Bring Buffalo to you!

Book our docents to bring the stories of Buffalo's fascinating history to your facility!

BOOKING INFORMATION

All presentations are available to be given in-person. Please inquire if you are interested In a virtual presentation on Zoom.

All bookings include a one-hour presentation (45 minute presentation, 15 minute discussion or Q&A). All talks include a PowerPoint presentation.

Bookings cost: $90
Note: Explore Buffalo is only able to accommodate venues who are able to provide technology (laptop, projector, screen, connecting cords.) The docent will provide a flashdrive with their presentation.
Talks are available upon speaker availability.

Book your Guest Speaker today!

Contact Suzanne Ernst, Program Director, at suzanne@explorebuffalo.org or call 716-245-3032 ext. 205

Presentation Topics

Please note: Talk availability is subject to the availability of our docents.

200 Years on the Erie Canal

The first Erie Canal, which opened in 1825, gave way to an Enlarged Erie Canal through the 1800s. In the 1900s, the Erie Canal gave way to the Barge Canal, today's Erie Canal. This presentation provides an overview of these three major iterations of the Erie Canal.

Architectural Styles 101

Have you ever looked at one of Buffalo's beautiful buildings, or maybe even your own home, and wondered about what style it is? Georgian? Gothic Revival? Mid-century? Every building -commercial or residential - whether built in the 1600's or 2000's, has a unique Architectural style. But you don't need to be a professional architect to identify them. Architectural Styles are very unique and each has its very own distinctive features. Once a few of these features are pointed out to you, we promise you will never look at a building the same way again! And you will know what style it is.

Art's Up: The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy (BFAA) & Its Impact Near & Far

The parent organization of The Buffalo AKG Art Museum is the BFAA which was established in 1862 and for over 150 years has been an ambassador for Buffalo — locally, nationally, and globally. In this talk, we will briefly review BFAA's history, including key events and "firsts" such as being the first major art museum to have a woman director. We'll focus on a selection of people throughout the years who've had significant influence, such as our own "Monuments Men" who helped recover Nazi-looted art during World War II.

We'll also acknowledge key contributors throughout the years who have helped not only to acquire artworks, but also to build the unique structures that display those works, including our recent restoration, renovation, and expansion on campus. In the end, we hope you will have a better understanding of the BFAA's role yesterday, today, and tomorrow as it sets its goals to continue to serve a diverse community and remain a leading promoter of the Buffalo area.

Banking in Buffalo (Available afternoons and evenings)

Buffalo has a rich history in banking. Although there were numerous banks created over the last two hundred years, only one of them is still in Buffalo under its original name! This talk will include a discussion of the individuals who forged Buffalo's economy and created banking institutions that helped make Buffalo prosperous and inventive. There were also key players on the national scene of financing that hailed from Buffalo. As important as the history of banking are the buildings constructed to house them. Buffalo's beautiful bank buildings are part of our architectural assets and admired around the world.

Birth of The Steel City: Bethlehem's Lackawanna Plant

Hear the story of how the 4th largest steel plant in the country came to the shores of Lake Erie, and explore the legacy of Bethlehem Steel in Lackawanna.

Presentation Topics

Please note: Talk availability is subject to the availability of our docents.

Buffalo Buildings by Famous American Architects - NEW IN 2026! (Available June 1 - Sept. 30)

At the turn of the twentieth century, Buffalo had grown to become the eighth largest city in America. The wealth generated by commerce and industry enabled the city's businesses, organizations, and citizens to hire some of the nation's most prominent architects, like Frank Lloyd Wright, H. H. Richardson, Louis Sullivan, D. H. Burnham, Gordon Bunshaft, and Richard Upjohn.
This Power Point will include photos and information about the famous architects and their Buffalo signature buildings, but also lesser known Buffalo sites by the same architects.

