

WALTER V. DAVIDSON - THE EMBODIMENT OF "FACTORY TO FAMILY" (Continued #15)

Walter V. Davidson was all about efficiency. He likely was drawn to employment at the Larkin Soap Company in 1906 because the philosophy of the company, "Factory to Family; Save All Cost Which Adds No Value," resonated with his own philosophy of all aspects of business.



One of several soap boxes on display in the Larkin Gallery_ this one branded with the company motto.

WVD was born in La Porte, Indiana in 1877, two years after the LSC was formed. When he was 23 years of age, he moved to Chicago and obtained employment as a bookkeeper. He then moved to Buffalo where he went to work at Walter Baker Co. where he proved to be quite innovative by developing the loose leaf ledger form.

Before long he met Christiana Isham and fell in love. Her father, James Isham, was a buyer for LSC and undoubtedly influenced WVD to seek employment there as well, which he did in 1906.

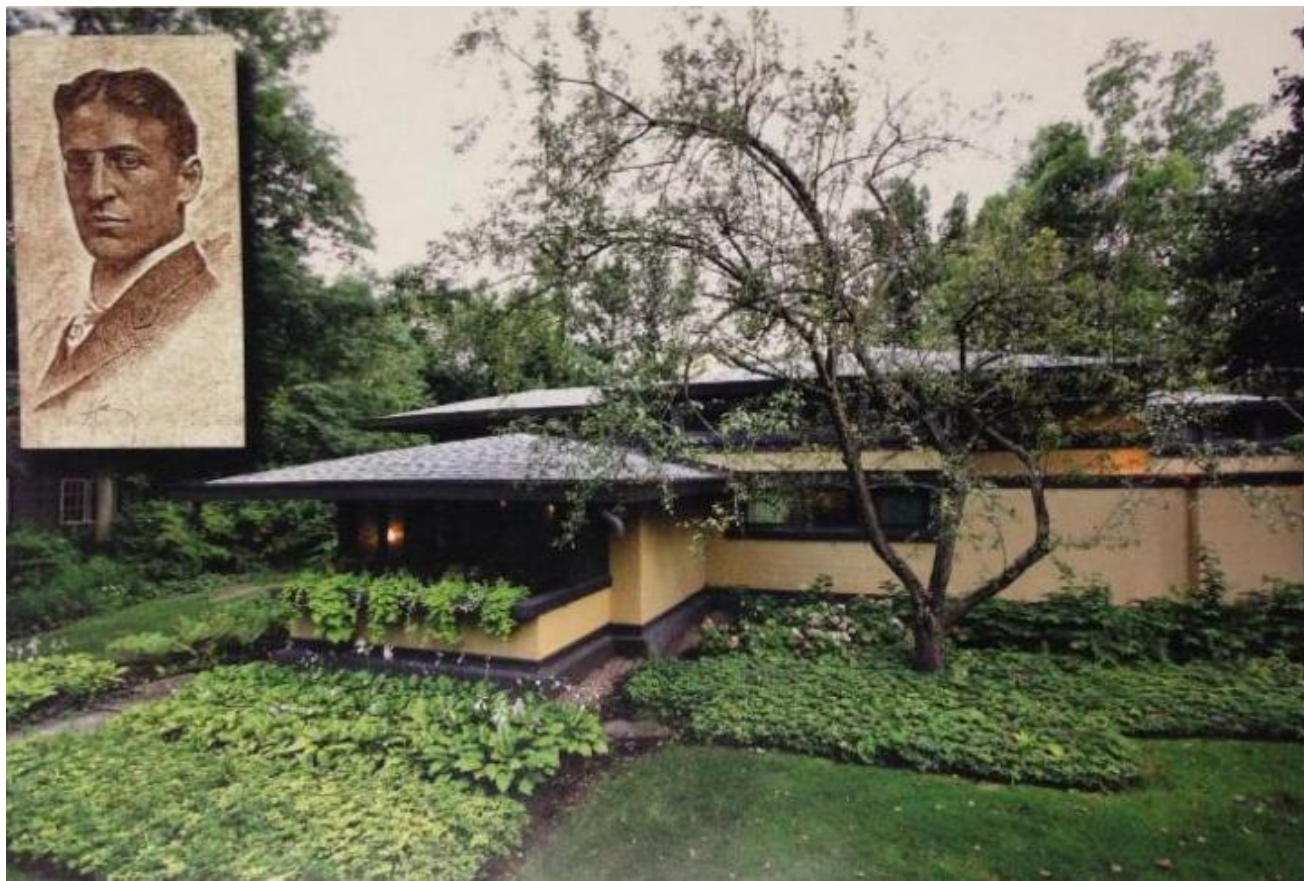
(An interesting side note, W.H. Isham, likely an employee of LCO since several members of the family worked there, was also a composer who composed, for piano and voice, "My Fifty Golden Years" as a tribute to John D, Larkin for founding the company 50 years before. The song was recorded on the Larkin label to be played on the Larkin Symphonola for the celebration. A copy of the sheet music and the actual record are on display in our Larkin Gallery).



