Many Places to Call Home: from the Heart of the City to Suburban Amherst

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Many places to call home

From the heart of the city to suburban Amherst

“Home is where one starts from,” said the poet T.S. Eliot, and for Buffalo’s law school, that has held true through a series of physical locations, from the heart of the city’s legal district to the expansive building it now inhabits in Amherst.

The very first lectures of the Buffalo Law School came in a small, plainly furnished room in a downtown Ellicott Street building, between Broadway and Clinton Street, on a site now occupied by the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library. The classes shared space in that building with the old Niagara Medical School.

That first Law School home lasted only a year, for in 1888 the school moved to a room in what was called the Buffalo Library Building, on Clinton Street. History records that the Law School agreed to pay $100 rent for the academic year (later increased to $150), provide its own seating and reimburse the library for cleaning costs. It was in the lecture room of this building that the first Commencement ceremonies were held, on May 29, 1889. The school would remain at the Buffalo Library until 1893. Students relied on the library of the Eighth Judicial Court for their research materials.

Another move came in the fall of 1893, when the Law School moved to the upper floor of the Stafford Building, at 158 Pearl St., a block from Niagara Square, now the site of the Edward A. Rath County Office Building.

Three years later, in 1896, the school moved to the ornate Ellicott Square building, which had just opened. One of the largest and most ornate office buildings in America at the time, it had additional appeal because it was also home to Bang’s Law Library, a significant private collection owned by the Ellicott Square Co.

The Law School joined the library, and students were given free access to its resources.

The next move came in 1913, when the Law School moved into the third and fourth floors of the Third National Bank Building, 275 Main St. at Swan Street. But the school’s continuing growth made a larger and more permanent home necessary, and in 1917 Buffalo Law took up residence in the former Hoyt Mansion at 77 W. Eagle St., where it would remain (though the original building would be razed and rebuilt) for more than 50 years. The initial building had two classrooms, a few faculty offices and a small library on the third floor.

The initial lease agreement came with an option to purchase the building, and within three years the school had decided to do so, for the then princely sum of $45,000. Its benefactors, led by Adelbert Moot, exercised their personal credit to make the purchase possible, alumni and friends of the school raised the money through contributions, and by 1921 the University of Buffalo owned the building free and clear.

When class sizes burgeoned in 1923, some lectures were given in Townsend Hall at the corner of Delaware Avenue and Niagara Square. But the Eagle Street building remained, as one report put it, “intolerably overcrowded.” The advent of the Depression and World War II ameliorated the crowding somewhat, but when a wave of returning GIs threatened to overwhelm the facilities beginning in 1946, something had to be done.

Classes were shifted temporarily to Townsend Hall, and a new three-story structure was built at 77 W. Eagle St. It would have a library with 20-foot ceilings, faculty and Bar Association offices on the second floor, three classrooms and administrative offices on the first floor, and in the basement, a student lounge and locker rooms. The project – which cost $704,000
including furniture, fixtures, equipment, and new books for the larger library—was dedicated on Oct. 21, 1949.

The building served well for a decade, but by 1960 the University Council had decided new facilities were in order. The case was bolstered by a fire in the neighboring Hutchinson Building, occupied by a floor-covering business. Burning debris from the taller building fell onto the tar roof of the Law School. Firefighters’ hoses saved the school building but flooded the basement, ruining many records and more than 1,000 law volumes.

Under Dean William D. Hawklund in the late 1960s, a detailed prospectus known as the Seven-Year Plan projected the growth of the Law School and called for a new, separate building. Debate centered around its location: on the University’s Main Street campus or on the proposed new campus in the wilds of Amherst?

Hawklund and the faculty were alarmed by a preliminary blueprint that called for the Law School to be housed in a large complex on the Main Street campus along with the other professional schools of medicine, pharmacy, dentistry and nursing, with a common library. The new Law School, they argued, must be in a separate building with its own library.

So Amherst it was, and has been ever since. While John Lord O’Brian Hall—the first building on what is now known as the North Campus—was being built, the Law School rented space in the historic Prudential Building, at Pearl and Church streets.

The new building had its cornerstone ceremony on May 11, 1971, with Manly Fleischmann ‘33 as the principal speaker. Sealed inside the cornerstone capsule were copies of the 1970-71 school catalog, a selection of current coins and a copy of the Buffalo Evening News Almanac. When the fall term began in 1973, the building was ready to go.

Kenneth B. Forrest ’76 tells what it was like in those early days in O’Brian Hall: “I was part of the first class to attend the school in a new building on a new campus. I pulled up, and in front of me I saw the world’s largest vacant lot. This was 1,200 acres of a construction site with two buildings, a dorm and a law school, and there was a rope so you wouldn’t get blown away walking from one to the other. I looked at this huge, empty, vast, pretty disgusting-looking expanse, and I said to myself, what exactly did you do?” Many of those early students remember sitting on the floor, chairs being in short supply; and the law library lacked much of its furniture because of a fire at the factory.

Through the years since then, occasional renovations have addressed such issues as a severely leaking roof in the early 1980s. But the most dramatic improvements have come recently, with the opening of the elegant Francis M. Letro Courtroom in 2001, and in 2011 with major renovations to O’Brian Hall’s first floor, including a new student lounge, main entryway area, and accommodations like new benches, handicapped-accessible restrooms, display cases for faculty scholarship and student moot court trophies, and two flat-screen information monitors.

It all comes down to making the best possible environment for legal studies—something that for generations has made Buffalo Law a place to call home.