



THE FIRST WARD AND ITS ELEVATORS

THE STRETCH OF THE BUFFALO RIVER immediately upstream of the Ohio Street Bridge has long been referred to locally as 'Elevator Alley'. Looking east from the bridge, a half dozen mills and grain elevators tower from both banks. Along the north bank of the river runs the great length of the Standard Elevator, not Buffalo's largest elevator but certainly one of its most successful, as it has operated more or less continuously since 1928. On the south bank, a great cluster of buildings defy immediate rationalization, but they comprise five elevators, two mills, and a malthouse, the Childs Street complex photographed in this volume.

This concrete canyon is a favored destination for boat tours, but it was also our introduction to the city's old

First Ward. A small parcel of residential streets sandwiched between the river and the New York State Thruway, the First Ward remains one of Buffalo's most beloved neighborhoods. South of downtown, in the midst of the city's first boom, it was here in the 1820s to 1840s that Buffalo's first Irish immigrants began settling. Driven from Ireland by poverty and the British occupation, they found work along the Erie Canal and in the new waterfront terminals and factories that ringed the neighborhood.

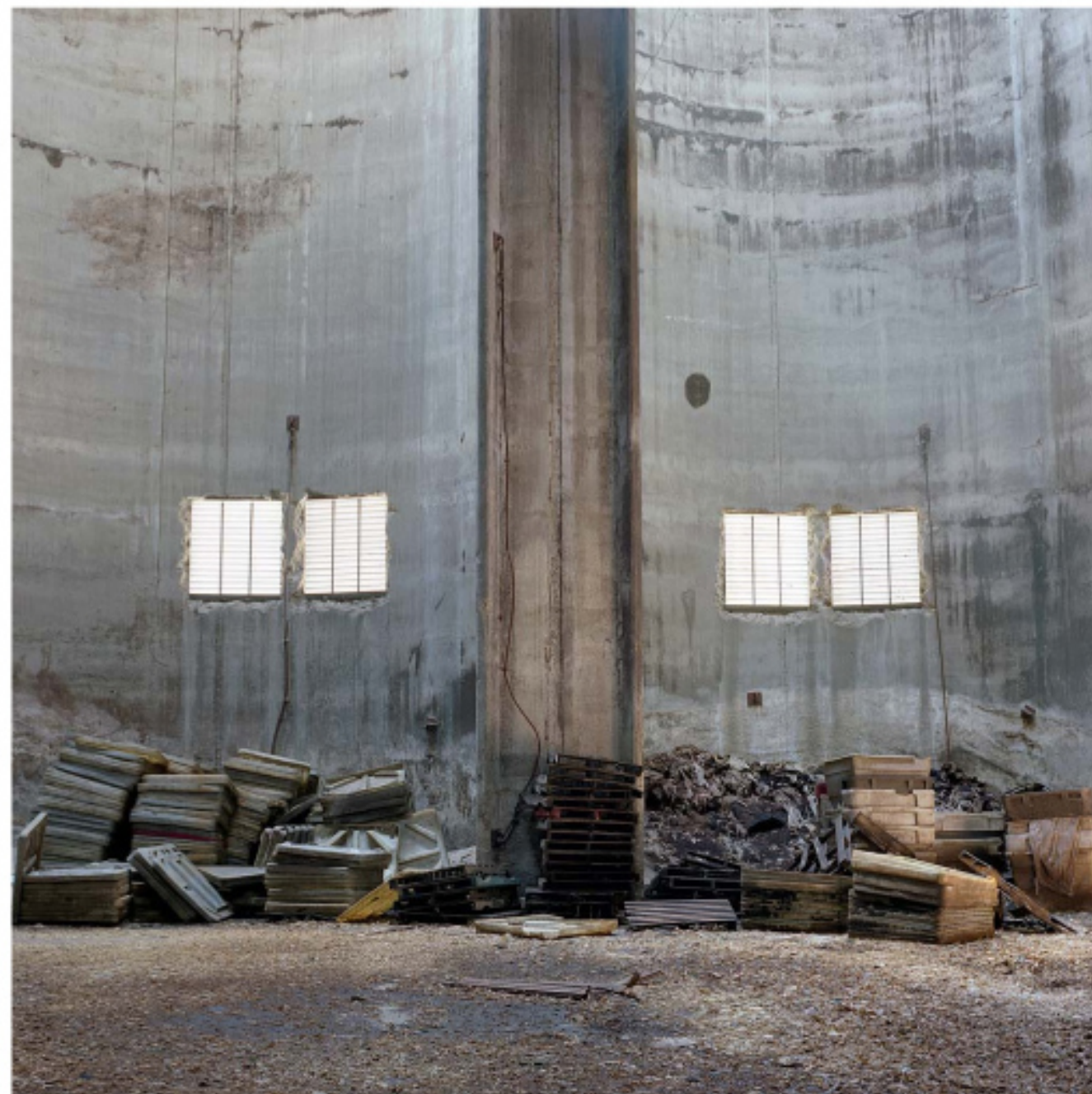
Homes and workplaces have shared the ward's tight confines since the beginning. The Thruway corridor was once the city's bustling main freight terminal, where the lines of a clutch of different railway companies converged along with the waters of