WVD has been described as the company comptroller, an engineer and advertising manager. It is likely he served in each of those capacities at one time or another during the years of his employment, though this writer has not been able to locate any records of his job titles and changes of them. What is clear is that he was well liked and respected by his employers, working closely with William Heath and Darwin Martin and continuing on with them in various business ventures in the years to come.

Davidson arrived at LSC at the tail end of the construction of the Administration Building. Given his keen interest in and skill at organizing the movement of people and goods through the company, he likely was delighted with Frank Lloyd Wright's design of the Administration Building and undoubtedly talked a great deal with Wright during Wright's many visits. He likely worked closely with Darwin Martin and William Heath as they coordinated the move of staff and equipment into the new building, which, as we do know, was designed to be awesomely efficient. These surmises are justified by history that we do know.

Within a year of arriving at LSC, WVD hired FLW to design a house for him, following in the footsteps of Martin and Heath.



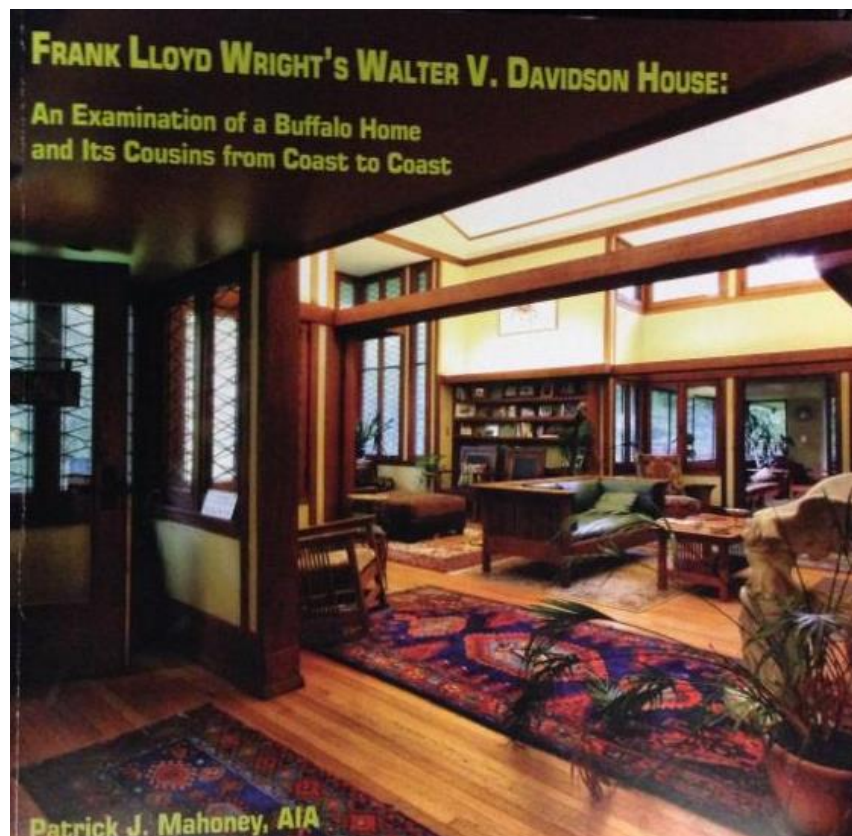
Frank Lloyd Wright's Walter V. Davidson House, Patrick J. Mahoney

The house, located at 57 Tillinghast in North Buffalo, was just a few blocks away from Martin's house. Heath's House was already completed by then; the Gardner's Cottage at the Martin estate was being built simultaneously with the Davidson House. The mortgage obtained by the Davidsons was secured by LSC. It was to be a more modest home, clad in stucco rather than more expensive brick.

The site was not encumbered with neighbors, giving them good views of Parkside and Delaware Park. Of course, that gradually changed. The Davidson's desired that the public rooms of the house face the street, while bedrooms and family recreation areas were toward the more private rear yard. They were about to have their first child, Jean, who was born in 1909.

