Landmark Structures

Rich Stadium / Ralph C. Wilson Stadium

By Kevin O'Beirne with a lot of help from "Staff Writer AI"

The former Rich Stadium, which has undergone multiple name changes since its opening, has been the home of the NFL Buffalo Bills for more than half a century. The enormous facility, which is one of the largest in the NFL but serves its second smallest market, has seen the Bills' highs and lows over many decades, from AFC championship games to the Bills' two-14 seasons in the mid-1980s. The stadium has hosted many other events over the decades, from large concerts to marching band competitions, to the first-ever NHL New Years' Day Winter Classic outdoor hockey game in 2008. Notable music acts that this writer has seen at the stadium include Van Halen, Metallica, The Who, Elton John, Billy Joel, U2, and others. However, the facility will forever be linked in the popular memory of Western New Yorkers with the Bills. During its history, athletic heroes thrilled and entertained tens of thousands of roaring fans, from the stadium's artificial turf gridiron, including OJ Simpson (when he was still just an athlete), Jim Kelly, Thurman Thomas, Andre Reed, Bruce Smith, Doug Flutie, Josh Allen, Fred Jackson, James Cooke, and many others.

The Buffalo Bills' stadium in 2017 (photo from sportsposterwarehouse.com)

The stadium has served as the Buffalo Bills' home since 1973. In March 2022, plans were publicly announced for its replacement. The new stadium, under construction during 2023-2026, will become the Bills' new home at the start of the NFL's 2026-2027 season. The current stadium is scheduled for demolition commencing in September 2026. Despite its impending demise, the facility is the home of many emotional memories for Western New Yorkers and will always be a Buffalo-area landmark structure, whether in physical being or in spirit.

For much of its history, the facility was named for corporate sponsors: Rich Stadium during 1973–1997 (for Buffalo-area frozen foods giant Rich Products); Ralph Wilson Stadium during 1998–2015, during which the stadium was often (disgustingly) known locally as "The Ralph" (for Ralph C. Wilson Jr, who was the sole owner of the Buffalo Bills during 1960-2014); New Era Field 2016–2019, named for Buffalo-area New Era Cap Company, (which is the nation's leading manufacturer of officially licensed major league sports attire and caps); Bills Stadium in 2020; and Highmark Stadium from 2021–present, named for the Highmark Blue Cross/Blue Shield insurance company, which maintains major offices in Buffalo). When the new, replacement stadium opens in September 2026, it will also be named Highmark Stadium.

Conceptualization

The genesis of Rich Stadium was in the late 1960s, when the Buffalo Bills, an original American Football League (AFL) franchise, faced a critical juncture relative to their home facility. Since its founding in 1960, the team played at War Memorial Stadium, a multi-use facility that opened in 1938 on the east side of the City of Buffalo. Until 1965,

War Memorial Stadium had a capacity of 36,500, which was expanded, via the addition of an upper deck, in 1965, to 46,200. Known affectionately as “The Rockpile,” War Memorial Stadium was aging and increasingly inadequate for the demands of a modern National Football League (NFL) franchise. After the AFL-NFL merger in 1970, the NFL mandated that all teams play in stadiums with a minimum seating capacity of 50,000.

Faced with the possibility of relocation, team owner Ralph Wilson began exploring options in other cities, including Seattle, Memphis, and Tampa, none of which had an NFL franchise at the time. The potential loss of the Bills galvanized political leaders and fans, prompting urgent efforts to keep the team in New York. The urgency led to the conceptualization of a new, larger stadium that would comply with the NFL’s new standards and secure the franchise’s future in Buffalo.

The Buffalo Bills playing at
War Memorial Stadium, circa 1970

The process of selecting a site for the new stadium was fraught with controversy and legal battles. Initially, a developer proposed building a domed stadium in the Town of Lancaster, a second ring suburb, east of Buffalo. However, this plan was ultimately scrapped due to community opposition, particularly concerns about its proximity to Lancaster High School, and political resistance.

The site eventually selected was in the Town of Orchard Park, a second-ring suburb, southeast of Buffalo. The site was a 197-acre parcel bounded by US Route 20 to the north, Neuman Creek to the east, US Route 20A to the south, and Abbot Road (Erie County Highway No 4) to the west. Accessibility to the stadium was improved approximately 2.5 months after its opening with the completion of the first segment of the US Route 219 expressway, between Interstate I-90 and a new interchange at US Route 20A, approximately 1.5 miles from the stadium. The property is about six miles from Exit 56 on Interstate I-90. The site was selected for its available land and accessibility, though it was not without detractors. The decision to locate the facility in Orchard Park sparked years of litigation, especially from the Lancaster developer who had invested in the original domed stadium proposal. The dispute was eventually resolved through a financial settlement.

