

***PICTURE BOOK OF EARLIER BUFFALO:***  
**PHOTOGRAPHY, HISTORY AND PRESERVATION**



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## ABSTRACT

The *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* is an artifact of the discourse on modern architecture, influencing the reader's perception of not only the built environment, but also of the past. The *Picture Book* includes roughly four hundred historic photographs and narrative text, compiled in 1912 by Frank Severance, the Secretary-Treasurer of the Buffalo Historical Society. The collection depicts nineteenth-century buildings that were demolished in order to make room for the rapid growth of the industrial era, thereby reimagining a city that had already disappeared by the time of the book's publication. The volume serves as a city in miniature, providing a visual journey through a vanished urban landscape that illustrates the ruins and rebirths of constant urban reinvention which still resonate today.

This collection reveals the contemporary values that are often displayed in a reconstructed memory of the past. The volume suggests that modernity was not only evident in new structures and styles, but is also fundamentally linked to an awareness of what has to be destroyed in order to attain that new vision. The collection simultaneously functions as an act of preservation, an expression of mourning, and a record of wonder at the urban transformations. How does this book translate the visual experience of the city, its past and future, for the reader? How is photography, an inherently modern medium, utilized to suggest a relationship between modernity and the ongoing cycle of destruction of renewal? How does this photographic vision contrast today with the reading of contemporary images of a shrinking Buffalo? Furthermore, the book can be newly reinterpreted by historians over time, from Severance's era to today, projecting the reader towards the future Buffalo as well into a remembrance of the city's now modern past.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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## **Introduction**

*Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* is a five hundred-page collection of roughly four hundred historic images and narrative text, compiled in 1912 by the Secretary-Treasurer of the Buffalo Historical Society, Frank Hayward Severance. The collection was created in order to visually document a multitude of buildings that were demolished in order to make room for new development during Buffalo's industrial era. The majority of the photographs depict downtown Buffalo's commercial and residential architecture at the turn of the twentieth century, with some images taken as early as the 1850's. Nearly all of the buildings depicted had been demolished by 1912 and, in many cases, these images are the only surviving photographs of those structures. In this sense, the photographs serve as a form of preservation, providing the only remaining traces of buildings that were eliminated to make way for development. During an era when the structural fabric of the city was rapidly altering, these photographs acted as a medium to not only record, but also to reflect and digest the psychological effects of those changes.

Not only are these nineteenth-century images a valuable asset to the history of Buffalo, but their compilation by Frank Severance adds an element of early-twentieth-century interpretation that can be analyzed in order to further comprehend the effects of industrialization on the urban populace. In this volume, Severance engages in constructing a vision of the past by including and interpreting various media, resulting in a presentation of that construction. The volume is a presentation, or communicative display, that emerges from this construction of collective memory, influenced by Severance and the media he includes in the collection. In this sense, the term 'construction,' not to be confused with the architectural construction of a building, refers

to the process that Severance undergoes in order to creatively imagine, record, analyze and interpret the past by presenting it. In this way, *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* provides not only a rare look at vanished aspects of the city, but also at the elements which make up the creative construction of one author's perception of the past.

Although the informational material in this volume has been utilized by several historians before,<sup>1</sup> this thesis is the first treatment of the volume as a medium worthy of interpretive analysis on its own, rather than solely as a reference to be used for factual data. Initially, I encountered the collection for its informational content, incorporating the data Severance provided on various structures into another project. After having thoroughly viewed the volume, however, it became clear that the material exhibited an intriguing combination of rich visual elements and an artful compilation by the author, indicating that it surpassed a mere archive and could be valued as an important artifact of its era that was ripe for analysis. This initial interest in the book as a creative medium, rather than an informational archive, served as an important exercise in explicitly questioning the role of the author in influencing the dissemination of information, and consequently interpretation, to historians. This catalyzed this thesis' discussion of the slippery lines between objective data and subjective interpretation, and the influence of these elements on the compilation of history by both previous and contemporary historians.

*Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* provides a case study for examining the intertwining roles of architectural photographers and the author in creatively constructing an urban memory of the past. This discussion will address themes regarding the cycle of destruction and renewal of the built environment, the role of the photographic medium in

documenting history, and the relationships between photography, architectural preservation and history. This thesis will consider the book as an artifact of the discourse on the emergence of modernity, by examining the influence of the author on the construction and presentation of the past, and the role of the book as a medium to communicate and interpret the city in the midst of an era of transformation. An awareness of the multiplicity of time periods present in the volume, and consequently different interpretations of the material over time, will be woven into the analysis of this collection.

The photographs in this collection, in conjunction with their appropriation by the author, illustrate not one, but several time periods. While the images themselves feature mid-nineteenth-century subject matter, their inclusion within the collection is marked by Severance's early-twentieth-century interpretations of the material. Additionally, the early twenty-first-century analyses put forth in this thesis add another strata of appropriation, thus incorporating a third temporal interaction with this collection. In this sense, this volume connects to several time periods, periods that Severance would have considered the past, present and future of his own lifetime. This simultaneity of time periods- which I later call an 'interpretive stratigraphy'- can be accessed by the photographs and their interpretation in the collection, thus making the volume essential in understanding the ever shifting interpretations that comprise the historical process. How can the simultaneity of time periods present in the collection be of use to contemporary historians in understanding changes in historiography over time? This discussion aims to contribute a thorough analysis of these issues to the field of architectural history and

historiography, presenting an argument for capitalizing on the presence of subjectivity in the consideration of historical images and documents.

This thesis approaches urban historiography and architectural preservation through the lens of photography. The importance of image analysis has been increasingly acknowledged in scholarly texts on architectural history, indicating a slow but steady shift from the perception of photographs as mirrors of truth to their function as interpretations of reality. While earlier generations of architectural historians initially utilized photographs predominantly for factual information, scholars have more recently acknowledged the power of photographs in shaping the historian's perception and interpretation of the past. In light of Barthes' observation that "a photograph is always invisible, it is not it that we see,"<sup>2</sup> it is essential for historians to recognize that photographs shape our perception of architecture and its significance. This discussion operates within those arguments, urging for and examining the subjectivities inherently present in urban photography.

There have been a number of scholars who have initiated and developed a more thorough argument demonstrating the need for interpreting images rather than solely viewing them as objective information. John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg examine the essential qualities of the medium of photography, emphasizing that it is uniquely a process of selection, rather than synthesis. They highlight the manner in which photography interprets reality, rather than merely reflecting it, by capturing vantage points that would not otherwise be naturally prominent to the naked eye.<sup>3</sup> Although they apply these concepts to Eugene Atget's views of Paris, they provide an

important underlying insight into photography that is applicable to images of many cities.<sup>4</sup>

Cervin Robinson and Joel Herschmann's *Architecture Transformed* (1987) provides a relevant discussion of the ways in which photography can influence our perception of architecture, establishing a useful overview of technical innovations and stylistic trends throughout the history of architectural photography. They illustrate a pattern of photographic approaches that tend to reiterate the architect's vision, often presenting ideal lighting conditions, an absence of people, and camera angles that mimic elevation studies and perspectival drawings.<sup>5</sup> In *Photography and Architecture* (1982), Richard Pare similarly emphasizes stylistic techniques and trends in architectural photography, while also conveying a particular concern with time. He discusses the momentary nature of the photographic medium in conjunction with the architecture it depicts, stating, "Time past, in the cumulative age of the building, time present in the photographer's moment, and time future in our present, all are interwoven...in the perception of each image."<sup>6</sup> The capacity of the photograph to illustrate this instantaneous juncture between the quickly vanishing past, the present and the future is a reoccurring theme in my discussion.

Others have taken a more literary approach to unraveling the role of photography and its influence on historiography. Rather than providing a systematized history of aesthetic techniques, Alan Trachtenberg approaches the subject of photographs by reading them as texts in *Reading American Photographs* (1989). He describes photographs as "not simple depictions but constructions [of]... social practices, cultural patterns and institutional forms."<sup>7</sup> He focuses his attention on viewing images as cultural

texts, but somewhat neglects to acknowledge the inherent differences between textual and visual media. Although he applies a form of literary criticism to images that does not directly reflect my methodology for this discussion, his view of the photographer as a key role in shaping and communicating culturally significant ideas has been influential to this study.

In Malcom Daniels's *Photographs of Edouard Baldus* (1994), Barry Bergdoll investigates the architect's use of photography, particularly during its earlier incarnations in the mid-nineteenth century. Architects capitalized on photography of their structures, assuming these images an objective likeness of their work and thus relegating the architectural photographer to a mere recorder of their accomplishments.<sup>8</sup> While this discussion focused particularly on the commercial world of photography in Second Empire Paris, Bergdoll's awareness of the falsely assumed objectivity of architectural photography is a fundamental concept. Robert Elwall's *Building with Light* (2004) provides an updated survey of architectural photography, utilizing an approach that views images as interpretation, rather than information. He writes, "architectural historians too often treat photographs as if they were the buildings themselves and not particular interpretations of them made at particular moments."<sup>9</sup> This form of image analysis seeks, in Barthes' terms, to make the photographs themselves visible to the historian, and this method is central to this thesis.

More recently, a few scholars are approaching the intersection of photography, architecture and history in innovative ways. Eric Gordon's *The Urban Spectator: American Concept-Cities from Kodak to Google* views the history of cities through the lens of media developments, examining the intersections between the public's perception

of architecture and the continually evolving media that mediates it.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Andrew Higgott and Timothy Wray's edited volume *Camera Constructs* (2012) compiles discussions on the topic of architectural photography from a variety of positions, examining images within the argument that they are instrumental in shaping identity and meaning to the city, functioning far beyond reflections of an elusive truthful reality.<sup>11</sup>

Two works in particular, Peter Hales' *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839-1915* and Mary Woods' *Beyond the Architect's Eye*, have directly influenced my approach to examining the juncture of architecture, photography and history in this collection. These works have served as the fundamental foundations for the way I view urban photography, illuminating the powerful influence that images can have on our perceptions of the city and our interpretation of architectural history. Hales' work has impacted the way photographs are appropriated by historians, examining their relationship to the built environment as well as to the process of writing history. He provides a seminal discussion on not only the stylistic qualities of many urban photographs, but also their influence on interpretation, which has led to a greater recognition of their role in analysis.<sup>12</sup>

Following this, Mary Woods' work operates within this context. She has aptly stated, "As an architectural historian, I see the built world through the camera...framing but also constructing my view."<sup>13</sup> Although my analysis of *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* focuses on only one city and a group of largely anonymous photographers, Woods' attention to the photographer's role in reflecting, interpreting and conveying a sense of place, both to the viewer and to the historian, is fundamental to this thesis. While several other scholars have incorporated photographic analysis into their work, it is

still arguably an underrepresented aspect of urban historiography. While scholars increasingly acknowledge the manner in which individual photographs popularly effect the perception of autonomous buildings, such as Bill Hedrich's iconic image of Fallingwater or Julius Shulman's photograph of the Kaufmann house, there is still a need for more application of this concept to the scope of an entire city. How does a collection of photographs, rather than individual images, mediate our perception of the city at a larger urban scale? Conversations surrounding the influence of a photograph's aesthetic components on a historian's interpretation of the city are still relatively rare, and it is possible to argue that the photographer's effect on shaping urban history is still undervalued within this academic context.

While many of these works discuss photographs in terms of individual examples, Gary Van Zante's book, *New Orleans 1867: Photographs by Theodore Lilienthal*, provides an excellent model for examining a cohesive body of images.<sup>14</sup> The collection features Theodore Lilienthal's commissioned photographs of New Orleans during a period when the city was rebuilding after the civil war. Depicting the city during a time of constant renovations, accompanied by continual promise and optimism, the photographs feature notions of construction and demolition that are echoed in the *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*. Van Zante succeeds in examining these images both individually and collectively, providing a useful precedent for interpreting the photographs as a collection rather than as separate entities. Although this thesis focuses more intently on comparatively fewer photographs than Van Zante's more democratic approach to the images, *New Orleans 1867* serves as a methodological and organizational inspiration for this discussion, providing a form of visual mapping that is useful for

tackling the large body of photographs in the collection.

A few scholars in particular have provided the underlying framework for this thesis' emphasis on preservation and history as creative processes. Max Page's term "creative destruction," although applied to New York City specifically, offers a useful construct for viewing the subjective choices made by preservationists and their direct influence on the built environment in any city.<sup>15</sup> Daniel Bluestone further examines this notion of the preservationist's role in celebrating or neglecting certain histories. He likens the choices of preservationists to the process of writing history, examining the relationship between the two fields and the differing consequences of their actions.<sup>16</sup> These ideas, when viewed in tandem with Neil Harris' concept of the "life cycle" of buildings, emphasize the importance of viewing preservation as a particularly human set of choices. In *Building Lives*, Harris puts forth a graceful comparison of building demolitions and their documentation to post-mortem photographs.<sup>17</sup> Harris' work illustrates the tendency to imbue buildings with values, memories, or even human attributes. Therefore, the choices to preserve certain buildings over others, or some narratives over others, indicate a process that can be both highly subjective and highly influential. This link between the creative, selective acts of both preservationists and historians serves as a fundamental argument for this thesis.

J.B. Jackson's influential work, "The Necessity for Ruins," puts forth a relationship between memory and monuments that provides a theoretical foundation for this discussion. He argues that reconstructed historical towns and reenactments have replaced the public monument in America's celebration and interpretation of history. This perspective catalyzed a shift towards an interest in the domestic, everyday lives of

cultural history, resulting in monuments dedicated to unknown soldiers, such as those in Arlington and Philadelphia, which feature the anonymous ‘everyman’ who could be any person, rather than the exceptional individual. These monuments and historical reconstructions celebrate “a vernacular past, a golden age where there are no dates or names, simply a sense of the way it *used to be*, history as the chronicle of everyday existence.”<sup>18</sup>

*Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* operates within Jackson’s description, illuminating some aspects of the earlier tendency to honor famous individuals, but largely celebrating a vernacular past. While there are some images of buildings associated with prominent citizens and architects, the volume as a whole is composed of a plethora of seemingly ordinary scenes, associated with no one in particular. Photographs that feature everyday street views, storefronts, residential settings and the humble early beginnings of the city collectively celebrate the ‘way it used to be,’ depicting not only the grand architectural specimens but also providing a small peek into the world of city residents during a time that has past. The everyday lives featured are, however, still shaped by the author, and there is a noticeable lack of minorities, women and working class citizens. In this sense, even though the visual components of *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* echo Jackson’s description of vernacular history, it is essential to recognize that that vernacular is defined by Severance, the wealthy, Caucasian male author. While this is problematic today, it is especially useful for gaining insight into the traditional patterns of the era in which the volume was published. Nevertheless, Jackson’s notions surrounding the American tendency to value a vernacular past is of particular use in the context of this analysis.

Jackson puts forth an important idea that links the human urge to preserve or reconstruct the past to a historical cycle of remembering and forgetting, stating “there has to be an interim of death or rejection before there can be renewal and reform.”<sup>19</sup> He suggests that ruins are a natural part of the cycle of construction and destruction of both the built environment and of historical memory, for “ruins provide the incentive for restoration, and for a return to origins.”<sup>20</sup> In this sense, ruins serve not only as remnants of the past, but as catalysts for remembering or reexamining what is in danger of being forgotten, much in the same way a monument can. Ruins thus fulfill an essential role, performing the decline of the past from historical awareness to a degree that inspires a rediscovery of the importance of their era.