Buffalo's First Ladies: Abigail Powers Fillmore and Frances Folsom Cleveland

Buffalo is proud to claim two presidents – Millard Fillmore, the 13th President of the United States, and Grover Cleveland, the 22nd and 24th President of the United States. But as we've heard many times, behind every great man there's a great woman, and Buffalo's First Ladies, Abigail Powers Fillmore, and Frances Folsom Cleveland, are no exceptions. In this presentation we'll focus on the women behind the Presidents with a look at their early lives, how they met their future husbands, and the roles they played as First Ladies. Other than being First Ladies, each woman had many other firsts connected to their name, such as having the first bathroom installed in the Presidential Suite and the first baby in the White House.

Buffalo: From Outpost to Gateway via The Erie Canal

Perhaps the most important thing in Buffalo's early growth was the selection of the then village as the terminus of the Erie Canal. Learn about the canal's construction and how it would change Buffalo forever.

Buffalo's Murals

In the last several years, there has been an explosion of murals in Buffalo. They come in all shapes and sizes and are all over the region. Explore Buffalo has several tours by bicycle and on foot that explore some of these. This talk is designed to give you an overview of the locations, artists, and wide variety of murals around town.

Buffalo's Power Couples

Meet Buffalo's diverse power couples of the early twentieth century. From the author and the actor (turned carpenter), to the journalist and the impresario, to the restaurateurs, these influential couples brought world-class entertainment and recognition to Buffalo in the early 1900s.

Buffalo Through an Artist's Eye - NEW IN 2026! - Only Available to Locations within City of Buffalo

Artists have been inspired by Buffalo's beautiful architecture for years. This is an opportunity to see some these beautiful paintings featuring Buffalo's beloved buildings. You will meet local artists including Charles Burchfield and Rita Argen Auerbach and learn about the buildings that so inspired them. We will also examine some of Buffalo's murals by national and international artists who were commissioned to create murals that celebrated Buffalo in ways that may surprise you.

Presentation Topics

Please note: Talk availability is subject to the availability of our docents.

Buffalo's Sporting Life Presented through the eyes of a lifelong Buffalo sports fan, this talk will focus on the history of professional sports in Buffalo through the years.

Buffalo Then & Now: What Building Was There 100 years ago? (Available June 1—September 30)

In this compare-and-contrast presentation, see what the sites of some of your favorite Buffalo buildings looked like one hundred years ago! This presentation will show what various locations around the Queen City looked like in 1918, juxtaposed with their 2018 appearance. You'll be surprised by how much the city has in some ways changed, and in some ways remained the same!

Buffalo's Two Cathedrals

Learn the history of the two cathedrals in downtown Buffalo. This presentation will take an in-depth look at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral and St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Cathedral. Both cathedrals were constructed in the mid-1800s as Buffalo prospered following the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. Learn about the history of the cathedrals while gaining an appreciation for their architecture and design features, including stained glass.

The Burchfield Penney Art Center: The First "Green" Art Museum in NYS

The BPAC for over 50 years has been known as the Museum for Western New York Arts. In this talk we will briefly review the history of this art center, then discuss the building design by Gwathmey Siegel and Associates. We'll illustrate how the architectural structure has distinctive features reflecting artist Charles E. Burchfield's love of nature. We'll also explore how the building design serves the BPAC's diverse programming to provide artists, students, scholars, collectors, and the general public with opportunities to learn and exchange ideas about the cultural legacy of the region.

Carnegie Libraries of Western New York - NEW IN 2026!

Andrew Carnegie's unique philanthropy provided library access to cities all over the United States, including right here in Western New York. Learn about the Carnegie library fund, and the stories behind the eleven local libraries we are fortunate to have, thanks to the generosity of Mr. Carnegie and the dedication of local citizens.

Celebrating Buffalo & Beyond: The Artistic Legacy of Józef Sławiński

Accomplished artist Józef Sławiński came from Poland to Buffalo in the 1960s and made the Niagara Frontier his home until his death in 1983. In those two decades Sławiński created artwork both reflecting and helping to inspire the civic, historical, architectural, religious, natural, and cultural heritage of the WNY community. In this talk we will consider both Sławiński's artistic vision as well as his versatility and skill in using varied materials and labor-intensive processes, such as hammered copper portraits or layered cement murals known as sgraffito which was his favorite medium. Although Sławiński's work is found elsewhere, his richest body of work is in the Buffalo area.

