulation patterns and view-sheds, and those intrusions should be removed to restore the historic landscape whenever possible.

The BOPC supports preservation of the integrity of Goat Island as originally designed and envisioned. The BOPC stands with other agencies, governmental units, private organizations and individuals with a common interest in the historic landscape at Niagara Falls State Park and the protection of its natural resources.

Related advocacy groups the BOPC encourages for additional involvement or comment should include at minimum: the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, the State Historic Preservation Office, the National Park Service, the Trust for Public Land, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the National Association of Olmsted Parks, the Cultural Landscape Foundation, Preservation Buffalo Niagara, etc. It is the opinion of the BOPC that all entities should carefully weigh in on this proposal and consider the adverse impact consequences which put the sanctity and natural grandeur of this historic landscape at risk.

This position statement is fluid and ongoing in meeting the mission and resolve of the BOPC.

¹ [Historical content taken from "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Creation of the Niagara Reservation – Notes for a Tour of the Niagara Reservation Sponsored by the Buffalo Friends of Olmsted Parks, October 20, 1990 and from notes from presentations by Charles Beveridge and Francis R. Kowsky on October 24, 2011 at a tour of the Reservation sponsored by the Board of the National Association for Olmsted Parks and the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy.]