Within this framework, Severance’s volume, which not only contains images of ruined buildings but also could arguably serve as a ruin itself, can provide the context for a larger discussion surrounding the way the past is interpreted over time. Jackson wrote, “Many of us know the joy and excitement not so much of creating the new as of redeeming what has been neglected.”<sup>21</sup> When compiling the collection, Severance may have been operating within this kind of excitement by redeeming the neglected early history of Buffalo, giving its vernacular past a voice through narrative and images. The basic act of compiling the volume seems to suggest a desire to illuminate a past that was perhaps in danger of being forgotten, even outside an analysis of the materials that are presented. However, there is no way to know Severance’s intentions, and thus the most effective way to unpack his interpretations is by examining the results of his efforts in the volume itself. While the significance of these shifting interpretations over time could be appropriately situated within a post-structuralist context, this thesis emphasizes the visual

materials themselves and Severance's interaction with them, and thus does not aim to operate within that theoretical framework.

As for my own analysis of the volume, I am conscious of acting within this same joy of redeeming the neglected past by examining a book that has never truly been interpreted in this manner. I have, however, also consciously attempted to acknowledge, and even utilize, that redemptive joy by explicitly examining it rather than giving into it entirely. Following Jackson's description of the cultural urge to revive historical eras, what drives us to imagine the vernacular past? How do photographs, a medium that freezes time, serve this need to view the past, and what does their organization within this volume reveal? As I interpret this volume, what do my own conclusions reveal about my own view of the past? Even more so, what do they reveal about the present? *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* serves as an excellent opportunity to examine these questions, providing material for the analysis of not just one period's relationship to the past, but several.

When dealing with such a wealth of material, it is necessary to place limitations upon the themes that will be addressed in this discussion. Only a small portion of the images in the volume will be discussed in any detail, so as to utilize them as representational of the numerous examples in the collection. Additionally, there are a number of images that are not photographs, but rather lithographs, maps, sketches and engravings. Although these are briefly mentioned in this thesis, they are not fully analyzed, and could be useful for a further examination on the relationship of those mediums to the photographs in the collection. It would also be fruitful in future projects to situate this volume within the context of other early twentieth-century picture books,

examining the twin evolution of the mediums of photography and book design towards iconic publications such as Life magazine or contemporary photographic books.

Furthermore, creating a more direct correspondence between the physical architectural sites and their depiction in the collection as well as their status in Buffalo today could enrich this discussion. While this concept is applied to two sites towards the end of this thesis, these efforts could be applied to creating a document that correlates a history of the sites displayed in the collection to their status today, depicting them both then and now. However, in order to provide a thorough analysis of the volume, this discussion centers instead on the book and its contents, examining their relationship to the author, to the construction of history, and to the city itself.

This thesis will utilize a methodology that focuses on examining the combination of visual, textual and organizational elements that comprise this collection. The qualitative analysis of this collection returns first and foremost to the physical materials at hand: the images, the text, and the book as a whole unit. These materials will be first researched by gathering informational data from primary and secondary sources on the subject matter, photographers and author of the collection. Then, utilizing this data, the analysis will shift into the interpretation of the less tangible, but equally present, qualities of the materials, such as the photographer's compositional construction of the images and the effects of the author's techniques on the reader. This analysis then turns to the built environment in order to further apply these concepts of subjective interpretation to historic preservation efforts and the evolution of the city over time. By conducting research on the demolition, construction and evolution of architectural structures at two

specific sites that are displayed in the collection, this discussion applies this information to a broader scope of conceptual patterns that reflect this cycle in urban history.

While the goal is to launch from this material into an interpretation of the results of Severance's act of compilation, this methodology is rooted in the book itself, which operates in this discussion as the root of all further analysis. Rather than attempt to unjustly assert Severance's intentions, this discussion aims to suggest the results and effects of his actions, explicitly acknowledging not only the subjectivity of the photographers and of the authors, but also of my own interpretations. In this way, the methodology utilized for this thesis enables a focused discussion on the *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* as it relates to the roles of the photographer and the author in interpreting history.

### **The Collection's Creator, City and Context**

The creation of *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* was rooted in Severance's efforts to popularize local history and improve the status of the Buffalo Historical Society. His path to the society was unique at the time, as he never had any significant formal training as a historian. After receiving a degree in Botany from Cornell University in 1879, Severance became a reporter for several different Buffalo newspapers.<sup>22</sup> As a journalist, he found himself increasingly interested in local history and began to develop a series of publications and lectures about the early history of Western New York.<sup>23</sup> During this process, he became popular with members of the elite Buffalo Historical Society, an organization originally founded in 1862 by Millard Fillmore, a local 'favorite son' of Buffalo who later became the President of the United States of America. Severance was

asked to assume the position of Secretary-Treasurer for the Buffalo Historical Society in 1902. Throughout his time in this position, he greatly influenced the organization both externally, by popularizing its public image, and internally, by creating a more efficient archival system.

Severance reinvented the image of the society by publishing a prolific series of volumes. Upon becoming Secretary-Treasurer, Severance described the society as, “A little coterie of elderly gentleman...Meeting now and then to hear someone’s reminiscences, more or less inaccurate, or if true, not always important...As for the general public, most of it had never heard of the Historical Society.”<sup>24</sup> Prior to his appointment, the society had published a few volumes under the title “Buffalo Historical Society Publications,” at sporadic, lengthy intervals beginning in 1879. In an attempt to contemporize this somewhat antiquated organization, Severance amplified the production of these publications and created at least one volume a year for the next thirty years. In this way, “The *Publications* of the Buffalo Historical Society were for many years an important project for Severance, and the national reputation of the society was built upon them.”<sup>25</sup> While focusing on one specific topic per volume, Severance chose subject matter that may have aimed to grab the attention of the public, resulting in volumes with titles ranging from, “Peace Episodes on the Niagara” to “Recalling Pioneer Days.”<sup>26</sup> Through this series of publications, Severance increased the popularity of the Buffalo Historical Society and created a lasting impact on the organization today.

Due to his lack of training as a historian, Severance contributed a unique perspective to the Buffalo Historical Society. His academic background in natural sciences and his professional experience in journalism influenced his approach to history,

and he sought to overturn the society's previous 'reminiscences' with a more accurate, better-organized historical record. As D.J. Gorman suggests, "Perhaps the lack of historical training made Severance more willing to use his historical talents in history popularizing ventures which the academically trained historian later eschewed as unbecoming."<sup>27</sup> The emergence of the academically trained historian in the late nineteenth century coincided with the institutionalization of history, which led to "the professionalization of historical studies and their concentration at universities and research centers."<sup>28</sup> By the early twentieth century, "history had become a full fledged profession."<sup>29</sup> With the emergence of this profession came the distinction between academically trained historians and popular historians. Georg Iggers states, "The self definition of history as a scientific discipline implied for the work of the historian a sharp division between scientific and literary discourse, between professionals and amateurs."<sup>30</sup> This 'scientific' approach was exemplified in the era's tendency to create taxonomies, and while their presence could be analyzed in Severance's collection, I am more interested in the volume in terms of its situation within the changing approaches to writing history. This firm belief in the "scientific status of history" provided an important dividing line between amateurs, who often utilized a more narrative style, and professional historians, who "shared the optimism of the professionalized sciences that methodologically controlled research makes objective knowledge possible."<sup>31</sup> While this historiographical approach morphed later in the twentieth century, scientific methods played a significant role in the definition of the history profession during Severance's era.

The relationship between professional and popular historians was also marked by a difference in their relationship to the general populace. While academic historians

encouraged that “History needed to be written *by* specialists, but not only even primarily *for* them, but for a broad educated public,”<sup>32</sup> popular historians accessed a larger audience, including those who were not academically trained in the discipline. Here, the division between scientific methods and cultural storytelling reflected the differences in authors and audiences. While for the professional historians, history was a scientific discipline, popular historians viewed history as a source of culture, particularly when communicating to a public “who turned to history in search of their own identity.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, while the professionalization of history led to greater academic structure and advancements, amateur historians utilized effective narrative to search for cultural links to the past that could provide meaning to the present and future.

Severance’s experiences enabled him to approach history as a journalist witnessing the past, straddling the line between the academic and popular historian. With a degree from Cornell in Botany, Severance would have been easily able to operate within his era’s tendency to value scientific methods and the aim of objectivity. His work experience as a journalist would likely have influenced his writing, which may have aimed to give unbiased, objective information that seeks out the truth in the past by demonstrating events that occurred. However, there is also a quality of singsong narrative that peeks through in the collection, revealing his own unique perspective as an educated man, yet not an academically trained historian. This quality could have perhaps made the collection accessible to a broader audience and thus would have served as an asset in his attempts to popularize history and the society through his series of publications.

The sixteenth volume in the series, *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, was published in 1912. The title page of the book states that the publication was “edited by Frank. H. Severance.” This is the only direct reference to any form of author, and this analysis operates under the assumption that Severance was indeed the primary author. The description of the task of compilation as ‘editing’ rather than ‘creating,’ provides an important detail regarding Severance’s relationship to the material. If he was indeed the author, which seems likely due to the lack of any other name associated with the volume’s production, then the role of editor implies that the material included in the collection is the primary focus and voice of the volume. An editor serves to compile and distribute material, whereas an author creates it from within. By listing Severance as the editor, the publication reinforces the fundamental importance of the material that is compiled in the volume, rather than the voice that presents it. This perception of Severance’s role could perhaps also function within a journalistic setting, in which the journalist aims to give the information a primary voice.

On the first page of text in the volume, Severance clearly states his intended aims in compiling the collection: “This volume is not a history of Buffalo, or of any period or phase of it...the primary purpose of the book is to preserve, in a convenient form, pictures of the earlier Buffalo.” Here he defines his limitations and his interests, stating that he does not intend to contribute to the academically trained, professional field of history, but rather to include visual information about the past through images, providing a visual archive which can be read, interpreted and viewed by historians and non-historians alike, however they so choose. The collection is not merely visual, however, and he includes text to accompany the images, stating “Pictures of some Buffalo buildings that have

gone, and some facts about them; that is what this book is.”<sup>34</sup> As a journalist recording the past, he plainly states his ambitions in creating this book. The result, however, is a collection that operates as an artifact of its era, providing a valuable resource through not only the images and narrative it provides, but also in the act of compilation itself.

Typically, a publication’s audience and their reception of the material can largely influence an analysis of any volume. Unfortunately, there is a lack of concrete evidence regarding the distribution and reception of *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, and consequently this interpretation can only speculate as to the actual readers of this volume and their perception of its contents. Without knowledge of the number of copies printed by the society, or purchased by the readers, this analysis can only postulate as to who may have actually viewed this volume. While it seems likely that at least some of the readers could have been members or supporters of the Buffalo Historical Society, there is no way to know for sure. Although there is no data available on the price of the volume, it seems possible that the majority of readers were at least of an economic class that would have been aware of the society’s publications, and able to purchase them. If that were the case, then the readership would have likely been middle to upper class citizens, perhaps predominantly local to Buffalo. Although Severance stated his interest in popularizing the society through these publications, it is difficult to know the audience he was aiming to reach through this volume. Was he attempting to expand the society’s readership into younger, bourgeois citizens, a detached upper class elite, or perhaps most progressively, the working class citizens of Buffalo? Severance’s determination to popularize the society through these publications may indicate that the readership could have been middle to upper class citizens with a newfound interest in Buffalo’s history

and the society, yet without any concrete data, the demographic nature of this audience is purely speculative.

The collection did receive positive acclaim from popular critics, providing a brief insight into the broader reception of the volume. These reviews were often accompanied by an undercurrent of nostalgia and an awareness of the rapid passage of time. One reviewer stated, “It were to be wished that such a book, executed with equal industry and intelligence, might be made for every one of our large cities before it is too late.”<sup>35</sup> This notion of remembering the past before it is ‘too late’ reoccurs throughout many reviews, and is echoed somewhat in the collection as well. More generally, the reviews reflect broader cultural trends in the desire to capture history, and publish it, through photography. The medium was particularly well suited to combat the quickly disappearing built environment that the collection sought to record, enabling the perseverance of vanished structures through the images in the volume.

Paradoxically, this collection, containing photographs that preserve images of absent structures, was more recently in need of preservation itself. In 1994, the Cornell University Library was able to digitize the entire volume in order to replace the irreparably deteriorated original.<sup>36</sup> Supported in part by the New York State Program for the Conservation and Preservation of Library Research Materials and the Xerox Corporation, Cornell digitally replicated this series of photographs and text in its entirety. As a Cornell alumnus, Severance would likely have appreciated the perpetuation of his preservation efforts. This contemporary act of digitization not only echoes Severance’s earlier-twentieth-century preservation acts in the publication, but may also suggest that the collection itself may have been published only minimally. Without any record of the

number of copies distributed to the public, it is impossible to know how many people had access to the volume. The fact of the original copy's disintegration and subsequent digitization, however, may indicate that the volume could have been rare even in Severance's era, suggesting that the print run may have been limited rather than pervasive. Today, *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* makes an important contribution to our historical understanding of the perpetuity of preservation efforts, shifting over time from the act of photography into the act of digitization.

In the very fact of its compilation, the collection deems Buffalo as a city of historical significance and a subject worthy of study. One literary critic stated that Severance "has no illusions about the artistic quality of his material, but a manly sense that a community so important ought to take an interest in the details of its appearance in past times."<sup>37</sup> Severance's gesture to compile the collection dignifies Buffalo as an important place, one with a history worthy of documentation as well as occupying a prominent status in the early twentieth century. This collection, like the photographs it contains, "gave Americans a visual history of their cities while simultaneously making the city a fit subject for American history."<sup>38</sup> By creating this volume, Severance not only 'saved' history before it was lost, but also suggested that the history was worth saving, due to the importance of the city's architectural collection in the past and present.

The book not only declared Buffalo to be an important city, but it also served to connect its audience. If mass distributed to a predominantly local readership, this publication would have effectively united all those who purchased a copy, by sheer virtue of creating the shared experience of viewing the collection's images of a collective history. Neil Harris states,

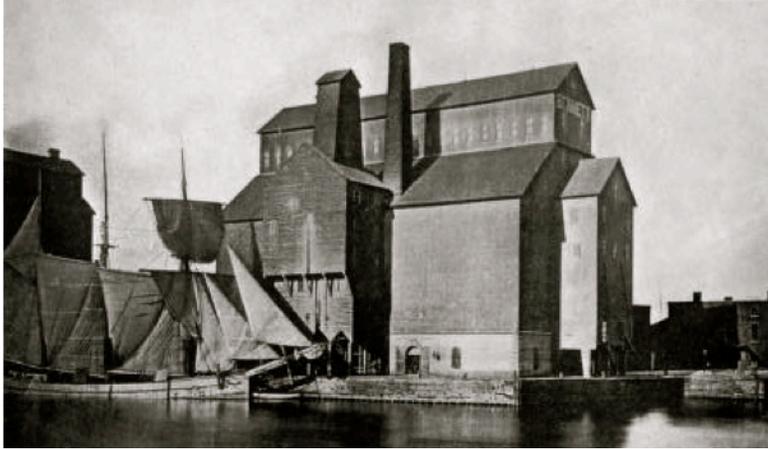
To own a photograph wasn't an affirmation of uniqueness; rather it was a declaration of shared identity with all the others who owned the same picture. The photograph celebrated American community.... uniting often disparate individuals and groups into a common identity of shared experience.<sup>39</sup>

The sheer reproduction of the images for publication made them available to an audience for the first time, and it was no longer necessary to visit the archives of the Historical Society to view these images individually, ensuring they would be accessible for years to come. While it is unknown how large that audience may have been, the publication not only served to dignify and define Buffalo by giving it a history, but it also may have created a collective community that was connected by a shared interest of their city and its history.