Presentation Topics

Please note: Talk availability is subject to the availability of our docents.

Christmas Shopping in Buffalo (Available afternoons and evenings)

Do you remember being in downtown Buffalo at Christmastime? This talk will bring back memories of getting dressed up, spending the day shopping in the wonderful stores, looking at the department store window decorations, eating at the AM&A's top floor restaurant and so much more! We'll also talk about all of the great retailers that made Buffalo their home.

City of Lockport (Available afternoons and evenings)

The city of Lockport took its name from the flight of five locks built for the Erie Canal to rise up and descend the Niagara Escarpment. But its history began long before that with the Native Americans who lived here. In this talk, you will hear about the rapid growth in the population of the area following the construction and opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. This talk includes the development of churches, industry, inventors, banking and the magnificent homes built by families of wealth who benefited from their location on the Erie Canal. Although the city has gone through economic decline, it is poised for a renaissance, embracing its history as a major part of the Erie Canal and the creation of the Empire State that is New York.

The Erie Canal: The Creation of the Empire State (Available afternoons and evenings)

The Erie Canal had a significant impact not only on the growth of Buffalo but the growth of the nation. The talk includes: the initial concept of the Canal, the political fight to make it a reality, the construction of this amazing civil engineering feat, and its effect on the economy of Buffalo as it became one of the largest inland ports in the world.

The Erie Canal, Silo City and Flour Milling in Buffalo (Available June 1 – Sept. 30)

Buffalo's population grew tremendously with the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. Quite surprisingly, because a few years before did not even have a harbor, and 2 private citizens , including one early Mayor, Samuel Wilkeson , had to risk his own capital to convince the NYS Legislature to extend the Canal past the Village of Black Rock . This talk will discuss the activities with the early Canal, and the development of Buffalo, for a time, as the number one grain handling port and flour milling capital of the World. The talk will also cover ongoing redevelopment efforts in the area now known as Silo City.

From Creek to Canalside

This lecture will explore Buffalo's relationship to the Erie Canal from "Wilkeson to Higgins", citizens from our past and present. Canalside is an important chapter in Buffalo's history as a major player in America's growth, a post industrial Rust Belt and a proud resurgent as a "New Boomtown". In 2025 Buffalo's Canalside will be a major focal point in celebrating the Centennial of Erie Canal.

Presentation Topics

Please note: Talk availability is subject to the availability of our docents.

From Soaps to Riches: Larkin, Hubbard, & Wright (Available June 1—September 30)

This lecture will tell the story of the Larkin Soap Company founders, John Larkin and Elbert Hubbard, and their relationship with architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright designed not only famous Larkin Company administration building, but also houses for company executives Darwin Martin, Walter Davidson, George Barton, and William Heath.

German Immigrants in Buffalo & WNY (Available afternoons and evenings)

Buffalo's history is a story of immigrants. Among the first immigrants were people from the German "states". In fact, individuals of German heritage comprise the largest immigrant group to settle in the United States as a whole. The nation of Germany as we know it was not established until the completion of the Franco-Prussian war around 1870. The talk covers early immigration prior to this period through the early part of the 20th century. It will also include information about the speaker's family that came from what is now the Alsace region of France.

The Guaranty Building (Available June 1 - September 30)

The Guaranty Building, completed in 1895, is considered one of Louis Sullivan's masterpieces. In the 1890s, the skyscraper was a new and uniquely American building type. Sullivan is one of the most important American architects of the 19th century and is considered the "Father of the Skyscraper." Learn about the history and architect of this landmark building in detail.

Half a Century of Working Women

From Irish immigrants arriving on "coffin" ships to Rosie the Riveter building war planes, women have helped shape our city and beyond. Whether managing the world's largest box company or running a nightclub on Michigan Avenue, Buffalo women have not shied away from hard work and entrepreneurship. We'll look at the period from 1900 to 1950 to meet some of these amazing women.

