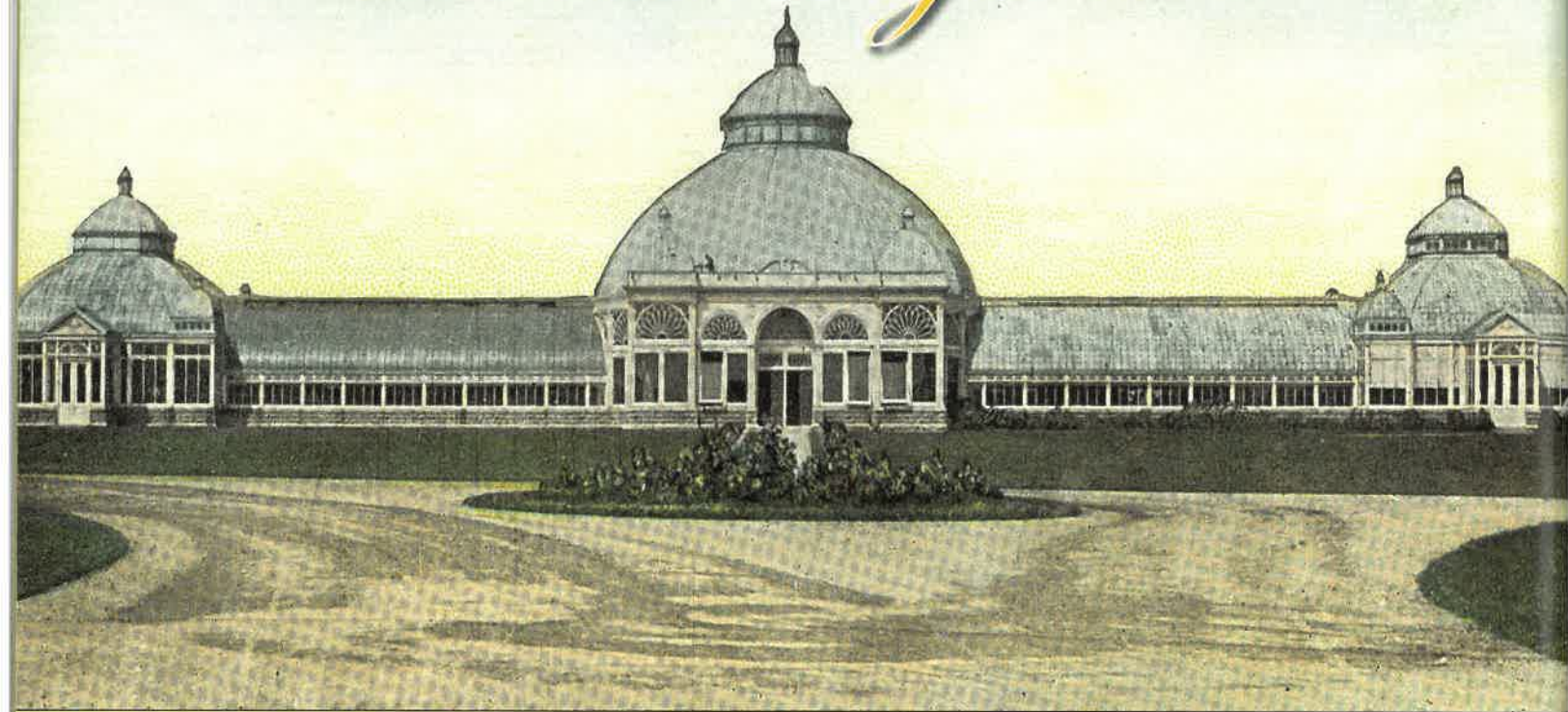


# *The Buffalo & Erie County Botanical Gardens*



BUFFALO AND ERIE COUNTY BOTANICAL GARDENS

By Douglas W. DeCroix

*Though Western New York* is certainly known for its winter weather, the region is also gaining a summertime reputation as a gardening hub. In 1995, the Norwood/West Utica Neighborhood Association held the first annual Buffalo Garden Walk. Since its humble beginnings 15 years ago, the Walk has become one of the largest events of its kind in the United States. This summer, Garden Walk Buffalo has joined hands with the Buffalo Niagara Convention and Visitors Bureau to initiate the five-week National Buffalo Garden Festival, which runs from June 18-July 25. When combining the subject of gardening with history and architecture, however, one place immediately springs to mind: the Buffalo and Erie County Botanical Gardens. Therefore as a tribute, both to summer and Buffalo's growing gardening reputation (no pun intended), the Botanical Gardens furnish the subject for this installment of the Old Photo Album.

The Buffalo and Erie County Botanical Gardens originated as part of landscape architect Fredrick Law Olmsted, Sr.'s design for a park in South Buffalo which would compliment the parks he had previously designed for the northern side of the city. Olmsted's final concept for South Park included a conservatory building, surrounded by gardens. For more temperate species, the plan also called for an arboretum and pinetum, along with bog and shrub gardens. It has been noted that Olmsted's plan for the conservatory and its surrounding gardens and grounds bears striking similarities to plans for the "Home Grounds" he designed in 1892 for the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina.



The conservatory building in South Park was designed by the prestigious firm of Lord & Burnham Co., and was to be a three-domed structure of wood, iron and glass. Lord & Burnham were influenced in their design by Britain's Crystal Palace and the Palm House at Kew Gardens. The glass and iron design proved to have great strength, and provided an ideal environment for the collection and display of exotic plant life. When built between 1897 and 1899, the South Park Conservatory was one of the largest public greenhouses in the United States.