Undoubtedly, the collection was created as a reaction to the historical events and patterns of change that occurred during Severance's lifetime. During the mid-nineteenth century, the era depicted in the collection, Buffalo was emerging from the shadow of its industrial roots and blossoming into a cosmopolitan city. The city's location at the terminus of the Erie Canal and the edge of Lake Erie made it an essential crossroads for trade between New York City and the Great Lakes. The invention of the grain elevator in Buffalo in 1842 led instantaneously to an industrial center clustered around the Buffalo River and lakeside waterfront, just south of downtown. These grain elevators, seen in Figure 1, were strategically placed between the waterways and the rail lines, where they could load and process grain directly from boats and then send and receive shipments of grain and other products from the trains. With a plethora of grain elevators, water access and railway lines, Buffalo quickly became an industrial center, drawing factory workers,

merchants, wealthy business owners and opportunists to the city in the mid-nineteenth century.

When Severance compiled the collection at the turn of the twentieth century,



Buffalo was a booming, industrial city that, like many American cities at the time, was experiencing unprecedented change at an increasingly rapid pace.

The Pan American Exposition of 1901, funded by a few of Buffalo's many local millionaires at the time, celebrated the emergence of Buffalo as a major American city by highlighting its harnessing of electricity from nearby Niagara Falls. The exposition commanded national attention, not solely for its world-class exhibits, architecture, art and attractions, but also due to the assassination of President McKinley at the fair. The shooting, followed by the President's death a few days later and subsequent inauguration of President Theodore Roosevelt in Buffalo, drew a whirlwind of press to the city. The exposition had a lasting impact on Buffalo, with broad-reaching influences on architecture and city planning that can still be seen today. Once the exposition was finished, most of its buildings were torn down, and like many world's fairs, left only the ideals of the City Beautiful movement in its wake. The fairgrounds were turned into wealthy residential streets with luxurious mansions and monuments and parks were scattered throughout the area. This amplified the outward migration of residences away from the city center and towards the northern and western wealthy neighborhoods,

resulting in the abandonment of large homes closer to downtown, as seen in Figure 2. Only a few permanent structures from the fair remained, including the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, which became the new home of the Society the same year Severance became Secretary-Treasurer of the organization.

While the mid-nineteenth century established Buffalo as an industrial and commercial city, the early twentieth century witnessed an intense, unprecedented boom. By the early 1900's, Buffalo had established itself as a major American city, with not only predominant

industries but also many wealthy citizens, a rich artistic and cultural scene, and architecture by luminaries such as H.H. Richardson, Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. The



**Figure 2:** *The Kip Holland House, 640 Main Street, Above Chippewa, In its Last Days*

industrial advancements and technological developments that characterized the era resulted in an urban landscape that was continually being altered to suit new needs as well as a rapidly increasing population. There was continuous demolition of older architecture in tandem with the construction of new structures such as the Bethlehem Steel Plant and the Larkin Soap Company. The quicker the rate of development became, the more the cityscape changed, with old buildings vanishing and new ones emerging at a rapid pace. Because of this, citizens may have been affected by these physical alterations

on a daily basis, with buildings appearing and disappearing at an alarming rate. In response to this persistent change, *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* presents Buffalo's past by compiling photographs that depict a vanished city.

### **The Book as an Artifact**

By using photographs, accompanied by a relatively casual narrative, Severance created a 'Picture Book,' engaging in a particular form of book making that addresses the reader in through own unique methods. This volume emerged from an era that demonstrated a marked interest in the compilation and collection of scrapbooks and photographic albums. The continual evolution of photographic technology provided increasingly accessible means for the public to capture their own photos and assemble them into their own arrangements within an album. Scrapbooks provided a flexibility that enabled a person to include postcards and photographs alongside meaningful miscellany that spoke specifically to their own memories and values. While this tradition continues today, it was particularly popular during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,<sup>40</sup> indicating a broader cultural trend that provides an important historical context for the emergence of the *Picture Book*. In some ways, this book could be read as a pre-assembled scrapbook, providing a formal photographic album that honors the memory of Buffalo's past while celebrating her journey into the present, much like a family album.

The physical presentation and layout of images in conjunction with narrative demonstrates this collection's status as an early version of a primarily photographic publication. As a book that focused primarily on images in order to convey a story, this

volume served as a precursor to photojournalistic publications such as *Life* magazine, which did not emerge until the 1930's. In this sense, the collection was particularly modern, utilizing photography to convey meaning rather than relying solely on text. Text and image are mostly presented separately throughout the collection, with several pages of text followed by several pages of photographs and little merging of text and image onto the same page. Historically, publications were technically able to place images and text in juxtaposition on the same page of a journal, newspaper or book, as had been done first with woodcuts and ink drawings, then later with photographs.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the separation of text and image results in a focus on the photographs as the foundation of the narrative. In addition, this has the effect of encouraging the audience to 'read' the image as they would the text, as placing several photographs in a row after text suggests they should be read in a similar manner.

Severance's organizational tactics reiterate the importance of the photographs, but the role of text is not to be underestimated. The publication begins with a formal list of Buffalo Historical Society officers, and then proceeds with a short table of contents containing titles for the eleven chapters, followed by a ten-page list of illustrations. The reader is first confronted with the sheer volume of images in this illustration list, suggesting that the subject matter of the collection is primarily photographic. However, for a volume labeled as a '*Picture Book*,' there is a significant amount of text accompanying the image, far beyond mere captions. While there are roughly four hundred images in the collection, the book includes approximately sixty total pages of text, woven into pages placed between the images.

Severance's narrative rarely refers directly to the photographs, and only in very few cases does he speak directly about the visual qualities of an image. Rather than describing or analyzing the images, the text typically provides supplemental information about the building or street depicted, functioning largely to complement the images by providing narrative context for the larger story of the location in question. He plainly states the function of the book as, "Pictures of some Buffalo buildings that have gone, and some facts about them; that is what this book is."<sup>42</sup> Severance's journalistic roots may have influenced his use of text, as he describes the historical events related to a setting in a relatively neutral manner. In this sense, the photographs and the text complement each other, each providing a fundamentally different form of media and information. While the photographs show the reader how the buildings may have looked, Severance's narrative provides "some facts about them," and they thus work in tandem.

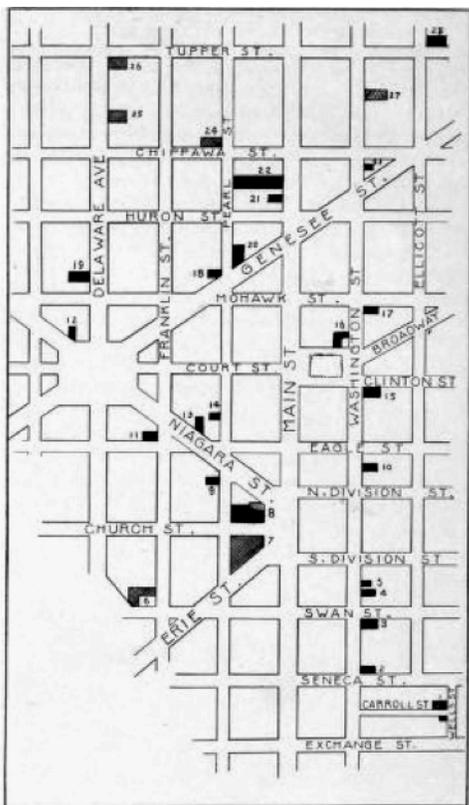
Additionally, for Buffalo audiences viewing the collection when it was first published, these photographic and textual media may have been also complemented by an awareness of smells and sounds evoked by the collection. For readers who were familiar with Buffalo at the time, an image or textual description may have catalyzed a recollection of the smell of the streets or the sound of the streetcars. Inevitably, readers contemporary to Severance's era would have had associations with the other senses, which perhaps would



**Figure 3:** *The Bank of Buffalo. Main and Erie Streets. 1838*

have been sparked by the images and text. In this way, the complementary relationship between text and image may have also resulted in the addition of other elements to the reader at the time. Today, these senses can only be speculative, for they are a media that is not as tangible or permanent as an image or a word.

While the images in the collection are primarily photographs, other forms of media are present in the volume, including reproductions of forty-one drawings, eighteen lithographs, six paintings, thirteen woodcuts, fourteen engravings, and four hand drawn maps. With over three hundred photographs in the collection, the presence of these other, non-photographic media are more infrequent, comprising only twenty percent of the total



**Figure 4:** *Location of Old Downtown Churches*

images in the volume. Most of these images depict the earliest eras of the city's history, usually before the widespread use of photographic technology. Scenes such as Figure 3 feature street views, providing a sense of scale and density to the buildings while enabling the viewer to imagine the setting without a crowd of people. These images are sprinkled throughout the collection, often sharing the page with text, whereas photographs are usually given their own page. These pre-photography illustrations complement the text, providing visual images to illuminate the settings and prominent figures of the early-nineteenth-century Buffalo recorded by

Severance.

Although there are only a few, the maps in the collection provide useful information regarding the drastic changes to downtown Buffalo during the nineteenth century. Figure 4, presumably created by Severance or an assistant, indicates the location of downtown churches over time. As the caption indicates, the spaces marked in black are no longer used as churches, and the narrative, along with photographs of ruins, confirms that many of those buildings have been demolished, abandoned, or burned. The few spaces that are grey indicate churches that are still in use, and the map reveals that those are few and far between. While the photographs depict the ruined churches and the narrative discusses their replacements, this map further complements the discussion, demonstrating in a single visual image the many changes that occurred within a few blocks over time. Placed at the beginning of the chapter entitled, “The Old-Time Downtown Churches,” this map provides not only a useful tool for the reader attempting to navigate the changes in actual urban space, but also a visual demonstration of the many transformations to the city, able to be grasped at a single glance. Together, these diverse forms of media serve to shape a more cohesive imaginary of the city in its earlier eras.

The collection of images, both the individual photographs and their layout within the book, provides a physical trip through the city, enabling the reader to contemplate, at a distance, the changes occurring on a broad scale. Just as photographers sought to order the city through aesthetic techniques, Severance ordered the city as an author, through the organization of the collection’s layout. The photographs in the volume not only provide the photographers’ perceptions of the city, but also suggest Severance’s perception of those images and of the city they represent, which can be seen in what he chose to

include, exclude and present in the collection. The layout reveals Severance's interpretations of the physical changes occurring in the city at the time of compilation. His approach to the relationship of text and image, as well as his placement of photographs in relation to their locations throughout the city, provides insights into his physical and psychological conception of Buffalo during an era of transformation.

The organization of chapters reveals Severance's early-twentieth-century assumptions of what would have been appropriate zoning patterns within the city. In general, the types of buildings and businesses presented in the collection are grouped in clusters that somewhat mimic Severance's conceptions of 'zones' within the city. For example, he begins with industrial structures, moves into commercial and governmental buildings, then follows with churches and ends with residences. While there are exceptions to this pattern, these groupings reveal Severance's conception of appropriate zones for different functions. He groups photographs of commercial, governmental and entertainment venues together, whereas industry, churches and residences are each presented in relatively uniform groups, separated from each other. Even though the churches were physically located in the city's commercial districts, they were presented in a separate chapter. Similarly, the wealthy residences, located on the outskirts of commercial districts, were presented in their own section, with several images of homes presented without interruption by images of any other kind. This may reveal attitudes towards spatially mixing certain uses within the city, thus illustrating the desire to separate industry from the home and commercial endeavors from religious buildings. Additionally, the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century tendency to classify material in a categorized taxonomy may have influenced his decision to order the book.

While these groupings imply the cultural values and organizational methods of Severance's era, he makes no explicit reference to this organizational strategy. Although he does not address his decision to separate the church and home from the bustle of industry and commerce, his actions suggests that these groupings operate within an early-twentieth-century tendency to categorize the material, reflecting the era's conception of these functions within the city.

This pattern is evident not only in his clusters of building types, but also by mapping these building types onto the city itself. The layout reveals a relationship between the physical location of buildings in the city and their placement within the collection. Generally, the narrative takes a similar shape to the location of building types, beginning in the south with industry (Figure 1), then travelling north along the commercial corridor of Main Street and its nearby churches (Figures 13 and 12), ending on the outskirts with wealthy residences (Figure 2). Thus, the collection presents the types of buildings you would see while physically traveling in the city from the south towards the north and westward. While the collection does not serve as an explicit itinerary for a trip through Buffalo, it does act as a historical guidebook that merges temporal and spatial patterns through its organizational techniques. By placing the images in a rough order that travels south to north, Severance created a volume that can give the reader an awareness of the symmetry between this spatial pattern and its temporal development, reaching ever northward over time. In this way, the book's layout echoes the history of urban growth in Buffalo, expanding from south to the north just as the volume stretches chronologically from the earliest era to Severance's day.

While the title page contains text but no image, the frontispiece (Figure 5) depicts the earliest known image of Buffalo, drawn in 1811 by E. Walsh, a member of the British 49<sup>th</sup> regiment. This image effectively represents the earliest eras of Buffalo's development, setting the stage for the collection not only chronologically but also thematically. The scene reproduced in the frontispiece was originally 21" high x 14" wide, large enough to provide a sweeping narrative with detail. It traces the transition from the pre-European era into the early colonial settlements that predated the majority of the subject matter in the collection. Temporally and conceptually, the image travels from left to right, indicating the evolution of the area from a wild landscape populated by Native Americans into a more European style early settlement.

The figure of the artist is situated along the bank of the Buffalo River, providing



**Figure 5:** *The earliest Buffalo picture known:  
View of Fort Erie from Buffalo Creek, 1811*

an initial focal point in the foreground where the viewer is likely to first encounter the scene. He serves as an apt entry into this image as well as this collection, providing the image's prospective for the viewer as well as the framework through which

we see the later images in the collection-- through the artist's eyes. Here, we are made aware of the role of the artist's gaze, who constructs our view of the past in the collection

and also plays a role in it. In addition to this awareness of the artist in this work, the figure also serves to suggest the sophistication of the incoming western civilization, in contrast to the Natives across the bank, by demonstrating the privileged ability to surpass mere survival activities and engage in more creative pursuits.

On the left side of the bank, the wild landscape is populated by trees and vistas that overpower the Native American encampments, which feature “an Indian family that are busy about their wigwam.”<sup>43</sup> Like many images of this era, the Native Americans are primitivized within the typical aesthetic traditions, including the barely clothed man in dehumanizing animal skins and the simplified teepee structures. The landscape is slightly tamer on the right, with a grassy field providing the setting for the introduction of a more permanent residence, built in the early colonial style. These two civilizations are placed in contrast with one another through the depiction of two different forms of residences and landscapes.

The use of nature to depict the impact of various civilizations can also be seen in the seal of the Buffalo Historical Society (Figure 6), seen on the title page of this and all other society publications. Organized into a three part system of symbols of Buffalo, the seal presents a Native American with a wigwam on the lower left, a buffalo on the right, and Niagara Falls placed predominantly in the upper half of the image. The falls, an easily recognizable emblem of the region, provide a notion of consistency, an unstoppable force that persists from the past into



**Figure 6:** The Buffalo Historical Society seal

the present and future. While the buffalo provides an obvious link to the city's name, the Native American on the lower left is a somewhat curious choice of emblem. It serves as a reminder of the earliest settlers of this location, indicating the lengthy history of the region-- and therefore the importance of the historical society, serving as a witness and archive to remember the past. Similarly to the frontispiece, the society seal depicts the earliest history of Buffalo through the symbol of the Native man, perpetually indicating to the contemporary viewer the changes the city has undergone since that prior era.

The Buffalo River separates these two civilizations, as well as suggesting a temporal divide. Read from left to right, the image presents a timeline, beginning with the native encampments and continuing into the European settlements. Furthermore, the river guides the viewer further towards the background of the image, drawing the eye from the front towards the back, where Lake Erie emerges from the horizon, dotted with ships and the distant shores of Fort Erie across the water. The impending approach of these ships suggests the future of Buffalo and the promise of further settlement. In this sense, the Buffalo River serves as a temporal element that connects three distinct time periods and stages of development: the past, present and future.