Irish Immigration: Coming to America (Available afternoons and evenings)

The Irish began their first significant immigration to Western New York during the building of the Erie Canal in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The next wave came with the onset of the Great Potato Famine in the middle of the century and the last large wave came in the latter part of the century. Those with Irish ancestry comprise about 10% of the population of the U.S. following only the German in size. The impact of the Irish on the Buffalo economy and culture remain evident even today. We will examine where the Irish settled and the jobs they held. We will also explore the impact of the Catholic Church in Buffalo led by a string of bishops with Irish ancestry and how the much discriminated-against Irish rose from their low status to become major players on the political scene. On St. Patrick's Day, everyone is Irish, so this is everyone's heritage!

Presentation Topics

Please note: Talk availability is subject to the availability of our docents.

Italian Immigration: Coming to America (Available afternoons and evenings)

Italians migrated to Buffalo in the latter part of the 19th century escaping famine brought on by drought and high taxes. Those with Italian ancestry are the third largest immigrant group to make their home in Buffalo. The Italians settled in areas of Buffalo where people from their regions previously settled. The waterfront was the home of the Sicilians to name one example. As they climbed up the economic ladder, they moved into Buffalo's West Side and into North Buffalo, forming neighborhoods known as "Little Italy." This presentation will cover the movement of Italian immigrants in Buffalo, the businesses they were involved in, (including the influence of the Mafia), prominent Italian-American citizens and their eventual absorption into the melting pot of cultures that gives Buffalo its character.

Lackawanna Steel: 1900 - 1922 NEW IN 2026!

Learn about the history of the steel industry in Western New York.

The Lake Erie Ice Boom (Available June 1- September 30)

What is the ice boom supposed to do? Does it slow the arrival of Spring in Western New York? Is it unique to this area, and does it possibly harm some other parts of the environment? All this will be discussed in The Lake Erie Ice Boom talk, available June through September.

Life in the Original Larkinville (Available April 1 – October 31)

Today, Larkinville is a revitalized neighborhood that boasts of successful businesses, a vibrant arts scene and, of course, food truck Tuesdays. The area has arisen from the neglect of the late 20th Century and in many ways represents the re-birth of 21st Century Buffalo. Many people, however, know very little about the namesake Larkin Soap Company, which was one of Buffalo's major employers 100 years ago. When one thinks of large corporations in the early 20th Century, images of over-worked and under-paid women and children working in dangerous sweat-shops comes to mind. While this period became known as the Progressive Era in American history, most large businesses were very slow to improve the working conditions for the average worker. This talk will look at the policies and benefits that were instituted by the Larkin Soap Company that not only improved the lives of their employees but also the lives of the citizens of Buffalo.

Presentation Topics

Please note: Talk availability is subject to the availability of our docents.

Life on the Erie Canal

When the Erie Canal opened in 1825 many who had worked digging the canal went on to work on canals around the country during the "canal craze." But many stayed in the area, bought small farms and settled into farm life. Others took jobs in the many factories springing up along the canal, but many others hired on to canal boats or bought their own canal boats, married, had families, and became life-long canalers. Hear what their everyday life was like, as well as those who came to experience this engineering marvel by taking a short cruise along the Erie Canal.

Merry Christmas from Buffalo, NY

Despite modern-day commercialism, Christmas here in Buffalo and throughout this nation was first a religious celebration whose roots date back to the Romans and to ancient pagan rites. While it eventually evolved into a general celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, Christmas was deeply rooted in the specific ethnic origins and traditions of the families celebrating it. Buffalo, with its diverse ethnic population, had an abundance of Christmas traditions that influenced the various ways this holiday was celebrated. Join us to learn how these early Buffalonians brought their unique ethnic and religious traditions to help define a Buffalo Christmas!