the short-lived and long-buried Hamburg Canal. On the east side of the ward, the city's first blast furnaces and stockyards developed on and above Katherine Street's peninsula, situating themselves along an early railway branch. Smaller freight terminals and early wood and steel elevators were constructed along these rail branches as well, and along the river closer to its mouth at the west end of the ward. Despite all this activity, the land now occupied by the Standard Elevator appears to have largely sat empty until the elevator's construction in 1928.

Across the creek, the bend in the river on which the Childs Street complex of elevators now stands would have initially been inconvenient to both the Erie Canal mouth and to the early railroads. In 1858, Henry Childs founded the Buffalo Steam Forge Company on the site, and presumably had a hand in installing the road that still bears his name. The

company manufactured iron axles for locomotives and railcars, as well as a host of other essential items for railways, steamboats and mills, and employed 100 people in 1887. The company's operation, which spurred connection of the site to the Buffalo Creek railway, laid the groundwork for the transformation of Childs Street into a grain center, beginning in 1897 with the construction of the Electric Elevator on the former Buffalo Steam Forge site.

Today the First Ward retains much of its heritage as an Irish American working class community. Churches, pubs and the First Ward Community Center still serve as centers of community life, while annual social and charity events in the ward make the news across the city. The Ward's economic role in the city may have declined in recent decades, but there remains something compelling about the neighborhood that stands in the shadow of the elevators.



AMERICAN ELEVATOR AND MILL

THE OLDEST OF THE SURVIVING Childs Street elevators, and the first concrete bin elevator in Buffalo, the American elevator was built in 1906 and originally meant to store barley, serving the needs of a malthouse situated where the present mill now stands. Intended to dominate northeastern markets, the elevator and malthouse were built for the powerful American Malting Trust.

This early titan with monopolist ambitions was brought down not by anti-trust laws, but by the institution of liquor prohibition in 1919, which made illegal all but a tiny fraction of the company's market. The trust sought liquidation almost immediately, eventually selling the American elevator at the end of 1921 to a subsidiary of the Russell-Miller Milling company, and two years later the malthouse was torn down to make way for the flour mill that still stands alongside the elevator today. The mill and elevator were bought by Peavey in 1954, and then by ConAgra in 1982. The

Peavey name was one that struck—the American elevator was known as “Peavey” throughout ConAgra’s tenure and some people still refer to it this way today.

Once it had been repurposed for flour milling, the American elevator was also used to unload grain for the Perot Malting complex next door, which lacked the marine leg needed to take grain from the holds of ships. An overhead conveyor could direct grain from the American over to Perot’s malting elevator, and it turns out that in the 1980s and 1990s, grain shipped by rail to the Perot facility was also being unloaded in the American’s railbays. John Hussar, who started at the then-Peavey elevator in the 1980s, recalls, “We used to unload cars for Perot’s, because Perot’s would take six hours to unload one car, whereas Peavey was 35 minutes.” After a few years, Hussar moved to the Lake & Rail elevator, just up the street, staying on until the end of ConAgra’s Buffalo operations.