The frontispiece, as well as the seal, suggests a multistaged view of civilization



**Figure 7:** *The Savage State*



**Figure 8:** *The Pastoral State*

that echoes Thomas Cole's Course of Empire paintings, particularly *The Savage State* (Figure 7) and *The Pastoral State* (Figure 8). Although painted in 1833, Cole's series "seems to be an unequivocal expression of the cyclical theory of history,"<sup>44</sup> which was widespread during that era. *The Savage State*, the first in the series and therefore the first stage in Cole's perception of the course of an empire, includes Native American references similar to the Buffalo Historical Society seal and the collection's frontispiece. A Native man wears skins and hunts a deer, while in the distance a cluster of wigwams reinforces the primitive tones to the scene. As in the left portion of the frontispiece, a wild natural setting is linked to the Native American encampment.

The right side of the frontispiece displays a setting similar to Cole's *The Pastoral State*, which serves as the second stage in the Course of Empire series. As in the frontispiece, this work depicts a pre-urban western settlement, featuring plowed lands, a clear sky, and a more permanent structure than a wigwam- in this case a stone temple. Figures dance, herd sheep and build a boat, each indicating the sophistication of the society in a manner similar to the figure of the artist in the frontispiece. The progression from the first painting to the second occurs in the frontispiece from left to right, indicating the passage of time, and advancement of settlements, in a single frame rather than in a series. Although Cole's work was completed two decades later than the frontispiece, both images illustrate similar nineteenth-century views of civilization, indicating the replacement of what were perceived as primitive societies with the introduction of more sophisticated, permanent western citizens who engaged in mental and artistic pursuits beyond mere survival.

The placement of this particular image as the frontispiece serves not only chronological purposes, but also evokes grander notions of the eternal cycle of



**Figure 9:** *The Consummation of Empire*

construction and destruction that are present throughout the book. At the time this frontispiece was made, Buffalo seemed to be the western edge of America, pushing the edges of the country outward towards the greater unknown prairies, serving as a gateway into

the great lakes and beyond. The progression of civilizations present in this frontispiece from the Natives on the right side to the incoming Europeans on the left side echoes these two earliest stages in Cole's Course of Empire paintings. In 1811, the artist was witnessing the beginnings of what was to be a larger city. In this sense, the image depicts the Native American past and the increasing European settlements of the early-nineteenth-century present, while also suggesting the future of the city, approaching with the boats on the horizon in the distance.

By the time Severance utilized this image as the frontispiece of the collection, 100 years later, Buffalo was arguably a city that related more to the third painting in Cole's series, *The Consummation of Empire* (Figure 9). This scene illustrates the bustle of a thriving city, including massive marble structures, fountains, sculptures and a busy harbor front. The monumental buildings and bustling crowd seem to celebrate the success of the city depicted, experiencing an arc within the grander cycle that Cole's series depicts. The

density and liveliness of this image would likely have resonated with the city of Buffalo in 1912, which was experiencing a boom in both industry and the arts at the time. While Severance was compiling the collection, the early stages seen in the frontispiece had already passed, and the city was experiencing the next era in Cole's view of progress. Each of these stages exists in relation to each other, and therefore one cannot begin or end until the next is beginning to take shape.

In this sense, the focus of the collection on a former stage of the cycle evokes not only the past, but also the present and future. Severance expresses a complicated awareness of the relationship between construction and destruction, stating "Buffalo is fairly well content to grow, ever busier, better and more beautiful; but in doing this she ruthlessly destroys the old."<sup>45</sup> Here, pride in the city's continual progress, and optimistic future, is accompanied by an awareness that older structures must be destroyed in order to make way for new opportunities. This concept presents a cycle of destruction and construction that echoes is echoed in Cole's Course of Empire paintings. In *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, Severance provides a look at the earlier stages of progress that led to the twentieth-century era he lived in. By beginning with the frontispiece depicting the two earliest periods of the city's development, Severance not only sets the stage chronologically, but seems to suggest the continuance of this cyclical pattern into the consummation stage of his present, with only the faint echoes of the final two stages, destruction and desolation, to be perceived by the contemporary reader today.

### **Interpretive Stratigraphies**

Photographs are inherently subjective, and their use by historians is inevitably subject to individual interpretation. Images are formed by several layers of influence and interpretation, and each layer makes an impact on their historiographical appropriation. Photographs are shaped by not only the photographer's aesthetic choices in constructing the image, but also by the historian's interpretative choices in analyzing it. A historiographical approach to the use of photographs by historians reveals an underrepresented recognition of the subjectivity inherent in image analysis. Because *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* presents one historian's construction of a memory of the past through photographs, it can serve as an excellent example of the process of shaping the narratives of history through photography.

While many historians tend to view photographs as purely visualized factual information, it is essential to recognize that the aesthetic qualities of an image influence a historical understanding of that information. Woods describes this interaction between photographs and historians, stating "As an architectural historian, I see the built world through the camera...framing but also constructing my view."<sup>46</sup> The photographer's visual choices can inevitably effect the perception of the subject matter, thus providing an image of a person's experience of a place, not its unerring reality. Lawrence Levine discusses the complicated nature of using photographs to create a historical record. He states, "Photographs are incomplete, as historical sources always are. They have been collected and filtered through other hands, as historical sources always have been. What differs is...our tendency to see photographs as more 'real' than other sources."<sup>47</sup> Due to this tendency, as M. Christine Boyer notes, "we should be suspicious of their control on our perception and how they insinuate their way into representational forms of the city."<sup>48</sup>

While photographs can provide a tangible look at the urban landscape, it is essential to recognize both the subjective choices made by the photographer while creating the images and by the historian in his/her choices of interpretation.

While photographs are static objects, their influence and interpretations can change over time, reflecting the transmutation of ideas, themes and values through different historical eras. Woods states, “The photograph, like the built environment it represents, has an afterlife too.”<sup>49</sup> Although the photograph remains the same, it can be newly seen by successive generations of historians, each with interpretations that reflect their own eras. Photographs of the past can be constantly reinterpreted to suit the present. Rather than serving as mirrors of truth, or as telescopes into the past, urban images can provide an archaeological exploration of several eras at once, presenting a stratigraphy of time and interpretation.

A photograph, like layers of sediment at an excavation site, can reveal a stratification of time. While an image itself remains unchanged, it serves as a constant over time, acting as a touchstone that can be constantly returned to with new interpretations that may change with each era, resulting in an ‘interpretive stratigraphy.’ Similar to layers of sediment corresponding to different eras, layers of interpretation indicate and situate those analyses within their own time period. Unlike a geological stratigraphy, however, a photograph does not visibly show any physical stratification, and instead serves as the catalyst for a less tangible form of layering. In the case of a photograph, the object itself, depicting an image, provides solely the base layer of the interpretive stratigraphy, serving as only one fundamental level of interpretation, that is, the photographer’s interpretation of the scene as communicated by his/her choices

through the medium of the camera. From then on, it accumulates more layers of interpretation with each viewer's analysis over time. Although this interpretive stratigraphy is not physically visible within the photograph, it serves as a useful mechanism for drawing attention to the simultaneity of analyses that can be superimposed, revised and reimagined regarding a photograph over time.

An interpretive stratigraphy can be seen in this analysis of the collection's photographs, where it is possible to simultaneously view a scene interpreted by a photographer in 1870 and Severance's interpretation of the image in 1912. As Patrick Hutton states, "What is remembered about the past depends on the way it is represented...Rather than culling the past for residual memories, each age reconstructs the past with images that suit its present needs."<sup>50</sup> These layers of interpretation suggest that the photograph exists in several pasts, 1870 and 1912, as well as in the present, as I reinterpret them today, one hundred years later. In this way, the photograph is not only indexical to the original location it depicts, but also indirectly connected to each layer of interpretation that has been placed upon it by a historian. Each photographic analysis reflects the ideas of its own era, thus layering a record of not only what was in the past, but also how each era viewed the past. Due to the stratigraphy they reveal, photographs can reveal a multiplicity of subjective meanings, each historically indicative and significant when read in conjunction with one another in a single layering of time.

In addition to photography, the term interpretive stratigraphy could be applied to other mediums, particularly architecture, which can contain physical layers accumulated over time. Older buildings can include a contemporary addition, reimagining the structure and its meaning from a new time period, manifested in a more tangible way than

in photographic interpretations. Preservation efforts also contribute to the layering process of interpretive stratigraphy, editing buildings in a manner that often values one time period over another, inevitably revealing the cultural values of the preservationist's own era. In addition to these examples of physically manifested interpretive layers, architecture can also be reconsidered through new analysis by historians, much in the same way a photograph can be reexamined over time. This thesis, however, focuses primarily on the interpretive stratigraphy that can be revealed through a combination of textual and photographic analysis, with some additional attention to the role of preservationists in contributing to a stratigraphy of architectural interpretation as well.

*Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* provides a rare opportunity to examine this visual stratigraphy of time, by simultaneously presenting a set of images in conjunction with their interpretation by the author. Consequently, an examination of both the photographs and their organization by Severance can draw comparisons that creatively envision the past in relationship to the present. This examination can contribute to contemporary urban historiography by materializing the importance of acknowledging the role of subjectivity in the photographer-author relationship. Even today, “there remains the myth that photography of the past represents a repository of facts, a raw slice of historical evidence.”<sup>51</sup> As tempting as this may seem, it is essential to not only recognize the subjectivity present in photographs, but to utilize that subjectivity in order to reveal a more interpretative meaning. Rather than attempting to utilize the collection's photographs as mirrors of truth, as Severance may have, it is essential to glean a different sort of information from the collection. Today, these multiple layers of interpretation, including the photographer's, Severance's, and my own, each reflect the cultural

assumptions, ideas and values of their own eras. Therefore, through an analysis of *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, this thesis argues this stratigraphy of photographic interpretations is useful because of, and not in spite of, its subjectivities.

### **Technology and Timelessness**

The images in *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* present a diversity of photographic techniques and stylistic trends. The photographs range from 1850 to 1912, and thus the methods of production range from a few daguerreotypes to images made with flexible film and hand held cameras, thus serving as a microcosm of the important developments made in photographic technology throughout a span of over fifty years. Therefore, the images presented in *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* provide a valuable insight into the use of an evolving photographic technology to depict the continual innovations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The path of photography's invention runs parallel to the emerging era of industrialization. The development of various methods indicates the public interest in certain aspects of the medium, with continual improvements in terms of speed, cost efficiency, portability and the ability to reproduce an image multiple times. The introduction of the daguerreotype in Paris in 1839 was received with much interest, but the images could not be copied. Simultaneously in England, William Henry Fox Talbot invented the photogram, which included the use of negatives, but involved a lengthy process and often resulted in opaque prints.<sup>52</sup> In 1851, the invention of the collodion wet plate drastically changed the use of photography, as well as its visual trends. The ability to quickly reproduce multiple copies of images from the same negative enabled the

growth of commercial photography, making the medium more visible in the mainstream culture of a growing Buffalo.<sup>53</sup> With the introduction of flexible film and handheld cameras during the 1870's and 1880's, the continuing development of photographic technology enabled quick, instantaneous images. These methods arrived at a time when the urban environment was in constant flux, and thus photography provided an essential technique for stopping time, just as it began passing more quickly than ever before.

In Buffalo, as in many cities throughout the United States, the public interest in photography developed alongside the increasing sophistication of the medium. In the earliest days of photography, there were a few Buffalo citizens who devoted their leisure time to dabbling in photographic techniques and printing methods, including prominent members of society such as Spencer Kellogg, Jr., G. Hunter Bartlett and Charlotte Spaulding Albright. It was an expensive hobby, however, and was generally limited to the upper class of society, who could afford the time and chemical materials. With the arrival of the hand held camera, Buffalo hosted a relatively large population of those interested in creating images, listing almost five hundred known amateur and commercial photographers by 1888.<sup>54</sup> In that same year, a group of talented, dedicated amateur photographers founded the Buffalo Camera Club, which regularly sponsored workshops,



**Figure 10:** *Site of present White building before 1880*

discussion groups and exhibits.

The Buffalo Camera Club included a Photo-Secession group, modeled after Alfred Steiglitz's movement, which included many local photographers who were considered successful photo-pictorialists. This style occurred nationally, producing works which "consisted mainly of soft focus carbon and platinum prints of landscapes that suppressed detail to accent the emergence of form."<sup>55</sup> The pictorialists were informed by the strategies of painting, deemphasizing the assumed truthful reflection of reality that the medium can provide. Instead, "They sought to transcend straight physical appearances... the spirit of their work was akin to the mists and fogs...in the softness of daybreak or the mystery of eventide."<sup>56</sup> There was a large group of pictorialists in the city, whose work became so well known they were often referred to as "The Buffalo School." Charlotte Albright, daughter of the benefactor J.J. Albright of the famous Albright-Knox Art Gallery, was a student of Edward Steichen, and her work was publicly recognized in professional photography magazines, alongside fellow Buffalo pictorialists such as Paul Fournier and Charles Booz.<sup>57</sup>

While the pictorialists earned Buffalo a place in the national art realm, their



**Figure 11:** *Ruins of the second American Hotel, burned Jan. 25, 1865*

images differ significantly from those in the *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*. Stylistically, the pictorialists often emphasized their manipulation of the subject matter through techniques such as blurred focus and soft light. The

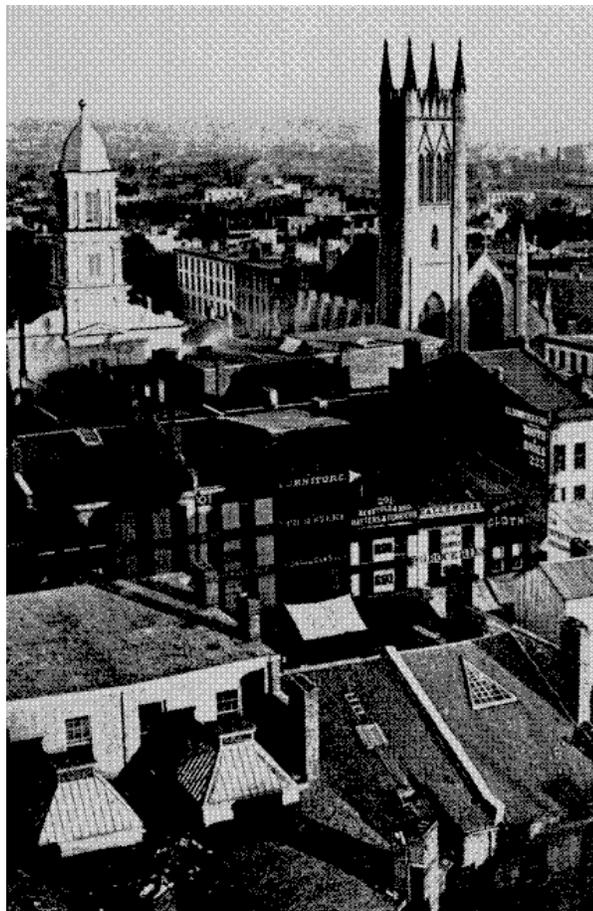
photographs in Severance's volume, however, feature sharper lines and minute details, utilizing a more documentary style in order to capture the former reality of the city as it appeared to the photographer in the moment. The images in the collection serve more of an archival purpose, providing information regarding the visual aspects of the scene in a more direct manner than the pictorialist style.

