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**The Life and Death of the
Great Northern Grain Elevator, 1897–2023**

A Fierce Wind

Archer Daniels Midland Milling Co. got lucky the night of December 11, 2021: a fierce winter wind took out a third of the north brick wall of the Great Northern Grain Elevator on Ganson Street in Buffalo. ADM had wanted to demolish the Great Northern soon after it purchased the elevator from Pillsbury in 1993, but each of its demolition requests to the city had been blocked by the Preservation Board, the Common Council, and preservationist groups. The elevator had been inactive since 1981.

That hole in the wall changed everything. Four days later, on December 15, ADM submitted a request to do an emergency demolition. Two days after that, with no public hearings and minimal inspection of the elevator, and less apparent knowledge of its structure, James Comerford Jr., Buffalo Commissioner of Permit and Inspection Services, issued a condemnation order. He gave bullet-point reasons, all of which turned out to be peripheral or spurious.

There were court actions: ADM wanted to move ahead with the demolition (rumored to be so it could use the space for a truck parking lot); preservationists wanted the structure repaired and maintained because of its unique place in Buffalo's economic history and global architectural history.

There had been a similar collapse in the south wall in 1907. It had been repaired in a few months. The brick curtain wall presented no other problems until the collapse of part of the north wall December 11, 2021, more than a century later. There was no reason why it should: it was well made and, other than the lakefront winds and lack of maintenance for decades, it had borne no burdens: it supported nothing. Its only function was to shield the steel grain elevator and workers on the floor from rain, wind, and snow, and to minimize the effects of winter cold and summer heat.

In two rulings, the first on January 5, 2022, and the second on July 5, 2022, New York State Supreme Court¹ Judge Emilio Colaiacovo seemed to take all statements from Comerford and ADM's consultants at face value and seemed to discount all comments from expert witnesses speaking for the Campaign for Greater Buffalo History, Architecture & Culture (hereafter, the Campaign for Greater

1. In New York State, the "Supreme Court" is the lowest level of the state judiciary. Above it is the Appellate Division, and above that the Court of Appeals, which is the highest state court.

Buffalo), a local nonprofit preservation organization, because they were “biased.” Their bias? They were experts on and were interested in preservation of historically important buildings. He held up dismissing the second restraining order case for ten weeks—from July 5 until September 15, 2022. Demolition began the following day.

During the time between Judge Colaiacovo’s denial of the petition from the Campaign for Greater Buffalo and his dismissal of the case, ADM was able to get the key demolition equipment it needed in place—particularly the Caterpillar 165’ Ultra High Demolition Excavator, only three of which were then available in the United States. Because the case was still in limbo, the Campaign for Greater Buffalo was blocked from submitting an appeal. By the time the judge did dismiss the case and the organization’s pro bono lawyers were able to submit an appeal, the 165’ Cat UHD had made its way from Florida to Buffalo and demolition was well underway.

Not that it mattered: the organization’s appeal was quickly denied by a Fourth District judge based in Buffalo. Neither the preservationists nor the Great Northern ever had a chance.