Despite the legal hurdles, in September 1971, the Erie County Legislature approved the issuance of bonds to fund the stadium’s construction. Thereafter, the project moved quickly, with groundbreaking on April 4, 1972. The stadium opened just over 16 months later on August 17, 1973.

The facility was designed by HNTB, a Kansas City -based architectural firm known for its work on large-scale sports venues, with structural engineering by David M. Berg & Associates Inc. The design was utilitarian and focused on functionality over flair. The stadium was designed as an open-air facility, with a seating capacity of over 80,000, making it one of the largest stadiums in the NFL at the time. Site improvements included surface parking for approximately 11,000 vehicles. Piped utilities serving the stadium needed to accommodate up to 360,000 gallons of water use during a single, three-hour event.

One of the most distinctive features of the stadium’s design was its bowl-shaped structure, with the playing field set 50 feet below the level of most of the adjacent ground surface. This design was intended to reduce the stadium’s visual impact on the surrounding suburban community. However, the design concept also created unique wind patterns that made kicking notoriously difficult during NFL games, which was an enduring quirk of the venue, because the stadium was oriented on an east-west axis, and prevailing winds are generally from the west-southwest.

The stadium’s design included large, reinforced concrete, upper decks on either side of the “bowl”. The upper decks did not extend into the end zones, helping to further channel air currents as described above. The upper decks, and associated stadium lighting, were generally the only parts of the venue visible from adjacent roadways.

The playing surface was AstroTurf, a synthetic material that was standard for the era. Seating in the bowl featured individual, fold-up seats, whereas seating in the upper decks was on flat, aluminum benches equipped with vertical seatbacks. The stadium's original design featured what turned out to be a generally inadequate number of restrooms, which was addressed during future modification projects.

Construction 1972-1973

Bidding for the stadium's construction contract took place shortly after the Erie County Legislature approved the issuance of bonds in September 1971. The bidding process followed standard public works procedures of the time, which required competitive bidding for large-scale, county-funded construction projects. The general contractor selected for the stadium was Frank Schoenle Construction, a local firm. The original construction cost was $22 million, equivalent to over $150 million in 2025 dollars, a bargain, compared with modern costs for new major leagues sports venues.

Groundbreaking for the new stadium was on April 4, 1972, with Ralph Wilson and Erie County Legislature Chairman Richard J. Keane turning the ceremonial first shovel of dirt. Construction progressed rapidly thereafter. Despite the scale of the project, the stadium was completed in 14 or 15 months.

In spring 1972, excavation and foundation work began. One of the most significant aspects of the site work was removing approximately 13,700 cubic yards of shale for the stadium's "bowl", excavated into a hillside, sloping toward Neuman Creek.

In summer 1972, structural steel and concrete work commenced. In winter, 1972–1973, seating, lighting, and AstroTurf were installed. During summer, 1973, final inspections and finishing touches were performed.

The stadium officially opened on August 17, 1973, with a preseason game between the Buffalo Bills and the Washington Redskins, which the Bills lost. The excitement surrounding the stadium's debut was palpable, but the day was not without its challenges. One of the most talked-about aspects of the opening was the massive traffic jam that plagued fans trying to reach the stadium, especially because the first segment of the new US Route 219 expressway was not yet open. With over 80,000 attendees, many of whom were unfamiliar with the new location, the roads leading to Orchard Park became gridlocked. The situation was made worse by the convergence of game-day traffic, the nearby Erie County Fair, and typical Friday evening summer congestion.

Fans recounted abandoning their cars miles from the stadium and walking the rest of the way. One sportswriter, Frank Cardon, reportedly walked three miles to reach the press box, arriving during halftime. Others missed large portions of the game or left early to avoid the same chaos on the way out. The parking lots weren't fully cleared until 1 a.m., hours after the final whistle. The first regular-season game followed on September 30, 1973, with the Bills defeating the New York Jets 9–7.

Rich Stadium under construction in early 1973 (photo from risecollaborative.com)

Despite the logistical issues, the fan response to the stadium itself was overwhelmingly positive. Coming from the aging War Memorial Stadium,

fans were impressed by the modern amenities, larger seating capacity, and the sheer scale of the new venue. One attendee described the experience as “big time,” reflecting the sense of pride and legitimacy the new stadium brought to the franchise. Critics acknowledged the operational hiccups but praised the stadium’s design and atmosphere, noting it as a significant upgrade and a bold step forward for the Bills and the region.

The original press box was a modest, enclosed structure located on the west side upper deck. It housed local radio and TV crews, print journalists, and team staff. Facilities were basic: analog equipment, limited camera positions, and no climate control.

Modifications and Upgrades after 1973

Since its opening in 1973, the stadium has undergone numerous renovations and upgrades to meet evolving NFL standards, enhance the fans’ experience, and extend the facility’s service life. These changes reflect both the franchise’s and NFL’s growth and the community’s commitment to maintaining a competitive and modern venue.