In addition to the photo-pictorialists, several commercial photographers located their studios downtown, increasing the presence of photography in the city during a time of increasing growth and industrialization.<sup>58</sup> One of the many photographic studios located downtown can be seen in Figure 10, which illustrates two commercial operations located adjacent to each other. While many of the photographs in *Picture Book* seem to be produced anonymously, perhaps due partly to the lack of archival information regarding the original photographers, Severance does credit a few photographers for some of the images that appear in the collection, and these belong mostly to the group of commercial photographers clustered downtown. He mentions Horace L. Bliss, "who photographed buildings and street views as early as 1860, at a time when such work was novel and seldom done."<sup>59</sup> Bliss' studio was located at the corner of Main and Eagle Streets, where he operated a profitable photographic gallery from 1858-1881, when it became the largely successful studio of his two sons, the Bliss Brothers. Once the collodion process was in use, enabling outdoor photographs away from the dark room, "The first outdoor views made by Mr. Bliss were the ruins of the second American Hotel, burned in 1865. The scene was just across the street from his gallery."<sup>60</sup> Seen in Figure 11, his outdoor image captures the quietude of the structure after it was burned. A solitary figure is silhouetted against the lowest point of the ruin, providing a contrast to

the cold moisture of the snow against the charred remains of the building. The burning of this hotel, rebuilt from a previous fire merely fifteen years prior, demonstrates the rapidity with which the built environment could change at a moment's notice, as well as the ever evolving ability of photographic technology to witness and record those instantaneous transformations and their aftermath.

The photographers that are credited with some of the images in this collection were not only well known in Buffalo, but also took great leaps to push the boundaries of photographic technology and

contribute to the budding photographic society in the city. Charles L. Pond captured the image in Figure 12, which is one of a series of views created from the top of St. Paul's cathedral, although only this one appears in *Picture Book*, separate from the series as a whole. In 1870, while construction on St. Paul's was nearing completion, Pond climbed the scaffolding 265 feet above the ground to make a series of images, which



**Figure 12:** *A Bit of Picturesque Buffalo in 1870* when placed together, form the first panoramic view of Buffalo.<sup>61</sup> Pond was a widely recognized photographer, for his panoramic views of Buffalo and her harbor as well as for his decade long study of Yosemite Park in California, which resulted in stereoviews

that he later printed, published and sold from his studio in downtown Buffalo.

Additionally, William J. Baker photographed some of the images in *Picture Book*, and was known for not only creating the “Rembrandt lighting” technique for creating softer light in portraiture, but also as the president of the Buffalo branch of the National Photographic Association from 1869-1873.<sup>62</sup>

Together, Horace Bliss, Charles Pond and William Baker present a triumvirate of financially successful, well-respected photographers who worked commercially in Buffalo’s downtown. While many of the photographs in the collection are not credited by a photographer, those that are credited were well established names at the time. Although the pictorialists demonstrated a marked presence in the city during the early twentieth century, the majority of photographs in the volume, dating to the mid-late nineteenth century, subscribe to more documentary and commercial techniques. The sheer volume of images in the collection attests to the impressive presence of photographers in the city at the turn of the twentieth century, providing a fruitful mix of commercial and amateur produced images.

Photography changed as cities changed, providing a visual and thematic symmetry rarely seen in history. During this era of massive transformation, photography served as a medium well suited to reflect and record the briefest moments that seemed to exist between the present and the past. As Jean Baudrillard states, “It is not surprising that photography...appeared as a technical medium in an age-- the industrial era-- when reality began to disappear.”<sup>63</sup> At a time when the built environment was altered so quickly it was beyond recognition, photography provided a new medium that offered an opportunity to pin down an ever shifting, elusive reality. Peter Hales contemplates the

role of photography in capturing moments of urban transition, stating that it served to “enclose within the frames of the photographs a present that was always instantly becoming the past.”<sup>64</sup> Photography served as an ideal instrument to document a singular, fixed moment in time when the world seemed to be constantly in motion. The medium itself served to stop time long enough to thoroughly examine it in relationship to its appearance in the past, present and the rapidly approaching future. As a result, the images in the collection depict a metropolis that seems as transitory as the act of photography itself.

Although photography promised to stop time just as it was historically gaining speed, the invention of the medium itself was only made possible due to that very same speed created by the industrial era. While many of the photographs in this collection depict the complex, hesitant relationship between the past and future, they were created through a cutting edge technology that was inherently a product of the technological age they were hoping to slow down through their photographs. Shelley Rice examines the technique’s relationship to this era, suggesting that “photography is a child of the Industrial Age, and only through its industrialization could it truly come into its own.”<sup>65</sup> Photographic technology developed alongside the technical advancements of the Industrial Age, providing a meaningful medium for urban citizens to contemplate the change they witnessed in their cities. By using the medium of photography to interpret the present and the past, these photographs “were also participants in the very modernity they celebrated-- they were, like skyscrapers and streetcars, electrical lighting and Otis elevators, evidence of the nature of the modern city. To view them, to own them was to connect oneself within this matrix of modernity.”<sup>66</sup> In this way, the photographs in

*Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, even though they contemplate the past, can be seen as symbols of progress, not only directly in their subject matter, but also implicitly in the technical manner in which they were executed.

The cultural reaction to the rapid pace of technological advancements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seems to have been a combination of awe and trepidation. Walter Benjamin, contemplating a similar cultural reaction during the Haussmannization of Paris, stated, “The fantasies of the decline of Paris are a symptom of the fact that technology was not accepted. These visions bespeak the gloomy awareness that along with the great cities have evolved the means to raze them to the ground.”<sup>67</sup> While some technology greatly improved the urban lifestyle, such as citywide electricity, it also posed a threat to destroy the physical remnants of the past.

These photographs provide not only a record of the physical change occurring in the built environment, but also serve as visual remnants of the human *need* to psychologically process that transformation. Hales argues,

The urban photographic tradition in America had been born out of a tremendous cultural need—the need for an essentially agrarian republic to come to terms with the process of industrialization and urbanization which was rapidly engulfing it and threatening the myths which sustained and defined the culture.<sup>68</sup>

In such a physically and figuratively transitory era, the urge to ground the past in a visible symbol can be understood as a human attempt to cope with rapid change. The sudden desire to link present experience with a tangible reminder of the past could be attributed to the influence of the Industrial Age on the lives of the urban populace. In this way, architectural photography acted as more than a visual medium for recording changes to

the built environment, but also served as a method through which to reflect, digest and express a reaction to those changes.

Photography also served as a method of organization. As a response to a chaotic, fluid cityscape, many photographs in the collection employed a number of aesthetic techniques that effectively abstracted the city into a series of easily recognizable forms and meanings. During this era, photography “defined the city as a place not of chaos, darkness and danger but of order, light and intelligibility, even invitation.”<sup>69</sup> In contrast to what was likely a noisy, jumbled and confusing pedestrian experience at the time, photography enabled interpretation at a safe distance, thus organizing the urban experiences of both the photographer and the viewer into a more manageable idea. Photography thus played an important role in the transformation of industrial era cities, often translating the overwhelming sense of change into an image of the city that was easier to grasp, both physically and figuratively.

While photographers used a number of techniques to order the chaotic city, two in particular are especially present in the collection. Depictions of aerial views and intersections pervade the volume, simultaneously presenting the city as a bustling, commercial arena as well as an abstractly ordered landscape. By providing a grandiose perspective rarely seen by the general urban citizen, aerial views rose above the daily chaos of the streets and presented the city as a unified, ordered entity. The ability to view a large part of the city all at once, an impossible feat on the ground, created an impression of a single urban landscape, rather than the fragmented reality it presented at the pedestrian level. High angle views, such as Figure 12, “offered a means of suggesting a holistic identity.”<sup>70</sup> This image presents a view of the city that encompasses the

downtown region with the east side in the distance, depicting a city with an idealized sense of unity. In reality, these sections of the city were highly segregated, and continue to be today, with downtown serving as a commercial and residential center for middle and upper class citizens, and the east side as a largely immigrant, working class district. The use of an aerial perspective illustrates Buffalo as a single, unified landscape, rather than a jumble of neighborhoods, thus providing an important myth of cohesion for viewers looking to make sense of the city as a whole.

In contrast, Figure 13 presents a busy street scene, which would likely have been a typical pedestrian

experience in the 1880's,

with resonance in 1912.

The image illuminates a view of the bustling streets

and compact, pulsing city

that would have been

familiar to viewers in the

early twentieth century.



**Figure 13:** *Looking down Main Street from North Division Street*

The caption notes that the scene presents this streetscape “before the removal of telegraph poles,” indicating the novelty of the scene for Severance’s contemporary audience, who may or may not have remembered the sight of that antiquated technology in the city. Presumably, all captions were written by Severance, although there is no concrete evidence that confirms this authorship.<sup>1</sup> The presence of streetcars in the image adds to the prosperity of the scene, signifying the early development of public

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<sup>1</sup> Additionally, all captions presented in italics are reproduced from the collection.

transportation in Buffalo, which also hosted one of the first electrified streetcars as early as 1890. The streamline view down the street emphasizes the density of the Italianate and Second Empire commercial buildings, particularly in relation to the comparatively small human figures in the streets.

While there is no way to know for certain the reception of this image by a 1912 audience, it is likely that it was quite different from the way that contemporary viewers may understand the scene. Today, to viewers familiar with Buffalo's status as a



**Figure 14:** *Corner of Main and West Seneca Streets, prior to 1904*

shrinking city, this photograph may exemplify the former grandeur of a busy downtown, one that no longer exists in this manner. However, the scene was perhaps less novel to a 1912 audience, who would have been

more familiar with this level of density in their daily experiences of the city. In this sense, the photograph may have served to “reveal order hidden to the walking presence.”<sup>71</sup> By providing composition to the kinds of streets seen in this image, some photographs indicate a sense of unseen, reassuring order lurking beneath the everyday pedestrian reality of the city.

*Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* also includes over twenty photographs that feature street intersections, all of which emphasize the commercial activity in the city,

centered along Main and Washington Streets. Figure 14 is a typical example of an intersection view in the collection, featuring a street view that places the conjunction of two streets near the center of the frame, focusing on the spaces between the buildings as much as on the structures themselves. Hales argues, “photographers used the high angle street view as a means of emphasizing culture or business...most often used to monumentalize the symbols of the city’s most important functions.”<sup>72</sup> The intersection, a place where the street and sidewalk meet, provides the photographer with an excellent opportunity to depict a thriving commercial center. By utilizing a high angle street view, the photographer ensured that the noisy conjunction of commerce and citizens would be ordered into an idealized depiction of a successful commercial center-- a symbol of a healthy city. Here, the conjunction of tramcars, carriages and pedestrians seem to blend into a planned intersection, rather than the noisy experience it may have been to the pedestrian at ground level. The multitude of images in the collection that depict bustling activity from a distance, often viewed through intersections and aerial views, attests to the photographic desire to transform this urban energy into an organized, idealized city.

While the act of taking a photograph may have served to order the city, the act of looking at that photograph could effectively transform the viewer’s perception of the city as well. As Hales states, “To the nineteenth-century audience, the city preserved in a photographic print *was* the true city- undoing in visual form what daily experience offered them.”<sup>73</sup> In some ways, photographs could become the city itself for the viewer. Architectural images offered an accessible alternative to the daily pedestrian experience, one that could be understood from a distance by giving overall spatial perceptions of the city at large, like a map. Therefore, as the audience browsed the collection, they did

more than look at photographs. In a sense, the collection became the city, newly ordered in order for viewers to travel through and contemplate the changes that were occurring on both a daily and a generational basis.

### Life Cycles and Death Beds

Photographs not only express a need to create order in the city, but also to preserve its buildings before they are swept up in the daily urban transformations of the



Figure 15



Figure 16

industrial era.

The majority of images in this volume depict buildings prior to or after their demolition,

indicating that

this photography functions as a form of preservation after the structures are gone. Harris compares images of demolished buildings to post-mortem photography, a practice that was largely popular in the late nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup> By taking pictures of the recently deceased, often on their deathbeds but occasionally in more elaborate arrangements, photographers created images that served as memento mori for the family of the deceased, providing an eternal reminder of both their likeness and their mortality. Earlier post-mortem photographs emphasized liveliness in their subjects (Figure 15), often by propping them upright or in other lifelike positions, whereas later corpse photographs

acknowledge the death of the subjects, depicting them in a coffin or in a more funereal setting (Figure 16). Corpse photographs served a range of emotional functions, acting as both consolation for the bereaved as well as a celebratory memento of the deceased.

Similarly, an image of a doomed building can operate as a post-mortem photograph, preserving the likeness of a now deceased structure in an attempt to combat its mortality. Harris argues, “The relation between photography and an interest in old or departed buildings...has much in common with the deep fascination photographs of the dead hold for so many people.”<sup>75</sup> The onslaught of rapid change to the built environment in the industrial era resulted in an increasing amount of photographers who “have taken very seriously the obligation of bearing witness to architecture in the last moments of its life.”<sup>76</sup> As a result of those architectural photographers, and historians like Severance, the urge to document a building’s final days remains as documented as the buildings themselves. The sheer number of images of these vanished buildings illuminates the desire to photograph them before they disappeared forever. *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* is just one example of books that were created to look back at the ‘lost’ era of a city in flux, “sometimes celebrating the thrust of transformation, but more often mourning the ghosts of departed loved ones.”<sup>77</sup> The photographs in the collection, as well as the compilation of the book itself, reveal a post-mortem desire to create a memento mori of the built environment, struggling to photographically hold onto that past just as it slips away.

As a medium designed to record a specific, brief moment in time, photography was a particularly appropriate weapon with which to battle death. Not only does photography record a moment just as it vanishes, but it also repeats that moment

endlessly, every time the photograph is viewed. The act of taking a corpse photograph, whether of a body or a building, reveals a desire to combat mortality, to preserve something that is already gone. Nancy West describes the appropriation of the medium for this function, “Fearful of their mortality, many people embraced the new medium as a means of counteracting death. If their lives were to be short, their image at least could endure.”<sup>78</sup> However, despite their attempts to preserve the live existence of the deceased, corpse photographs instead preserve the fact of their death, not life. Roland Barthes, perpetually aware of the mortal role of the medium, states that a photograph “produces Death while trying to preserve life.”<sup>79</sup> In this way, post-mortem photographs, of bodies and of buildings, served to artificially extend the life of the dead, preserving them in a photographic afterlife that remained forever present, yet forever still.

In comparing these architectural images to postmortem photographs, the buildings depicted are essentially perceived as having human qualities. Harris folds this comparison into his ideas surrounding the ‘life cycle’ of buildings, suggesting that architecture can be perceived as objects with a human life cycle, usually including a birth, middle age, and a death. While the birth and maturation of a structure are marked by certain rituals, “Nothing better reveals the linkages made, sometimes unconsciously, between building and human life cycles, than the powerful emotions raised by the expiration of a structure’s time on earth.”<sup>80</sup> He describes the human need to process changes in the built environment, likening this awareness of architectural life cycles to the stages we undergo in order to process a death. He illustrates these stages, similar to those that “occur in human terminal disease, stages that include denial, resignation, and... a series of life-affirming gestures devised to make sense out of the time that remains. In

the case of many buildings this means...exhaustive documentation.”<sup>81</sup> In this way, humans can perceive architecture as having a life cycle that is similar to the human stages of life, and, concurrently, there is a human need to process the death of that life in a similar manner we would with a loved one.



**Figure 18:** *Ruins of Pierce's Palace Hotel,  
Burned Feb. 16, 1881*

The urge to create a post-mortem photograph of a demolished building reveals not only the linkage between human and architectural life cycles, but also suggests fundamental ways that humans interpret these structural deaths. In addition to the sense of loss that occurs during the passing of a loved one, or the destruction of a building, there can also be a sense of panic, of the impending arrival of a new world that

threatens to replace the old. Under the constant threat of transformation, particularly during the industrial era, older buildings can be seen as “sources of wisdom...whose presence amidst change and innovation supplies continuity with an ever dimmer past. Like sages and tribal elders, they are cherished despite their infirmities.”<sup>82</sup> Seen as vital connections to another time, older buildings can serve as touchstones of history, acting as a physical space that can literally be touched in order to access the past. Photographs of these recently deceased structures can provide an indexical connection to this past,

providing continuity in a time of transformation. Figure 18 serves as an example of this type of photography, illustrating the ruins of the burned Pierce Hotel with a camera angle that intentionally included the local marvelers trying to reckon with the detritus.

