

DIVISION OF PLANNING
RESEARCH DEPARTMENT
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*Older People of
St. Boniface Parish*

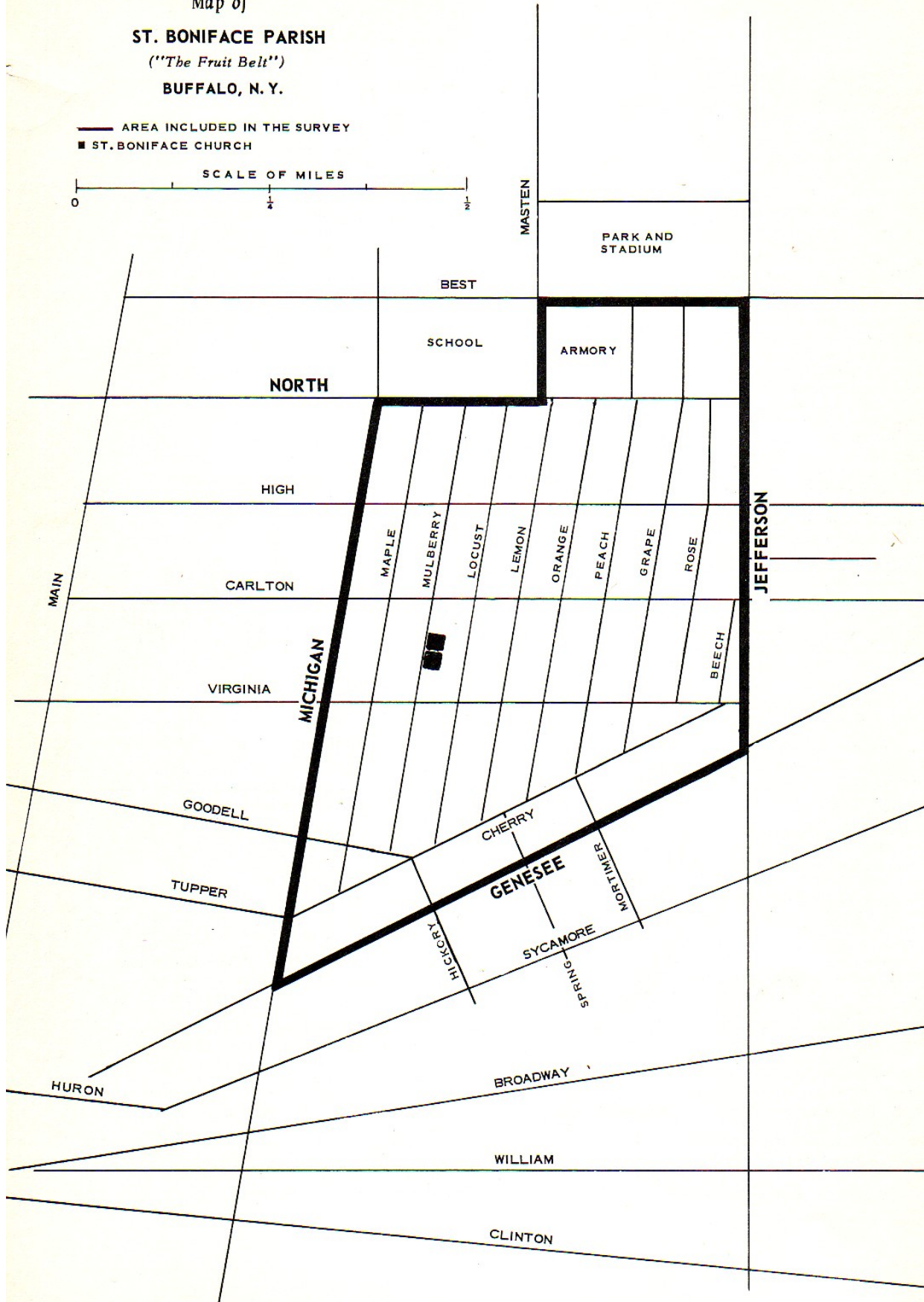
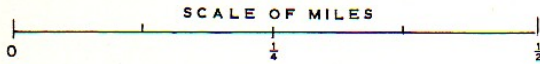
"THE FRUIT BELT," BUFFALO, N.Y.

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CATHOLIC CHARITIES OF BUFFALO, N.Y.
525 WASHINGTON ST.
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Map of
ST. BONIFACE PARISH
(*"The Fruit Belt"*)
BUFFALO, N. Y.

— AREA INCLUDED IN THE SURVEY
■ ST. BONIFACE CHURCH



St. Boniface Parish

"THE FRUIT BELT"

St. Boniface Parish is an old, predominantly German parish, not far from the center of Buffalo. The boundaries of the parish are almost identical with an area commonly referred to as "the Fruit Belt" because of the names of the streets . . . Cherry, Beech, Rose, Grape, Peach, Orange, Lemon, Mulberry, Maple and Locust. These streets are located in a kite-shaped area bounded by Michigan, Genesee, Jefferson and North Streets. At the time the Fruit Belt was laid out in 1835, Jefferson was the eastern boundary and North Street was the northern boundary of the village of Buffalo. Between Jefferson and Michigan on the north side of North Street are the Masten Park School and a huge armory. Masten Park is one of the high points of the city and the land slopes steadily from it to the south and toward the waterfront.