The Bills’ Wall of Fame, inside the stadium, was added in 1980. The first major renovation was in 1984, when the stadium’s capacity was increased to 80,290, by adding 16 executive suites atop the administration building. These suites marked the beginning of a trend toward premium seating, which continued in future upgrades.

Beginning of Buffalo Bills game in 2022 (photo from wblk.com)

The Buffalo Bills' corporate offices were constructed in 1990, adjacent to the stadium, to centralize team operations. The new building included executive management, marketing, ticketing, and football administration. The facility also includes meeting rooms, training areas, and media spaces, and was part of a broader effort to modernize the team's infrastructure.

In 1992, 24 more executive suites were added in the stadium’s west end zone. The Buffalo Bills Fieldhouse, adjacent to the stadium, was also constructed in 1992. This indoor practice facility was built to provide the team with a year-round training environment, especially important given Western New York’s harsh winters. The Fieldhouse included a full-size indoor turf field, weight training areas, meeting rooms, and other amenities necessary for player development and team operations.

In 1994, a significant capital project introduced the Red Zone and Goal Line Clubs, two enclosed, glass-walled seating areas with 500 seats each, offering fans a more comfortable and exclusive viewing experience, which, admittedly, made viewing an NFL game more like watching it in a theater on a movie screen.

Also in 1994, a Sony JumboTron measuring 31.5 feet high by 41.5 feet wide was installed and was the largest video board in the United States at the time. The JumboTron dramatically improved the in-stadium entertainment experience and set a new standard for NFL stadiums.

As part of a new lease agreement with Erie County in 1998, the Bills implemented $57 million of improvements, including: wider seats, more luxury and club seating, and improved concourses and restrooms. Restroom improvements included two

"tower"-like structures on each side of the stadium, providing access to restrooms for upper-deck attendees for the first time. The 1998 changes reduced the stadium's capacity to just under 74,000, but significantly enhanced comfort and accessibility.

In 2003, the field's original AstroTurf was replaced with AstroPlay, a more advanced synthetic surface. This was part of a broader trend across the NFL to improve player safety and performance through better turf technology. By 2007, the Bills had invested an additional $5.2 million in digital upgrades, including: a new Mitsubishi HD LED video board (88.8 feet by 32.5 feet, replacing the 1994 JumboTron), and over 1,000 feet of LED ribbon boards around the stadium interior. These enhancements modernized the visual experience and allowed for more dynamic advertising.

Exterior of Highmark Stadium (photo from blog.ticketmaster.com)

In 2011, the eight-year-old AstroPlay field surface was replaced with Titan, a synthetic surface manufactured by A-Turf of Williamsville NY.
A 10-year lease agreement signed in 2012 between the Bills, Erie County, and New York State, included $130 million in improvements to the stadium. Completed in 2014, this renovation featured: new entrance gates, expanded concessions, two new HD video boards 33.6 feet by 59.84 feet), larger LED sponsor boards, a redesigned team store, and improved parking and exterior areas. One of the most symbolic additions was Founder's Plaza, which includes a life-sized statue of Ralph Wilson, the team's founder, unveiled in 2015.

The stadium's original field lighting was replaced with LED fixtures prior to the 2017 NFL season. The upgrade involved removing 360 existing metal halide fixtures and installing 384 new LED lights across the stadium's six lighting poles. The project was completed using a 150-ton crane to reach the poles, which are over 100 feet tall. The new LED system provides approximately 130 percent of the illumination furnished by the original lighting, while consuming only 25 percent of the energy required for the former lighting, and significantly reducing annual maintenance.

In 2023, the stadium received its final major upgrade before its planned retirement: a new installation of A-Turf's Titan, refreshing the playing surface for the last few seasons of use.

To mitigate weather challenges, especially Orchard Park's occasionally heavy snowfalls, the stadium has relied on subsurface drainage systems, heated turf, and snow removal protocols. These systems were continually updated during renovations to maintain playability and fan safety.

The press box has been improved over the years. Its original design accommodated only local television and radio broadcasters. Over the years, it was modified to provide dedicated space not only for local broadcasters, but also separate spaces for each of the major broadcast networks and ESPN. Press box technology improvements now support high-definition 4K broadcast feeds, remote production, and cloud-based media workflows. Enhanced facilities for the NFL Network, international broadcasters, and streaming platforms such as Amazon Prime) were added. The stadium also featured dedicated zones for photographers, radio booths, and post-game interview areas.