Wolfgang Kemp argues that this type of image is produced most thoroughly when, “it takes the threat of the loss of the object so seriously that it focuses its interest on a detailed reconnaissance and recording of that object’s functional modes and use value-- that is, when the object comes to be seen as a bountiful hoard of archival material about a rich past.”<sup>83</sup> The photographs in *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* provide this record of decay, at least in part, in order to ‘make sense’ of the death of these buildings, to not only acknowledge their expiration, but also affirm the glory of their previous existence. In this way, the photographs themselves are part of the life cycle of the buildings they depict, serving as witnesses, similar to surviving family members of the deceased, whose indexicality to the scene can attest to the lives of their subject matter.

In *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, Severance’s narrative use of personification echoes Harris’ idea of life cycles. In the collection, he illustrates his personal attachment to the buildings themselves, waxing poetically on the abandonment of older buildings rather than providing a detached stance. Severance ruminated on the typical path of neglect, devaluation and ruin that older, once prominent houses characteristically face in response to the continual march of progress and urban renewal. He writes,

The home of the well-to-do resident, built in the 30’s or 40’s, was then the pride of a somewhat primitive neighborhood. Within its walls, for a generation or more, dwelt a worthy household. ... Then set in the inevitable succession of change. The father and mother go to their rest; the children scatter. The growing town encroaches; the garden is despoiled, cut up in lots, smart new structures crowd each other...Presently, something elsewhere, a shade newer and smarter, takes precedence. The erstwhile home, scene of all the domestic blisses and

sorrows, begins to be known as the ‘old’ so and so house; the neighborhood declines into untidiness...Last stage of all, it stands a while empty, locked, with cobwebbed windows and placards on the walls, till the march of improvement comes down the street and the old home disappears in a few loads of brick and plaster, and there arises on its site a new Pride of the Neighborhood...So we change through the decades.... Often it would seem as if the honest old walls must protest.<sup>84</sup>

By personifying the house, Severance lends a degree of nostalgic sentiment to the residence, placing the reader in a position that is automatically sympathetic to the old house’s neglect in the face of urban renewal. This storybook approach to narrative suggests the author’s perspective on the continual urban developments that were occurring during the early twentieth century. Seen from the neglected house’s point of view, the ‘progress’ of urban alterations had a negative, inevitable effect on the older architectural stock of the city. Due to the personification of the house, the result of this urban renewal seems to be the abandonment of old values, which have been replaced by something ‘a shade newer and smarter.’ This narrative, which richly illustrates the secession of events that typically accompany ‘the march of improvement,’ indicates

Severance’s suggestion that physical change in the built environment is often accompanied by a shifting in cultural values. These shifting values, accompanied by the subsequent degradation and replacement of



**Figure 19:** *The Goodrich House as it appeared in the ‘70’s*

buildings, suggests a relationship between the life cycle of buildings and of their depictions by historians.

Yet Severance accompanies his narrative of ‘neglected houses’ with images of residences in their heyday, providing views of them when they were complete, rather than after their death. He provides photographs of grandiose homes in their era of glory, when they were occupied by their original residents. When he places these images, such as Figure 19, within the context of his narrative, he ruminates on the passing of time not through images of ruined homes, but through the contrast between these images of the houses in pristine condition with the dilapidation and destruction that presumably inspired Severance’s words in his present day. By using images of former glory to contrast to what he perceives as their more recent ‘crumbling’ status, Severance provides a sort of retroactive post-mortem photograph. Rather than photographing the moment of their death, these images act similarly to a young portrait placed over an elderly person’s casket at a funeral. They emphasize the vivacious days of youth as the most important era in a building’s life, which become ever more important after death.

Figure 19 depicts a wealthy family in Buffalo, the Goodrich family, who were well known for their fortune in the steamboat and railroad industries. Arranged for a family portrait in front of their Greek Revival house, the buildings and family members lend each other significance-- the house is deemed more important by its association with its wealthy inhabitants, and the inhabitants are made more prestigious by their impressive house. Viewed at a corner angle, the composition of the image emphasizes the large Ionic columns and towering height of the structure, which seems to dwarf, yet complement, its owners. The family members are dressed with a simplistic dignity and

arranged in a variety of graceful seated positions amongst the steps, indicating their comfort with the space as their home.

In 1892, this house was sold and moved to the north of the city, a location where an increasingly wealthy, residential community was developing. Because of the move to a different neighborhood, this image would likely have reflected important urban changes for Severance. The disappearance of residences from the center city is further emphasized by the inclusion of images depicting downtown in its former residential manifestations, which had mostly vanished by the time the collection was published. In Severance's era, downtown was an increasingly dense, commercial center, leaving little room for the grand mansions of an 'earlier Buffalo.' This photograph of the Goodrich house, particularly because the house had been moved to another location further outside the center, epitomized this trend of outward residential migration that characterized not only Severance's era, but which continues to occur on a larger scale in Buffalo today. While the original era of the Goodrich house had disappeared by Severance's time, it is preserved here in its former glory, ensuring that its most valued moments would survive after its death.

The volume reveals this life cycle of architecture through not only Severance's narrative, but also through the layout and photographs themselves. The 'exhaustive documentation' of doomed buildings, as Harris labels it, takes two major photographic forms in the collection: images of a building before it has been demolished, and images of the building in ruins, after or during demolition. While both types are present in Severance's collection, the former comprises the majority of photographs in *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*. The latter are particularly compelling, however, and interestingly

enough, their appearance in the collection is largely relegated to a single chapter focusing on churches, in which ruined images predominate.

### **Destruction and Construction: Ruins and Preservation**

In the chapter entitled, “The Old-Time Down-Town Churches,” Severance includes several pages that compare photographs of an intact church with an image of its ruins. The chapter begins with his contemplation of the role of churches in urban history, stating “Nothing marks more certainly the emergence of a city from villagehood than the



**Figure 20:** *St. Paul's before the fire of May 10, 1888*



**Figure 21:** *St. Paul's after the fire of May 10, 1888*

destruction of its earlier churches...Sentiment and affection cling to the old sites, and love to recall the associations of the past.”<sup>85</sup> Severance describes the disappearance of many congregations from the downtown churches, stating, “When the heart of the town gets commercial, and perhaps harder, the churches move out toward the periphery, where the people live.”<sup>86</sup> He indicates that it is not the architectural styles that have changed over time, but the populations who have moved to other areas of the city, leaving these churches empty in their wake. Aware of the powerful metaphorical associations with

churches, Severance uses religious architecture to discuss the quickly disappearing past. Severance's use of juxtaposition and narrative seems to suggest that these churches are the casualties of commerce, serving as dying sages who will be replaced with large state buildings and a newer way of life. By frequently placing an image of a church's prominent glory days in direct contrast with a photograph of its demolition, Severance evokes the losses incurred due to the city's expansion with a sense of simultaneous mourning and wonder at the transformation.

The juxtaposition of demolition and construction is a reoccurring theme in this photographic collection, and can be best examined in the chapter on churches. The twin images of St. Paul's Church, seen in Figures 20 and 21, utilize a similar composition and perspective in order to present a powerful contrast of the church before and after it was burned in 1888. By viewing the scene from a similar angle, the composition of these photographs provides a direct comparison of the same site, emphasizing the impermanence and fragility of architecture throughout time. This dramatic, picturesque comparison evokes a romantic vision of "moldering relics which suggest a past beyond reach,"<sup>87</sup> leaving these "photographs as sole survivors of a bygone era."<sup>88</sup> It is difficult to avoid the sentiment of loss when gazing upon these images, and the seemingly transient nature of this architecture is amplified by Severance's choice to compare these images.

He also includes images of the Church of the Messiah, seen in Figures 22 and 23, presenting a photograph of the church converted into a commercial shop and an image of the church after a fire. Impressively, even the image of the building before destruction emphasizes the disintegration of church culture, as it had been converted from religious use into commercial use, hosting the H.C. Martin and Company business. This early

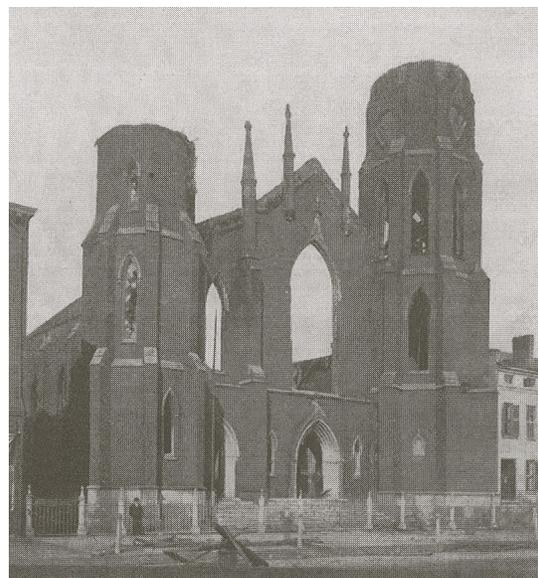
example of what would today be labeled as adaptive reuse indicates the rapidly shifting nature of the built environment, and its cultural demographics, during the late nineteenth century. This reuse echoes the pattern of movement outward from the center city as described by Severance in this chapter, suggesting that the dispersal of the congregation resulted in the reimagining of the church as a commercial building. By utilizing the same compositional perspective in each photograph, this juxtaposition creates a stunning difference between the two images, evoking an awareness of transformations over time. During a period that is historically categorized by an unprecedented rapid change, photographs of architectural ruins serve to express a reaction to the quickly vanishing past.

The frequent occurrence of fires served as essential moments of creation and

destruction that emphasize the significance of that cyclical process in Buffalo and in the *Picture Book*. Similar to many cities at



**Figure 22:** *The Church of the Messiah in its last days*



**Figure 23:** *Ruins of the Church of the Messiah*

the time, Buffalo witnessed a plethora of fires during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often a result of flammable structures or poor fire fighting equipment. While the city witnessed countless fires, the following were particularly significant in terms of physical damage, financial consequences and human casualties. In addition to the loss of nearly the entire city in the burning of Buffalo in 1813 as part of the War of 1812, other significant fires occurred in 1829, 1832, 1860, 1865, 1878, 1880, 1882, 1887, 1894 and 1907.

While the loss of so many structures may have seemed devastating, it is essential to acknowledge that the demolition of those structures often provided opportunities to build anew. Severance discusses the typical frequency of fires, stating, “For a full century Buffalo has had the average American city’s recurrent baptism of fire; but how few of these burned buildings are pictured for us!”<sup>89</sup> His use of the word ‘baptism’ suggests a form of cleansing, of renewal, of beginnings rather than endings. Combined with his sentiment about the lack of images of burned buildings, this statement encapsulates broader themes of destruction and renewal. Although the photographs of burned buildings can easily inspire a sense of loss for the contemporary viewer, it is also essential to recognize that the death of these buildings signified the ability to build newer architectural styles and experiment with continually evolving structural ideas. As a city with an astounding amount of wealth in the early twentieth century, these burned sites enabled Buffalo to draw the country’s finest architects, such as Louis Sullivan, H.H. Richardson and Frank Lloyd Wright, to create new structures that would forever be valued in architectural history for their revolutionary styles and techniques. In this sense,

fires represented not only the tragic destruction of the past, but also the optimistic possibilities of the future.

As a gateway to the Great Lakes, and the great vastness of the still untamed west, Buffalo's booming expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries functions within a broader discourse of assumptions regarding the ideas of manifest destiny. Although the manifest destiny ideals were most rampant during the early nineteenth century, they have arguably informed American ideology continuing into today. During Severance's era, Buffalo was celebrated as the gateway to the west, and the urge to expand, both beyond the city and within the city, was likely an underlying force in the view of Buffalo as ever-growing. Today, after half a century of shrinkage, contemporary readers, particularly Buffalo natives like myself, may be tempted to see this destruction of the old as purely devastating. During Severance's era, however, that destruction promised new construction that was ever taller, brighter and more modern, placing Buffalo on the map as one of the most architecturally rich cities in the country. These differing reactions serve to further emphasize the importance of considering the volume through the lens of several historical contexts, taking into account the views of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Severance acknowledged this dualistic notion of loss and growth by compiling the collection, stating "Buffalo is fairly well content to grow, ever busier, better and more beautiful; but in doing this she ruthlessly destroys the old."<sup>90</sup> Placing expansion and destruction side by side in this comment, Severance touches on the complications of viewing a vanished past. Modernity inevitably required casualties, resulting in the loss of the older structures that *Picture Book* details. Yet in illustrating those losses, the

collection also implies many gains, demonstrating the codependent relationship of removal and renewal that is required in order for a city to evolve. Therefore, any reading of this volume must address both a sense of nostalgia for the past and an early twentieth-century optimism and drive to expand.

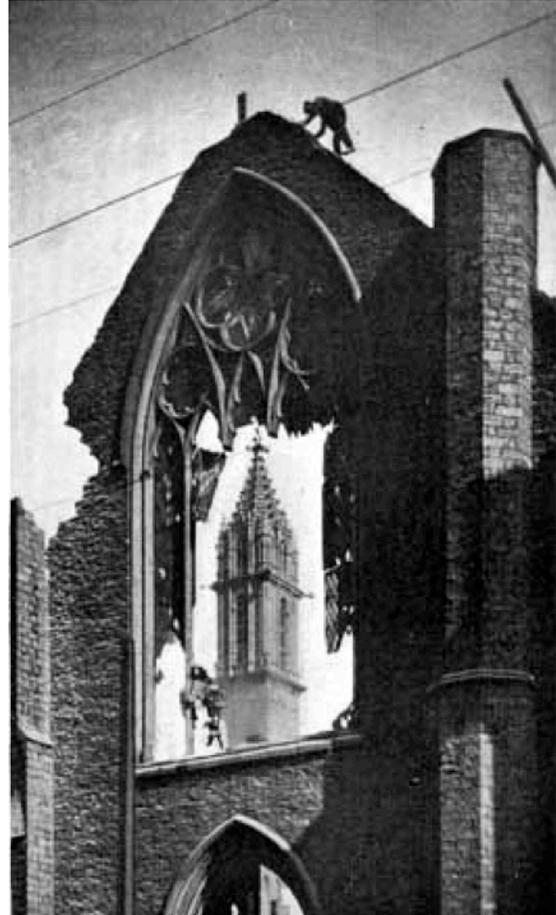
If destruction was required for improvement and expansion, then the publication of *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* provided a convenient form of preservation. The photographers, by capturing the images, as well as the author, by compiling and publishing them, engaged in a form of preservation that managed to save the likenesses of these structures through this collection. While the buildings have vanished, they persist in this volume, giving the reader an awareness of what once existed. Although the structures were not physically saved, they were at least captured on film and published, enabling their memory to persist without impeding new construction. In this sense, the collection acts as a form of historic preservation that does not prevent new construction on the same site, enabling the city to erect emerging architectural styles in order to advance itself and its citizens. The medium of photography and the book itself thus serve a highly important purpose, functioning as an act of preservation and archival documentation while simultaneously reflecting the continual desire to build anew.

Images such as Figure 24 and Figure 25 are juxtaposed to reveal the march of improvement, depicting the complicated relationship between demolition and construction in the life cycle of buildings. These photographs, both individually and comparatively, demonstrate a tenuous relationship between the recent past and the rapidly approaching future, attempting to reconcile the consequences of time by taking and displaying these photographs. While the photographs themselves reveal the

photographer's approach to interpreting the built environment, Severance's approach to



**Figure 24:** *St. John's Episcopal Church*



**Figure 25:** *The Passing of Old St. John's*

situating them in the collection reveals his influence on an urban memory of Buffalo's earlier industrial era.