STREETS AND STORES

Genesee Street is a major thoroughfare into the heart of the city. It is lined with low buildings housing commercial establishments at street level, with rooms and apartments in the stories above. Michigan and Jefferson Streets are both main thoroughfares, formerly good residential streets. Now most houses along these two streets are run down, many having been converted to commercial establishments; lawns are washed out; what small trees and shrubs remain are uncared for. North Street has retained its residential character. Within these boundaries the streets are lined with large trees, planted in a grass plot between sidewalk and street. The houses are built very close together, almost all having a small plot for grass, shrubbery and flowers in front and a deep yard to the back. Most of the dwellings are one-and-a-half story houses, the latter being almost invariably two-flat dwellings with porches upstairs and downstairs. Many houses have had additional rooms built on in the rear. It is also common to find a small cottage at the rear of the lot.

Almost without exception, commercial establishments are located along two streets which cross the area east and west. Along them are grocery stores, drug stores, a 5 & 10, service shops (shoe repair, beauty parlors, barber shops, etc.), a movie, a large public school, numerous churches, a legion post, restaurants, taverns, gas stations. As some residents put it, "Some says they're goin' to move, but why should I want to leave here. . . I've got everything I want right here where I can walk to it." Though trees and houses intersperse the rather barren pavements and store fronts of the more commercial cross streets, the character of these short blocks is far different from the long shaded blocks of the north-south residential streets.

THE PEOPLE

Almost all of the older members of St. Boniface Parish have long been associated with it, many having been born in the neighborhood. Older residents remember when the site of the armory was a cemetery, and a spot from which to get a beautiful view of the city. Some recall the first street paving, with cobblestone, and the early board walks; many recall when cobblestones were first covered with asphalt, and speak of old buildings that have given way to newer establishments.

These older people for the most part are independent home owners, with many family ties in the neighborhood. According to the residents, the people who originally built in the district, often built the small houses first, and lived in them while saving to build and then building the the larger houses. The small houses then served as a source of rental income and were also available to the children when they married. The two-flat houses served the same purpose. A number of the older people interviewed in this study, occupied the first floor flat while a married son or daughter lived upstairs, paying an agreed amount of rent and seeing that things were taken care of around the house. Whether or not occupied by members of the family, the rent from a cottage or extra flat was a regular source of income for many home owners in the area.

CHANGES

Until recently it is said, all houses were neatly kept up, lawns were trim and green, geraniums and other "box" plants lined many porch railings above and below, and the residents were very proud of the flower and vegetable gardens. Now, however, every block has some houses and lawns that have been "let go," and some blocks are almost entirely dilapidated.

There is a unique element in the story of this neighborhood which is now undergoing severe changes. This lies in the fact that the population maintained its homogeneous character for some years after all surrounding areas had fully entered or passed through stages of complete transition. The demolition of substandard housing in the industrial areas south of the Fruit Belt had created a movement of the largely Negro population into the surrounding regions. Movement northward in the city stopped at Genesee Street, the southern border of the Fruit Belt. It then jumped to the neighborhoods north of the Masten Street School and the armory on North Street, then gradually closed the gap between Genesee and North along Michigan and to the west, along Jefferson and to the east, completely surrounding but not penetrating the area.

A few years ago, however, changes began to take place along Cherry Street, the street closely paralleling Genesee to the south. Several factors might account for the change beginning at that point: its nearness to Genesee (houses on one side of Cherry about the run-down commercial buildings on the through street); the fact that population pressure had been felt longest along the south while the north was bordered by the spacious ground of the school and armory; and finally public knowledge of the fact that the city planned to build a thoroughway over the site of Cherry Street in the foreseeable future. At any rate, along Cherry Street and the southernmost blocks of the district, the character of the neighborhood and population has changed greatly, while in the northern portion most blocks are in transition and a few are still (at the time of the study) essentially unchanged.

PREPARING FOR THE SURVEY IN THE PARISH

To obtain the fullest possible cooperation from the parish members, several steps were taken:

An announcement of the plans and purpose of the study was read from the pulpit and a notice signed by the Director of Catholic Charities of Buffalo was published in the St. Boniface Parish Bulletin on Sunday, June 17, 1956, a week before the study was to begin. (See Appendix). A brief reminder appeared in the Bulletin the following Sunday.

With the cooperation of the parish priests, an office was set up in the basement of the St. Boniface School. A telephone was installed and a typewriter, dictaphone, file cabinet and writing tables were provided. During the study, each interviewer carried a statement of identification bearing the signature of the pastor and the official seal of the parish.

In these preparations, one factor was overlooked until interviewers came face-to-face with its consequences; since the announcement was signed by the Director of the Catholic Charities of Buffalo, and was referred to as being sponsored by that organization, a number of parishioners assumed that it would be concerned only with those who had need of charity in the most limited sense of the word. Even though the announcements stressed that the purpose of the study was to ascertain the thoughts and opinions of elder citizens and stated as carefully as possible that help was being requested of *them*, still the idea of a "Charities" survey dominated the carefully planned phrases so that every interviewer heard at least once, "Oh, yes, I knew about the study, but I didn't think you'd come here. We don't need anything." Some under that impression did not wish to be interviewed; at least one refused to discuss the matter at all; and it is possible that other refusals (including some of the unopened doors) might have stemmed from such a belief. It must be said that the great majority did not bring this up at all, and most who did were open to explanation from the interviewer and quickly receptive to the new idea. Still it was the consensus of all that the way would have been smoother if the introductory letter had been signed by the Bishop of the Diocese, without reference to the Catholic Charities at any point.