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Historical Background

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Compared to other cities in the original 13 colonies, Buffalo is relatively young. While French explorer Robert LaSalle is credited as the first white man to view the area in around 1628, it would be another 130 years before the first permanent French settlement was established.

Control of the area changed hands several times before the turn of the 19th century with the British and the Dutch each having a turn. Finally, the land was sold for development to a group called the Holland Land Company, which was led by Joseph Ellicott, known as the founder of Buffalo.

Ellicott named the settlement New Amsterdam to please his Dutch superiors, and began to plan the new village. The system of major arteries radiating from the central hub—what is now Niagara Square—was copied from the design of Washington, D.C.

Five Lawyers and No Church

In 1810, New Amsterdam had fewer than 500 residents, a newspaper, a few stores and "five lawyers and no church," according to the diary of De Witt Clinton who was finalizing the route for what would become the Erie Canal.

When the residents decided to rename the town Buffalo, Joseph Ellicott was insulted. He left to make his residence in Batavia, 30 miles east, and vowed never to return.

The derivation of "Buffalo" has never been fully explained. One thing's for sure: no buffalo, or North American bison, has ever been sighted in the area—unless, of course, you're talking about the [Buffalo Zoo](#). One theory is that the first settlers, upon sighting Native Americans in the area, gave the name Buffaloe's Creek to what is now the Buffalo River. Another idea is that the French called the Niagara River *beau fleuve* or



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beautiful river, and this came to be mispronounced as "Buffalo."

By 1812, the United States was at war with Great Britain and Buffalo's border location would bring the war home. The British burned the city in December 1813, reprising their 1759 attack on the then-new French settlement.

He Built the City

By 1820, events started to fall into place for Buffalo. Construction of a harbor began, led by Samuel Wilkeson and financed by a \$12,000 loan from New York State. The epitaph on Wilkeson's [Forest Lawn Cemetery](#) grave reads *Urban Condidit*, Latin for "He built the city."

The value of the harbor was not lost on New York State officials, who decided in 1822 that Buffalo, not rival town Black Rock, should be the western terminus of the Erie Canal, linking the Hudson River and the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes. The opening of the Erie Canal in October 1826 was probably the single most important event in the growth of Buffalo. Nearly all of the 2,400 residents turned out to see the first vessel enter the canal and the dumping of a bottle of Hudson River water into Lake Erie.

Buffalo, which would be incorporated as a city in 1832, was now set to become one of the country's most important transportation hubs. By the mid-1830s, grain pouring in from the Midwest was processed in Buffalo then shipped via the canal to points east. Grain elevators, invented in Buffalo, sprang up everywhere. By World War II, Buffalo would be processing 300 million pounds of grain annually.

Buffalo's growth continued through the 19th century. The arrival of the railroads spawned the development of heavy industries such as steel and auto manufacturing. At the railroads' peak, just after World War II, this city of 42 square miles had within its borders some 700 miles of track.

Presidential Native Sons

Two of Buffalo's native sons served as U.S. presidents in the 19th century. Millard Fillmore took office in 1850 upon the death of Zachary Taylor, and would subsequently be elected to his own term. Grover Cleveland, a Buffalo mayor, then New York governor, was elected to office in 1884. After losing a bid for re-election in 1888, Cleveland became the only president to serve non-consecutive terms with his victory in 1892.

The flow of electricity from Niagara Falls, 20 miles to the north, beginning in November 1896, continued Buffalo's spectacular economic growth. This plentiful supply of energy helped Buffalo land the 1901 Pan-American Exposition, fending off bids from larger cities like Detroit.

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The Exposition grounds covered an area between Elmwood Avenue and Delaware Avenue, north of [Delaware Park](#), the city's biggest green space. Park designer and renowned landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted also designed park systems in Chicago, Montreal and New York City. The last remaining building from the Exposition now houses the [Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society](#).

On September 6, 1901, tragedy struck at the Exposition. Anarchist Leon Czolgosz shot President William McKinley as he shook hands in the crowd. McKinley succumbed to his wounds early in the morning of September 14, and that afternoon Theodore Roosevelt was sworn in as his successor at the [Wilcox Mansion](#), the home of a personal friend.

Of Growth and Prosperity

Although the Exposition lost money, it put Buffalo squarely on the map as one of the most important business centers in the United States. This position continued through the first half of the 20th century, as Buffalo grew and prospered on its way to becoming the country's 15th largest city in 1950.

However, Buffalo was not immune to the regional trend of plant closings and relocations. Beginning in the mid-1950s, many businesses shut their doors or headed to the south and west, and the city's population declined by more than 150,000 before stabilizing by the mid-1970s.

More recently, beginning in the early 1980s, the city has undergone a renaissance as old, "smoke stack" industries have been replaced with financial and high technology firms. Additionally, the waterfront has been developed more wisely, with housing, businesses, restaurants and recreation replacing the steel mills and factories.

Now, visitors and residents can enjoy attractions such as the [Erie Basin Marina](#) with its restaurant, the [Hatch](#). Or take a lake cruise on the [Miss Buffalo](#). Or a step back in time at the [Buffalo and Erie County Naval and Military Park](#). You could say that the city is experiencing its second youth—and really enjoying it!

Bruce Buckfelder

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