Individually, the photographs themselves are products of different eras, as reflected in their contrasting focal points, compositions, aesthetic emphases, and subject matter. The earlier photograph, entitled "St. John's Episcopal Church" and placed on the left, presents a documentary view of the church in its functioning condition, using a relatively direct perspective to record its architectural façade, ornamental details and soaring tower. The anonymous photographer's choice of angle reveals the underlying

goal of the photograph to emphasize the grandeur of the church, providing only the suggestion of a surrounding urban context. Taken from the view of a street corner, the photographer ensured that the church would fill the frame, with little room remaining to display the building's relationship to the nearby commercial businesses and streetscape. This composition communicates the primary motivation for the photograph as one that is for individual architectural study or historic documentation, rather than an examination of the church within its broader urban context.

Placed in direct contrast, the later photograph, entitled, "The Passing of Old St. John's," visually depicts the intersection of demolition and construction that typified this booming, industrial era in Buffalo. The photograph itself, placed in conjunction with its opposite, reveals a sense of process, rather than of completion. Even in the title of the photograph itself, the word "Passing" illustrates Harris' life cycles, as the words in the title liken the demolition of the building to the death of a person. However, he does not name it the 'death' of St. John's, but rather the 'passing,' indicating a transitional period, and not an already completed past. He uses the term several times, describing, "the passing of another landmark, at Main and Swan..."<sup>91</sup> and "notable buildings which have passed away,"<sup>92</sup> indicating that the process is still occurring and not solely in the past.

While the object of the first photographer's gaze is the church's architecture, "The Passing of St. Johns" instead encourages the viewer to contemplate the interdependent relationship between the past and present, as is manifested in the daily surroundings of a continually changing city. Rather than focusing on the architecture of the church itself, this image utilizes the church's central window to frame a picturesque view of the newly constructed Federal Building. By providing this specific angle, the photographer ensured

that the perspective visually aligns the pointed arches of the destroyed great window with the spire of the Federal Building. The photograph's composition emphasizes the juxtaposition of the city's past and its present, represented by these two iconic structures that were recognizable throughout the city. This direct comparison undeniably evokes the continually changing cityscape during this era, utilizing the romantic imagery of a ruined church in contrast to the new triumphs of architectural style and technology.

The metaphorical implications of the juxtaposition of a neglected church and a triumphant Federal Building should not be overlooked. In Figure 25, the artful composition suggests the photographer's intentional comparison of these two elements, and it is therefore impossible to ignore the photographer's inherent perspective on the relationship between church and state. By viewing the rise of the Federal Building through the frame of a crumbling church window, the photographer seems to suggest a connection between the demise of older architecture with the demise of older values. By devoting an entire chapter to the demolition of churches, Severance has suggested that religious architecture can provide a very powerful metaphor for "the associations of the past." If the church is to be seen as a vessel for not only religious ideals, but also community values and memories, than the destruction of St. John's implies far more than the demolition of a building. The composition of this photograph not only depicts the simultaneous creation and destruction of the built environment, but also the selection of new governmental ideals over older religious values. The evolution of the downtown area as a commercial and governmental center, as Severance had previously stated in this chapter, became a quintessential place of business, with less room for older churches and their traditional values in this increasingly modern city center. In this way, this

photograph both literally and figuratively depicts the rise of the state, built amongst the ruins of the church.

“The Passing of Old St. John’s” serves as an example of the dichotomy of destruction and renewal that is ever present in the collection. While Severance frequently juxtaposes images of an intact church with an image of its ruins, Figure 25 evokes this contrast within a single image. By framing the newly constructed Federal Building through the crumbling window of St. John’s church, the photographer visually captures the juxtaposition of *what was* and *what will be*. Nick Yablon writes, “It is expressions of temporal confusion such as these...that were analogous and related to descriptions of the confused temporality of urban construction and demolition during the same period.”<sup>93</sup> At a time when buildings were simultaneously created and destroyed, this image captures that notion of anchorless change. In this way, the photograph illustrates a juxtaposition of tradition and modernity that demonstrates the importance of memory and consistency during a time of reorganization and construction.

It would be an oversimplification, however, to suggest that Severance placed these juxtapositions together simply out of nostalgic sentiment, when the implications of their contrast require a more complex analysis. By presenting several pairs of churches in juxtaposition, Severance reveals a complicated relationship between the dynamism of urban construction and the sacrifices made in order to provide space for new buildings. He expresses an awareness of the interdependence of construction and destruction, stating, “The evolution of the town presents many curious features, but nothing is more striking than the impermanence of improvements. What one decade achieves, the next destroys. The pride of today is the scorn of tomorrow.”<sup>94</sup> Many of the photographs

depict a ruined city, placed in juxtaposition with the erection of a new, unfamiliar urban landscape. Severance's words recognize this pattern of renewal and destruction, suggesting a more sophisticated, complicated notion of this relationship to the past that stretches beyond a mere nostalgic sentiment.

*Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, therefore, does not solely look to the past, but also presents a sense of hope for the future. Just as old buildings were valued as the elder sages of local history, in Harris's view, "new buildings, like new people, were adventures waiting resolution."<sup>95</sup> "The Passing of St. John's" suggests this sense of progress, with a worker who is presumably engaged in some sort of laborious process, and is perhaps part of a demolition crew. He climbs to the pinnacle of the church in order to dismantle it and replace it with, hopefully, something better. Many of Severance's juxtapositions exemplify a simultaneous sense of hope and loss, making powerful comparisons that ultimately ruminate on the passing of time, at once mourning and celebrating the replacement of the old with the new.

By recognizing the shifting nature of cultural ideals, Severance depicts an urban environment that is subject to the values of successive generations. This acknowledgement that 'what one decade achieves, the next destroys,' is central to understanding the implications present in *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*. Severance makes this statement in reference to the destruction of an earlier Buffalo, one that no longer exists except in the photographs that he salvages. The recognition that the past is often destroyed by the present, particularly during the early twentieth-century quest for urban reinvention, may have been accompanied by an acknowledgement that the present, too, will be destroyed by future renovations. In this way, Severance's words lend an

insight into the effects of his efforts to compile this collection; here he has preserved a fleeting moment in time, situated in the context of a reaction to an increasingly unrecognizable city. By creating *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, Severance not only ensured that Buffalo's past would persevere, but also that his own contemporary time would remain recorded in reaction to a quickly approaching, unknown future.

During a period that is historically categorized by rapid change, photographs of architectural ruins serve to express a reaction to the quickly vanishing past. David Lowenthal suggests, "The dominant association with decay is our own transience."<sup>96</sup> When faced with a constant state of simultaneous construction and demolition, it seems only natural that urban citizens would begin to contemplate the impermanence of not only their physical environment, but also their own fleeting roles in a broader cultural history as well. Julia Hell suggests, "the ruin functions as a uniquely flexible and productive trope for modernity's self-awareness...It is the reflexivity of a culture that interrogates its own becoming."<sup>97</sup> At a time when urban transformations increased, the ruins of former buildings, crumbled not by a lengthy amount of time but by modern developments, provided an iconic opportunity to ruminate on the relationship between the past and the future.

Ruins, which make a significant appearance in this collection, tend to present a complex sense of temporality, existing in both the past and present. Andreas Huyssen states, "Any ruin posits the problem of a double exposure to the past and the present."<sup>98</sup> They exist as "relics of the past persisting into the present,"<sup>99</sup> collapsing time into stratigraphic layers of history, where the past, present and future exist simultaneously. Ruins evoke their former structure, a deceased body yet unburied. They are not yet gone,

but are passing between past and future time periods. Yablon illustrates, “It is this ongoing balance, this sense of being delicately poised between the not-yet and the no-longer, that renders the ruin dynamic rather than static, alive rather than inert.”<sup>100</sup> In this sense, ruins encourage their witnesses to contemplate several times at once, the eras of a building’s glory, its demise and its demolition.

Ruins are indexical to their original structure, and can therefore function as tangible photographs of their former architectural selves. As physical pieces of the eroded whole, ruins serve as traces of the structures they once were. Although they are only fragments of the original, they “are rightly perceived as more authentic and ‘truthful’ in relation to their originals, even if they no longer resemble the originals they were once part of.”<sup>101</sup> Due to their indexicality with the original structure, ruins may be considered more authentic than a reconstruction. Even though a reconstruction would more closely illustrate the architecture in question, ruins, due to their status as traces of the original, evoke a more ‘truthful’ encounter with the structure.

Similarly, a photograph is highly valued for its indexicality to the original scene. A photograph serves as a footprint of the former reality it captures, but depicts only a fragment of the original setting. The photographer’s aesthetic choices to include/exclude aspects of the scene through techniques such as the placement of the lens’ frame, the angle or the lighting, each influence and shape the footprint that a photograph resembles. This fragmented visual imprint of a physical location requires, like ruins, that the viewer imagines a temporal and spatial context that extends beyond the frame. Huyssen states, “In the ruin, history appears spatialized, and built space temporalized.”<sup>102</sup> Just as a ruin challenges us to imagine its former, whole structure-- suggesting both a different spatial

environment as well as a different time-- a photograph can evoke the viewer's imagination of the spaces just outside the frame, and the events before and after the photograph. While not all photographs function this way, indeed, some even operate to combat this response, their indexicality to the scene is often not only a valued attribute, but also one of mystery. Photographs of structures that no longer exist, such as those in Severance's collection, become highly valuable due to their status as the sole remaining traces of a scene that has disappeared forever. Therefore, ruins and photographs are not merely indexical to their former selves, but also serve as fragments to represent the entire scene, for they are all that remain. In the absence of the original structure, photographs and ruins, although essentially fragmentary traces, come to signify the whole.

Architectural photographs often operate as ruins. As a medium of response to impending ruins, Woods states, "photography can capture and hold this afterlife of buildings,"<sup>103</sup> ensuring their image will persist long after the building has ceased to exist. Furthermore, photography often *is* the afterlife of buildings. A photograph is frequently the only manner in which a building can remain once its physical remnants have crumbled. In a photograph, the building continues to exist and can be studied, remembered and, essentially, preserved. In a vast world, photographs are often the primary means of experiencing architecture from a distant landscape, providing their own perceptions of a building's space, attributes and relationship with the surrounding environment. Just as a photograph allows us to experience architecture from a remote location, it also enables us to reimagine architecture that is temporally distant, existing previously in another life. In this sense, the photographs in *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* operate as the architectural ruins of the industrial era. They are the sole remnants

of those buildings, functioning as absent, symbolic pieces of what once was. Therefore, this collection is as much a compilation of images of ruined architecture as it is a collection of ruins themselves. Furthermore, the collection, as a compilation of fragmented ruins, is a ruin itself.

### **Historic Preservation and the Perseverance of History**

While the photographs in *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* operate as ruins, they also simultaneously act as a form of preservation. In Severance's era and in our own, photographs are often viewed as the last remaining relics of a vanished past, serving as indexical traces of a time that has already slipped away. In this way, the architectural photographs in the collection were valued by Severance and his readership as if they were the buildings themselves. In a chapter entitled, "Vanished Main Street," Severance writes,

Of most of the interesting old houses, no pictures exist. Sentiment is probably not lacking, but often, even today, it does not take the form of preserving pictures of the old homestead. If it had done so, half a century ago, how we would value the record of the vanished Buffalo!<sup>104</sup>

By encouraging citizens to create architectural photographs of threatened buildings, Severance suggests that the population can 'preserve' structures through photography, even if they are demolished. In addition to the collection's photographs acting as methods as preservation, the author's use of these photographs to depict the past can also be seen as an act of preservation. In this way, Severance's utilization of the photographs, as well as the photographs themselves and the architecture that they depict, are essentially representations of preservation efforts.

Often, historic preservation efforts reveal contemporary values rather than maintaining those of the past. During this process, structures often come to represent cultural ideals, and thus the argument to save a building may, consciously or unconsciously, center around the longing for a particular aspect of the past. Inevitably, preservationists serve to selectively choose some buildings, and therefore some values, to honor, and deemphasize others. Because of this, preservationists engage in a process that D. Medina Lasansky deems, ‘urban editing,’ in which they physically shape the built environment in order to emphasize the values of the present rather than the past. She argues, “restoration provides the means through which the past could be remastered and manipulated to serve contemporary ideological rhetoric.”<sup>105</sup> Following this, my thesis argues that by editing the urban environment to suit current values, historic preservationists can impact the cityscape in the same manner that historians impact the reconstruction of cultural memory.

In some ways, the role of the preservationist is similar to the historian. Both entities are perpetuators of cultural memory, ensuring that it survives from generation to generation. Similarly, both the historian and the preservationist serve to preserve memory, but also creatively shape it, molding it to reflect the values of their own time. Daniel Bluestone, a professor of both architectural history and historic preservation at the University of Virginia, often blurs the lines between the two fields. He contemplates the relationship between preservation and history, stating,

Writing history and preserving buildings clearly reinforce particular histories while ignoring others. However, unlike academic historians, preservationists work in a world in which the traces of histories they choose to ignore often disappear. Carried to its extreme, this process of devaluation leads to destruction and fosters a historic landscape that increasingly conforms to and confirms the privileged narrative.<sup>106</sup>

Both fields of thought serve to creatively preserve selective cultural memories that uphold their own time period. While a preservationist's neglect may result in a demolished building, a historian's neglect may result in a vanished moment in time, disappearing without memory.

In *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, the reader can see only what Severance has chosen to include, which is, in some sense, what Bluestone would define as a 'privileged narrative.' The lack of images of low-income neighborhoods, immigrants or non-white citizens, or other 'undesirable' realities of the city as a dirty, polluted and overcrowded place reflects the subjectivity of the historian, as well as the desire to make the book a marketable celebration of the city. There is a marked absence in the book, both geographically in the lack of images of the city's East Side, and sociologically, in the lack of images of working-class citizens and minorities such as Eastern European immigrants and African Americans, which were prevalent throughout the city at the time. This may be partially due to Buffalo's photographers in the mid-nineteenth century, who may not have typically chosen these communities as their subject matter. Nevertheless, the absence of these topics in the collection reveals both the photographers' and the author's subjectivity in emphasizing certain aspects of the past and devaluing others.

These inherent biases can be seen as an indicator of the trends of historians, and upper-class urban citizens, of the early twentieth century. As Max Page argues, "The history of place was manufactured. History was a product...powerfully imbued with missions rooted in the social issues of the day."<sup>107</sup> In the collection, the exclusion of photographs and text regarding the more 'problematic' aspects of urban life is reflected in the lack of images of this material and the lack of discussion on the issues that such

images may evoke. In this sense, the omission of these items reveals as much about the author's perspective, and his twentieth-century context, as it would if they were included. By examining this book as a subjective presentation of images of nineteenth-century Buffalo, it is possible to see not only the visual interpretations of the urban environment, but also the cultural expectations, assumptions and values of the early twentieth century when the book was created.

By examining the interpretative nature of historic preservation and historical compilation, it is possible to see the creative process that greatly contributes to both practices. Lasansky argues, "the past is constantly being rewritten in a way that reflects more about the present than it does about the past. The same observation can be applied to the preservation and maintenance of historical structures."<sup>108</sup> Many processes that contribute to the daily practices of historic preservation are embedded in the desire to isolate a singular moment in time, as one that is ideal and worthy of celebration. For example, in order to submit a nomination to list a historic property on the National Register of Historic Places, it is necessary to define a 'Period of Significance.' By selecting a year, or a condensed span of years, the nomination must indicate the most essential point in time for the property, which may require the rehabilitation or reconstruction of the building to that specific point in time. By isolating this moment as significant, this aspect of historic preservation effectively removes the property from a fluid historical narrative, and instead encourages a building to exist in a single celebrated moment. While choosing a period of significance is a relatively routine procedure for many preservationists, its broader implications effect the re-creation of history as one that celebrates only one period, that which is deemed most important by a preservationist.