My City Smells Like Cheerios - The History of Cereal In Western New York

On a warm, breezy summer day, that sweet aroma wafting over the city will tell you they're making Cheerios. But why here in Buffalo? And how did breakfast become a thing, what is the connection to health sanitariums? Hear the story of how Cheerios came to be made in Buffalo and how dry, ready to eat cereal right out of the box began in central New York, and even cereal's connection to Mar-a-Lago!

A Night Out on the Town (Available April 1—October 31)

This talk revives the exciting history of the entertainment community in Buffalo. Are you a movie buff? We will talk about the variety of theatres that would have shown everyone from Charlie Chaplin to Cary Grant to the original Star Wars. Is music more you speed? We will help you imagine where you would have sat to listen to the likes of Sinatra, Elvis, the Stones, and the Goo Goo Dolls. From vaudeville to live stage productions, Buffalo has been home to wondrous theatres and other venues which are no longer physically with us but, through this talk, can once again be part of our collective memory.

Presentation Topics

Please note: Talk availability is subject to the availability of our docents.

Polish Immigration: Coming to America (Available afternoons and evenings)

Polish immigration to Buffalo began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The Poles came from a region divided among three empires in the 18th century. The Poland that we know of today did not exist until after WWI. Still, those who came were fierce in their tenacity to hold onto to their cultural identity. One of the best examples of this is the Polish enclave that formed in the east side of Buffalo known as "Polonia". Drawn to migrate to Buffalo with the promise of Catholic parish communities, the first of which was St. Stan's, the Polish began coming in earnest in the 1870s. The Polish culture is still going strong in Buffalo today. With the many festivals, foods, dance and singing, we can celebrate the Polish culture that has been preserved by the descendants of the original immigrants.

Roswell Park - NEW IN 2026!

Many people have heard of Roswell Park, the renowned local cancer center. But how many know it is named after an esteemed physician of the same name? Learn how Dr. Park created the world's first cancer research facility and the groundbreaking innovations that continue to be made right here in Buffalo!

Sporting Women of WNY & Beyond (& Some Who Were Just Passing Through!)

Look back at sporting women from the late 1800s to current day, including a few specific women and sporting women in general. Which forms of exercise and sports were considered acceptable for women, and how did sports and exercise affect fashion?

Swift Flowing Water: HiSTORIES of North Tonawanda

Water frames and colors the history of North Tonawanda -- flowing from the name of the place, to the power passing through it, to the people who came to it, and to the products made there and then sent out to the world.

The strategic location provided a gateway to the Erie Canal and a transfer point for both electricity and travelers going between Buffalo and Niagara Falls or Lockport.

This talk will introduce a few of the influential individuals, as well a selection of the major industries and businesses in N.T.'s history, sometimes having interesting connections with other people and places in or beyond Western New York.

Presentation Topics

Please note: Talk availability is subject to the availability of our docents.

Top 10 Architectural Features (Available June 1—September 30)

One reason that Buffalo's architecture is so appealing is that it loaded with ornamentation – especially Classical ornamentation derived from Greece and Rome. Join us for this talk where you'll learn the top ten most frequently used decorations. Once you know these, no matter where you travel in the Western world you'll be an architecture "expert." This talk features many examples derived from the Illustrated Dictionary on the website *Buffalo Architecture and History* (BuffaloAH.com).

The Vanishing Ditch

A close look at how the first Erie Canal, which opened in 1825, came into existence. Find out where you can see surviving remnants of that canal in New York State.

What's in a Name? (Available afternoons and evenings)

Did you ever wonder how certain Buffalo streets got their name? This talk will go over the origins of street names on ten Explore Buffalo Tours Including: Allentown, Black Rock, Columbus Parkway, Albright Estate, Bungalows, Hamlin Park, Tonawanda and Hidden Gems of the Delaware District.

World War II: Buffalo Women on the Homefront

During World War II, Buffalo focused its industry and manufacturing on helping with the war effort, and women played an especially important role. Learn about the services and jobs women performed on the Homefront to help the Allies secure victory.