The first director of the Botanical Gardens, Professor John F. Cowell, saw to it that the building would be filled with a world-class variety of plants. Traveling the globe to obtain unique species, Cowell's work gained national attention for the conservatory. During the Pan-American Exposition in 1901, throngs of visitors traveled south by trolley to view the exotic varieties of plant life on display at the conservatory and gardens.

Throughout the 20th century, the conservatory and adjacent gardens went through cycles of upturn and decline. In 1981, when city budget shortages and the deterioration of the structure threatened its closure, the ownership and operation of the Botanical Gardens was taken over by Erie County, supported by the newly-formed Buffalo and Erie County Botanical Gardens Society. The not-for-profit Society subsequently assumed full responsibility for the day-to-day

operation of the Gardens in August 2004, under a 25-year agreement with Erie County.

More recently, the Society has developed a master plan to revitalize the Botanical Gardens and its conservatory. This historic structure is one of less than a dozen large Victorian conservatories in the United States, and one of only two which feature a triple dome design. It is currently home to about 20,000 botanical "residents." In addition to the renovation of the significant architectural structures, the plan calls for innovative and engaging exhibits, focused around the theme of Buffalo's location on the 79th Meridian.

The future of this important cultural revitalization project could be in jeopardy, however. While the Botanical Gardens was the recipient of operating funds from Erie County for the first five years of their operating agreement, the County Executive has failed to release any funding for the current year, despite an appropriation for such funding in the 2010 County budget. Needless to say, the withholding of funding has been a major setback for the Society and the Botanical Gardens. With luck, right minds will prevail, and the revitalization of this cultural treasure will be allowed to continue.

To learn more about the Botanical Gardens and how to get involved, visit their website at [www.buffalogardens.com](http://www.buffalogardens.com). In the meantime, sit back and enjoy this array of photographs from the early 20th century. 🏡

A view of the northern elevation of the conservatory, from a postcard, c. 1910.  
BILL KOCH COLLECTION







Interior of South Park Conservatory, Buffalo, N.Y.

Two interior views of the conservatory, the bottom image illustrating a display of Chrysanthemums, c. 1910.

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CHRYSANTHEMUM SHOW, SOUTH PARK CONSERVATORY,  
BUFFALO, N. Y.





Chief Gardener Bott tends to the conservatory's "residents" in these interior views, c. 1910.  
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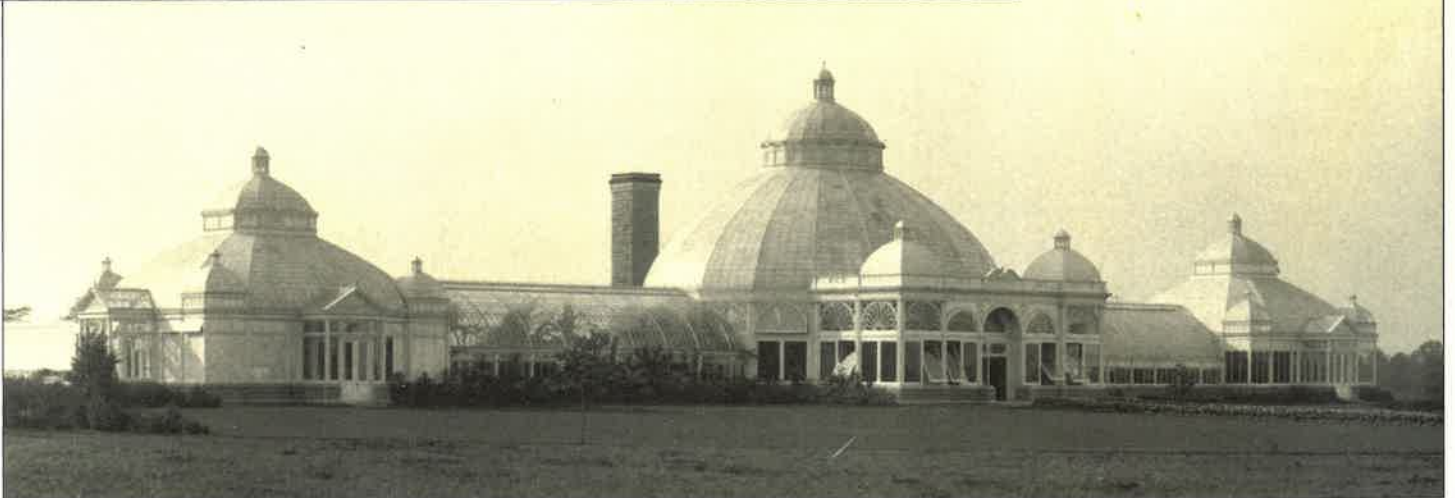
Moving outdoors, visitors young and old enjoy a stroll among the array of colorful gardens adjacent to the conservatory, c. 1910.  
BILL KOCH COLLECTION







During the summer of 1922, a female visitor posed for her photo at a variety of locations around the Botanical Gardens. Our Lady of Victory Basilica, under construction, is just visible in the right background of the image at top. BUFFALO AND ERIE COUNTY BOTANICAL GARDENS



A view of the conservatory and its adjacent grounds, looking northwest, c. 1910. BUFFALO AND ERIE COUNTY BOTANICAL GARDENS