Often this exalted moment is defined so as to eliminate any alterations to the property, indicating that the architecture should be fixed in time, rather than a constant evolution. Lowenthal reflects, “While preservation formally espouses a fixed and segregated past, it cannot help revealing a past all along being altered to conform with present expectations. What is preserved, like what is remembered, is neither a true nor a stable likeness of past reality.”<sup>109</sup> Choosing a period of significance serves as only one example of the many creative aspects of historic preservation, revealing the influential process of emphasizing certain aspects of history while deemphasizing others.

The photographs in the collection, as well as the site history of the architecture presented, reveal the connection between the creative construction of history and the subjective influences of historic preservation. In this way, *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* reveals that “the experience of the city was reframed in conjunction with the reconceptualization of history.”<sup>110</sup> By viewing not only the photographs of demolished buildings, but also the history of preservation and destruction on the sites of their subject matter, it is possible to see this connection develop throughout time.

### **After the Photographs: Two Site Histories in Contemporary Buffalo**

As Severance predicted, many buildings were demolished after the book’s publication, making them casualties of modernity. Just as many buildings from the 1840’s had been demolished in order to erect new structures for Severance’s era, those buildings, new in his time, were demolished in order to make way for even newer structures. While a detailed site history of many of these photographs could effectively

provide a miniature history of Buffalo, attention to two sites in particular will suffice for the purposes of this

argument. By

examining the sites

presented in Figure 26,

depicting the Richmond

Hotel, and Figure 25,

“The Passing of St.

Johns,” this analysis

extends an

understanding of the

past-- both the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth century-- into an

examination of the present day. This adds another stratum to the stratification of time



**Figure 26:** *Ruins of the Richmond Hotel*



**Figure 27**

seen in the volume, layering the history of the buildings depicted, the history of their demolition, and, after the book was published, the continually evolving history of their locations in the city.

Many of the buildings Severance depicted were demolished or altered in order to pave the path for newer technology, increased commerce or evolving stylistic tastes. The site history of the Richmond Hotel, seen in Figure 26 reveals aspects of each of these concepts, thus depicting a rich,

multilayered history contained within a single location and evoked in merely one photograph. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Richmond Hotel served as a resting point for the social elite visiting the city. In 1887, the hotel tragically burned, resulting in fifteen deaths and several injuries.<sup>111</sup> While fires were common in the late nineteenth century, this event was particularly gruesome, with several employees and guests trapped in the hotel, unable to be rescued. Due to the proliferation of overhead wires, a result of the increasing presence of telegraph and telephone companies, fire rescue teams were unable to gain entry to the higher levels of the hotel as it burned. As the nearby taverns and hotels responded by acting as makeshift hospitals, the inability of the fire brigade to save those on the upper floors resulted in a few desperate citizens jumping to their death from windows. The newspaper accounts that followed were particularly gruesome, and several upper-class guests had died at the hotel. Many blamed the tragedy on the inhibiting presence of the wires, reflecting the industrial era reaction to the increasing influence of new technology. In this sense, the presence of a photograph of the Richmond Hotel fire in the collection, with its composition placing telegraph poles in the center of the frame, reveals this notion of combat between technology and historic structures.

In 1889, the ruins of the Richmond Hotel were replaced with the Iroquois Hotel, seen in Figure 27, which served to accommodate the increasing number of visitors to Buffalo in the years prior to and during the Pan American Exposition. This eight-story, Second Empire style structure was bedecked in terra cotta ornamentation and was continuously updated and outfitted with the latest hotel improvements- such as electricity and private bathrooms. By the 1920's, this hotel was so popular that Ellsworth Statler

believed it was preventing his own hotel, the “Hotel Buffalo,” from achieving the same success. When his attempts to hire away the manager failed, he eliminated the competition by buying the Iroquois Hotel and closing it the day his next hotel, the “Statler Hotel,” opened in 1923.<sup>112</sup>

The building of the old Iroquois Hotel remained at the site until 1940, when it was replaced with the Bond Clothing Company in 1940. The Bond Clothing Company, a retail store with chains in several major cities, operated from that site until 1962, when, like many other downtown stores, it relocated to a suburban mall. In 1966, the building was replaced with “One M & T Bank Plaza,” the downtown branch of a major banking firm. Built by Minoru Yamasaki, the same architect who designed the World Trade Center, this twenty-one-floor International Style building remains an important architectural contribution to Buffalo’s



**Figure 28**

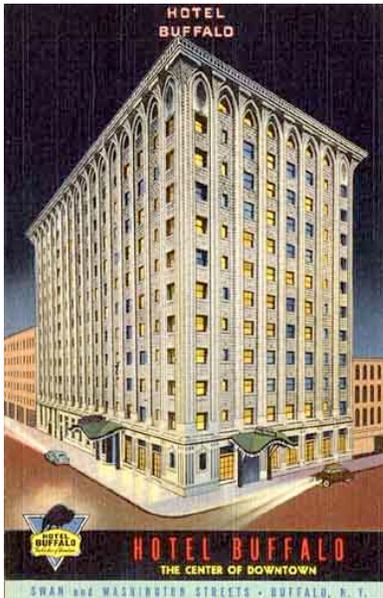
downtown (Figure 28). Like many sites in Buffalo, the evolution of buildings at this location reveals the shift in the city’s downtown functions, from a bustling, somewhat chaotic tourist hub, to a struggling commercial center, to a center of banking and offices. When Severance published this collection in 1912, he attempted to ensure that the illustrious Iroquois Hotel did not overshadow the tragedy of the once glorious Richmond Hotel. Today, however, the same site hosts renowned modern architecture, and the previous history of that location remains overshadowed, just as Severance feared. This reveals just one example of the cycle of destruction and

renewal that occurs over time, and the cycle of remembering and forgetting that is embedded within the historical process, demonstrating both the need for Severance's collection and for an ever-evolving examination of it.

While the site of the Richmond Hotel evokes the cyclical process of destruction and construction, the creative process of preservation can be seen in the history of demolitions made on the site of St. John's Episcopal Church, at the corner of Washington and Swan Streets. When the church was destroyed in 1906 (see Figure 25), there were no significant demonstrations of opposition to the demolition, as preservation efforts were uncommon in America at the time. In 1908, the church was replaced with a hotel owned by hotel mogul Ellsworth Statler. This hotel, the "Hotel Buffalo," was the first in a chain of Statler's successful downtown hotels on the East Coast, which later became the Hilton hotels.<sup>113</sup> The "Hotel Buffalo," seen in Figure 21, existed concurrently with the second in the Statler chain, a new, nineteen-story, Sullivanesque style hotel called the "Statler Hotel," seen in Figure 30, which was located only a few blocks away on the site of former President Millard Fillmore's mansion.<sup>114</sup> Again, there was little documented opposition to the destruction of the Fillmore mansion, as the new Statler Hotel was highly anticipated and reinforced Buffalo as a prominent city on the map. As one of New York state's tallest and most prominent buildings, the Statler hotel was widely celebrated, setting the standard for hotels for many years to come.<sup>115</sup> For many years, the two hotels were simultaneously present in the Buffalo skyline and their presence indicated not only the success of Statler business, but of Buffalo itself.

In 1968, the Hotel Buffalo, on the site of what was once St. John's Church, was demolished as part of an urban renewal program and later replaced by a baseball stadium,

“Coca-Cola Field.” There was modest opposition to this action, but in the era of urban



**Figure 29**  
including organizations such as Preservation  
Buffalo Niagara and the Buffalo Preservation

Board, advocate for various new uses for the structure, the finances have not been significant enough to demonstrate sufficient support to save the structure. During the debates surrounding the future of this historic structure, many preservationists have cited the history of the Hotel Buffalo as a nostalgic warning against repeating past mistakes.

The history of this site provides an example of the evolution of meanings that are embedded in historic preservation efforts throughout time. At the time of St. John’s demolition, the construction of the Hotel Buffalo was seen as an important addition to Buffalo, as a sign of the city’s prosperity. Ellsworth Statler’s choice to locate the hotel in Buffalo, unprecedented in its level of service and amenities, was largely seen as a compliment to the city, deeming it worthy of a world-class establishment. Because of this, the destruction of St. John’s was seen largely as a necessary casualty of the past, a martyr sacrificed in order for the city to expand, modernize, and improve. It was not

renewal, the push to make sites ‘shovel ready’ was prevalent. A few blocks away, the famous Statler Hotel, on the former site of Millard Fillmore’s mansion, is currently the subject of a heated preservation debate. The building was abandoned and boarded up in early 2010, and has been sitting vacant and deteriorating for the past year. While many preservationists,



**Figure 30**

mourned citywide, because to do so would be mourning the promise of an incoming future.

While the demolition of St. John's was largely accepted because of the anticipation of new development, the threatened demolition of the Statler Hotel would be seen by many as tragic. Today, the imminent demolition of the Statler Hotel is often viewed with a heavier symbolism that has a more complex relationship with the future. In a city that financially struggles and continually fights to retain its population, the loss of the Statler Hotel could implicitly be seen as a sign of the demise of the city. Due to the uncertainty of the city's future, there is less tangible hope for a prosperous replacement than there was during the creation of *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*. During this era of change, which is perhaps similar in pattern to Severance's era, the city of Buffalo finds itself looking to the past for a collective identity. As one preservationist has stated, the Statler's "continued deterioration and possible destruction will be an irreparable loss to a city whose greatest asset is its incredible historic architectural inheritance."<sup>116</sup> As a reaction to some of the hardships presently experienced, Buffalo, like many other struggling cities, may be recreating its own urban identity by rooting itself in the glory of its most successful former era. This period is easily represented by the Statler Hotel, whose very existence confirmed the importance of the city in the early twentieth century.

The current Statler debate reveals the manner in which structures can become associated with particular ideals. For historians and preservationists, as well as public citizens, a building can represent an important cultural memory. Page aptly states, "Collective memory is stored and preserved in physical landscapes...Landscape and

memory are codependent; memories are literally impossible without physical landscapes to store and serve as touchstones for the work of recollection.”<sup>117</sup> Historic buildings often trigger collective memories, and because of this they can come to represent a cultural value or belief. In Buffalo, the Statler Hotel has long been seen as a historic example of the city’s prosperity in its golden age. When buildings become symbols of values in this manner, the choice to preserve a building or destroy it can signify the triumph of one value over another. By examining the history of preservation efforts, both at this site and at large, it is possible to recognize the current values of preservationists and planners who affect the decisions. While the previous choice to demolish the Hotel Buffalo reveals the values of one era, the future state of the Statler Hotel will, in time, reveal the ideals of another.

Individually and collectively, the architecture, photographs, history and historical narrative of these sites reveal the interaction between various elements in the cultural construction of collective memory. Just as the camera lens has been adjusted to frame the scene, the physical scene itself has been adjusted to emphasize the values of the culture seeking to “preserve” it through photography. While the subjective values of the photographer are evident in the image produced, the efforts and choices of preservationists also reveal the ideals they attempt to uphold. Societies may choose to creatively destroy aspects of their own history by selecting some buildings for demolition, and others for preservation. In Buffalo, one example of this process can be seen at the site of St. John’s Episcopal Church, which is linked to an ongoing history of destruction and construction. By examining these elements, the preservationist’s process

of urban editing can be likened to the photographer's aesthetic choices made in taking photographs and the author's subjectivity in interpreting them.

### **Conclusion: Then and Now**

Today, Buffalo natives often view Severance's era as the city's golden age, an era in which Buffalo was a wealthy, cultural center that hosted the exposition and some of the country's most celebrated architects. At a time when the city is currently suffering from a massive population loss and dilapidated urban fabric, the dense, chaotic boom of the early twentieth century naturally provides the ideal daydream. A simple mapping of the locations presented in the collection with those same locations in Buffalo today reveal a very different city. The area Severance depicted as under threat by rapid development, the central business district, is now virtually empty. While in Severance's time that location may have seemed almost overwhelmingly busy, today the empty storefronts, crumbling structures and ghostly streets long for that early twentieth-century bustle.

As a twenty-first-century Buffalo native, it is imperative that I acknowledge the subjectivity of my own interpretations throughout this thesis. Currently, Buffalo is struggling, and perhaps even succeeding, to overcome its more recent past. Often classified as a shrinking, post-industrial city, Buffalo faces a plight of abandonment, neglect and poverty. Dilapidated structures in the city's downtown and east side face demolition daily, thus providing a contemporary set of associations that inevitably cling to my perspective as I analyze Severance's collection. While Severance's volume provides a nuanced view of the interdependent, even optimistic relationship between

demolition and new opportunities for construction, today those themes may resonate in a different tone.

Contemporary Buffalonians may be more likely to view demolition as a sign of failure rather than of opportunity. Therefore, the associations with demolition have shifted from Severance's era into today, and inevitably this has affected my analyses of the collection. There is a tendency to emphasize the role of nostalgia more so than of optimism, which is likely more a sign of my contemporary experiences in the city than of the actual collection itself. When examining the juxtapositions of ruined churches, for example, my own experiences connect the images to the crumbling churches in Buffalo today, creating a mental connection that views the photographs in comparison to the struggle of a shrinking Buffalo, rather than to an era in the height of its growth.

Still, this tendency to superimpose my own associations has value, and further demonstrates the worth of analyzing the subjectivity of interpretation rather than searching for an objective truth. In this sense, it is essential to explicitly acknowledge that my interpretations of Severance, and of Buffalo during various eras, are directly influenced by my own era and experience of the city. When examining the subjectivity inherently present in these interpretations- my own, Severance's and the photographers'- this discussion could function within a post-structuralist context. While this theoretical framework could be applied to future studies of this material or related subject matter, this thesis has primarily emphasized a direct focus on the collection and its components.

These cyclical psychological and emotional responses to the passage of time also reveal a cultural reaction to another cycle- that of creation and destruction. *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo* serves as Severance's rumination on the constant urban editing that

accompanied the onset of the industrial era, a process that arguably still persists today. Just as in Severance's time, buildings today are destroyed to make way for new ones, and the choices in this process often reveal present values, reflecting what we choose to remember and forget about the past. This cycle, which Max Page astutely calls 'creative destruction,' is continually present in *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, which illuminates the creative influences of a society on the built environment as well as the impact of an author and urban photographers on the cultural perceptions of urban change.

Additionally, the collection does more than preserve these demolished structures through photography, or even reflect the many influences on that act of preservation. By compiling images of vanished structures, this collection comes as close to those buildings as possible, indexically linked to an imaginary city of buildings that have long since disappeared. While each photograph serves as a ruin, providing the only remaining indexical trace of a building, this collection of photographs serves as a ruin itself. It is at once a compilation of smaller individual ruins, thus creating a microscopic city comprised of several distinct ruins, and simultaneously a singular ruin in and of itself. As a solitary object, comprised of individual photographs, this collection is, in a sense, a ruin. It is a ruin not only of the former individual buildings it depicts and of the former city it imagines as a whole, but also acts as a ruin of itself, of the time in which it was created and the twentieth-century values that it reflects. This topic could be explored more deeply in further work, and would be of particular interest when compared with contemporary industrial ruinscapes and 'ruin porn' photography.

While the temporal and spatial perceptions of the past tend to repeat over time, manifesting in similar combinations of optimism, nostalgia, and trepidation in each

instance, they also continually influence the creative processes of writing history. *Picture Book of Earlier Buffalo*, in both its photographs and their interpretation by Severance, demonstrates this complex awareness of the passing of time, illuminating its casualties and its triumphs. As an intact example of the relationship between urban photographers and the author, this volume, taken as a whole, depicts a stratigraphy of interpretations over time. This history is richest where these interpretations converge, revealing a complex relationship between the past and the present that is fluid and dynamic, constantly shifting to newly illuminate any given historical moment.

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