The facility's seating capacity has fluctuated with the various improvement projects, and is summarized as follows:

1973–1983: 80,020
1984–1994: 80,290
1995–1998: 80,024
1999–2000: 75,339
2001–2007: 73,967

2008–2013: 73,079
2014–2015: 71,870
2016–2025: 71,608

Replacement

Despite renovations over the years, the stadium lacked many of the modern amenities and revenue-generating features found in newer NFL facilities. Concerns about structural aging, limited premium seating, and outdated technology made a compelling case for a new stadium. The decision to replace the Buffalo Bills' long-standing home at Highmark Stadium was driven by a combination of aging infrastructure, evolving fan expectations, and the need to secure the team's long-term future in Western New York.

Negotiations for a replacement began in earnest in the early 2020s. The Bills, in partnership with Erie County and New York State, explored several options, including a downtown Buffalo location and a major renovation of the existing stadium. Ultimately, the decision was made to construct a new stadium directly across Abbott Road from the current stadium. This location allowed the team to remain in its traditional home while minimizing disruption to fans and infrastructure.

The new stadium broke ground on June 5, 2023, with a ceremonial event attended by Governor Kathy Hochul, Bills owner Terry Pegula, and NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell. The project is the largest construction investment in Western New York history, with a total cost of $2.1 billion. The cost may be compared against other, recent and planned, NFL stadiums: Washington Commanders - $3.8 billion in 2030; Cleveland Browns - $2.4 billion in 2029; Tennessee Titans - $2.1 billion in 2027; Los Angeles Rams and Chargers - $5 billion in 2020; Las Vegas Raiders - $1.9 billion in 2020; Atlanta Falcons - $1.6 billion in 2017. Of the budget for the Bills' new stadium, $850 million comes from public funds, $600 million from New York State, and $250 million from Erie County, while the Bills and the NFL are covering the remainder through private investment and personal seat license (PSL) sales.

Designed by the architectural firm Populous, the new stadium reflects both Buffalo's industrial heritage and its winter climate. It will seat approximately 62,000 fans, making it one of the smaller stadiums in the NFL by capacity, but with a strong emphasis on premium seating, sightlines, and fan experience. The design includes a steep seating bowl to bring fans closer to the field and enhance crowd noise, creating a more intense home-field advantage.

One of the new stadium's most innovative features is its 360-degree canopy roof, covering over 60 percent of the seating. The canopy will shield fans from precipitation and wind, while the field remains open to the outdoor atmosphere, which seems to be a point of pride for Western New Yorkers. The canopy includes the world's largest snow-melt sys-

The old and new Highmark Stadiums, together with the Bills' Fieldhouse, in Spring 2025 (photo from wnypapers.com)

tem, with heated hydronic piping and weather sensors to automatically manage snow accumulation.

The playing surface will be natural grass, maintained with a SubAir system that controls soil moisture, aeration, and temperature. This system, along with UV grow lights, will ensure a playable surface even during winter months. The stadium will also feature dual LED video boards, enhanced acoustics, radiant heating in concourses, and 5G Internet connectivity.

Structural steel installation was completed in April 2025. As of October 2025, over 70 percent of the stadium is complete, with seating installation in progress, and the canopy structure being assembled. The new, natural grass playing field, including an array of fancy irrigation and snow-melting systems, has been installed. The stadium is scheduled to open in summer 2026, in time for the NFL season.

Because, once the new stadium is operational, there will be little use for the current, structurally deteriorating facility, the current Highmark Stadium will be demolished between September 2026 and spring 2027. While the decision to remove the existing stadium so promptly after its successor opens may seem heartless to some fans with fond memories of OJ Simpson and Jim Kelley, it makes considerable sense. If retained, huge sums would be needed to improve and structurally stabilize the upper decks. Buffalo has a long history of failing to properly address sports venues that have been replaced. After the Bills moved to Rich Stadium in 1973, the Buffalo Bisons, a minor league professional baseball team, continued using “The Rockpile” until the Bisons’ new stadium, Pilot Field, opened in Buffalo in 1987. War Memorial Stadium was demolished in 1989, although it was visually preserved in the 1983 Robert Redford baseball movie, The Natural. When the NHL Buffalo Sabres’ home, Memorial Auditorium, was replaced with a new, larger arena in 1996, the former arena sat vacant until its demolition in 2009. In the football stadium’s demolition and resulting site restoration, considerable engineering ingenuity is necessary to backfill the 50-foot-deep “bowl”, to equal adjacent grades, with the area being repurposed for expanded parking and fan amenities.

The legacy of Rich Stadium/Ralph C. Wilson Stadium will remain deeply embedded in the identity of both the Buffalo Bills and western New York. Millions of Buffalo Bills fans and concert goers will treasure more than 50 years of fond memories from the facility for many decades to come. When demolition of the current stadium is completed in 2027, a 54-year chapter in Buffalo sports history will conclude, while simultaneously opening a new epoch featuring an aggressive, winning, talented Buffalo Bills roster.

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