



BUFFALO IN 50 MAPS

By Vicky Johnson-Dahl

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Review by: Kimberly L. Campbell

I WILL PUT THIS DISCLOSURE AT THE TOP—I AM married to a Buffalo Bills fan and I read this book to get some Buffalo facts to impress my husband and in-laws. If you are in a similar situation, and need to impress a Bills fan in your life, or if you are otherwise genuinely curious about this city—this book is a good place to start.

As a part of Belt Publishing’s urban cartography *50 Map* series (which includes *Cleveland in 50 Maps* and *Detroit in 50 Maps*) this book aims to give you a feeling for what Buffalo is really like through a range of maps that vary in topic and technique. While not *technically* a book of fifty maps (it has, in fact, more than that)—this book contains a large collection of Buffalo-themed maps that show that this city is more than hot wings, cold winters, and a potentially haunted but stellar football team.

The book is organized into four sections named after various nicknames for the city. The first section, “Queen City of the Lakes,” gives context for the city through boundary, elevation, and street pattern maps, to name a few, plus one (28–29) comparing Buffalo’s shape and extent to those of other US cities. The second section, “City of Good Neighbors,” introduces the character of Buffalo’s citizens through maps of the neighborhoods and demographics. The third section, “City of Light,” aims to show how Buffalonians move about their city. Finally, the “City of No Illusions” section shows the reality of current day Buffalo through mapping specific places of interest.

In section one, we learn about how Buffalo began and how it grew. The early years followed a familiar historical pattern—from forced sales of native land, to tensions between and influences from different communities of settlers. Buffalo’s population exploded after it was chosen over the village of Black Rock as the location for the western terminus of the Erie Canal—completed in 1825—ballooning from a population of 2,000 to 10,000 in the eleven years between 1822 and 1833. By 1943, however, the city had reached its modern extent, and stopped expanding geographically.

This initial section contains minimalistic maps that ultimately achieve their goal in providing context for the city. For example, the map of the “Buffalo Borders” (22–23) uses only white space and the names of the communities bordering Buffalo to outline the city. My favorite map from this section is “Avenues, Streets, and Roads” (26–27), which gives some insight on, as the author calls it, the “weird non-pattern” of urban planning influenced by whatever was thought fashionable by planners at the time. I also felt a connection with the elevation map (24–25). Speaking as someone from northern Illinois, I am familiar with having lived in a place with a great deal of snow but very little topography upon which to enjoy it. We also get the first reminder of Buffalo’s rust belt city status in the “Vacant Land” map on page 32. Copious amounts of vacant land can be seen inside the city, particularly in the eastern portion—not unlike many other North American post-industrial cityscapes.



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In section two, starting with a map of the city neighborhoods (44–45), we get a sense of the people that live in Buffalo. Most of the city’s thirty-five neighborhoods are named after inconspicuous things or provide nods to the city’s history—like the neighborhoods of Black Rock (the almost Buffalo, as the author puts it) or Seneca-Cazenovia (named for the eighteenth-century indigenous orator). Then, your eyes rest on the neighborhood of Fruit Belt. This neighborhood is named for its abundant cherry, peach, and other fruit trees, many originally planted by German immigrants. Today, these trees are protected by a Fruit Belt Community Land Trust tasked with defending the neighborhood from often aggressive and unapologetic redevelopment (46–47).

Section three shows how Buffalonians travel across their city. In a story that, again, echoes that of other rust belt cities, former industrial hubs are impacted by suburban sprawl and overwhelmed with high numbers of personal cars—resulting in an underdeveloped transit system and overdeveloped highways. The commuting pattern map on pages 72–73 show that many Buffalonians today travel outside of Buffalo for work—and you can’t help thinking back to the “Vacant Land” map on page 36 where we saw such large swaths of vacant land where the city has demolished abandoned and uninhabitable homes.

The final section of the book shows Buffalo’s current day reality. We see the changes in the grain elevator infrastructure—a clear symbol for the industry that once dominated the region (94). We also see the demographic changes as the immigrant populations shift and evolve over time, as reflected in the evolving pattern of former Catholic church locations (92–93).

Amongst all these obvious signs of change I especially love the inclusion of the parade map (96–97), because it is a reminder that there are still plenty of things for the people of Buffalo to celebrate—including St. Patrick’s Day, Juneteenth, Puerto Rican and Hispanic Day, and even Dyngus Day (the last of which I had to Google).

Some maps in the book don’t add much to the conversation; “Traffic Violations” doesn’t seem to show anything particularly unique to Buffalo; and while the “Cheerio

Smell” map (82–83) is a fun bit of trivia, it, too, doesn’t add much to the reader’s understanding of the city.

I wish some maps had a bit more context; mostly because I was curious. For example, I wish we could have seen where the village of Black Rock (a settlement almost as old as Buffalo itself) was in the initial maps instead of having to wait until the general “Neighborhoods of Buffalo” map on page 44. Similarly, I think that it would have strengthened the “Race and Ethnicity” maps (32) to have included a label for Main Street, even though the author explicitly claims that despite the street’s importance to neighborhood ethnicity, it doesn’t need a label because its location is shown “clear as day” in the dot pattern. Perhaps it is clear as day—to the author, but it was not for me.

Some maps lost their impact due to symbology choices. For example, the “Fruit Belt” map (46–47) left me with more questions than it answered. I found that my eye immediately wandered away from the Fruit Belt, landing instead on the neighborhood directly to the north—Masten Park—which appeared to have more fruit trees than the Fruit Belt, which was apparent, regardless of the desaturated symbolization colors. I would have liked either an explanation of that or for the author to just keep the symbology in that specific neighborhood.

I think the strength of this collection of maps lies in its mixture of maps that bring levity and maps that touch on more serious topics. For example, “Driving into Buildings” (77) made me laugh out loud, while “Redlining” (48–49) provided the serious context for the race and ethnicity maps (32–35)—and even for the “Vacant Land” map (36–37) in section one—showing how this practice still molds and defines the city today; often in negative, far reaching ways.

Overall, this book is very clearly a love letter to the author’s hometown. The maps shown vary from dot density to tessellating hexagons (my personal favorite) and show us that Buffalo is more than chicken wings and winter. It is a place of art, celebration, and places to see actual buffalo (or, more correctly, as the author reminds us, bison). But, most importantly—and here I echo their final sentiment—Go BILLS!