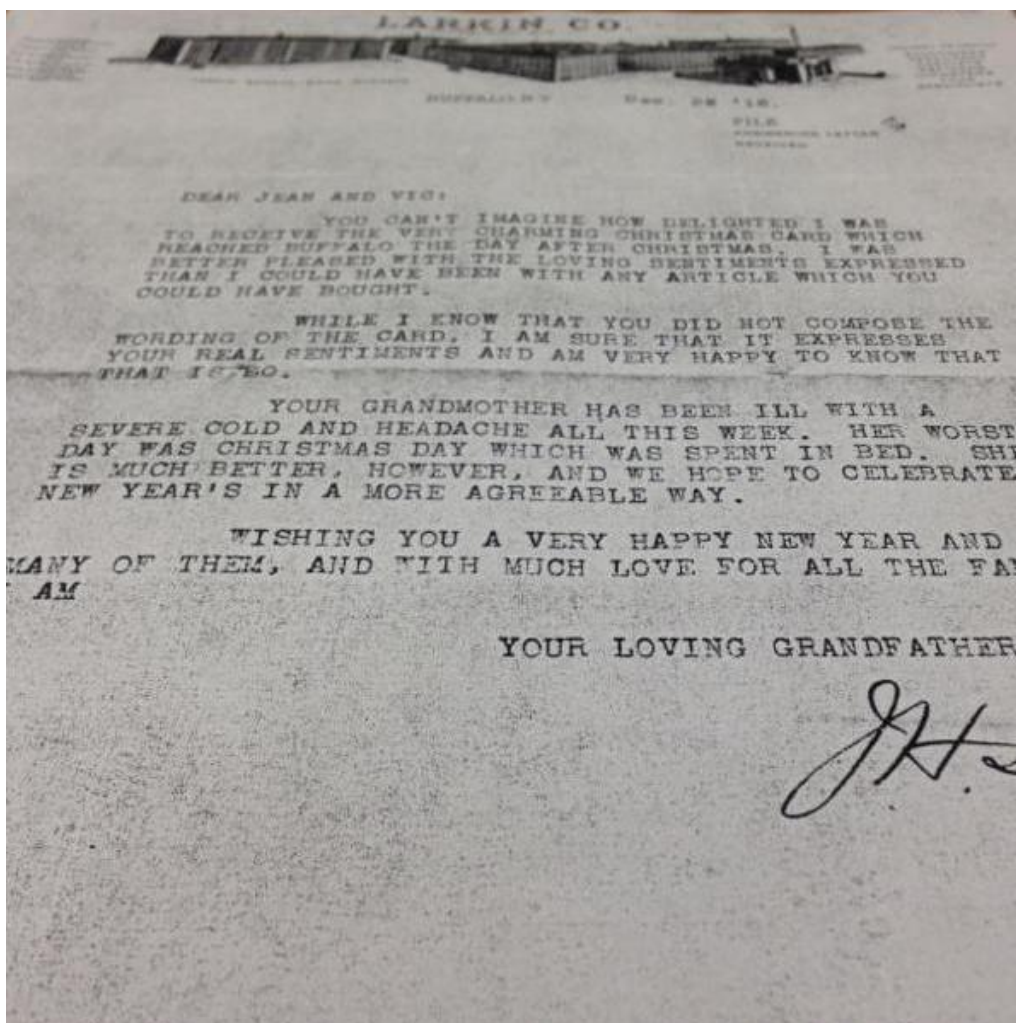


An interesting design feature of the WVD house was that it had five levels separated by four steps between levels. (Compare this with the 16 steps separating the Martin House' first and second floors.) There was a reason for this. WVD had had polio as a child and was handicapped with a pronounced limp. Jack Quinan, renowned expert of FLW, in his book, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Martin House: Architecture as Portraiture", does an amazing analysis of how FLW's design frequently reflected the character of his client. If he had a good relationship with a client, the house would reflect a sensitivity to the client's personality and needs. This was particularly true in the Martin House, DDM having become a very close friend. Quinan notes, at p.199 of his treatise, that "Other clients with whom Wright enjoyed less intense relationships, fared less well...WVD, handicapped with a pronounced limp as a result of polio and possessed of a volatile temperament, was given a two-story design...with five different floor levels for Davidson to manage."



Patrick Mahoney, an outstanding Wright scholar, authored the book, "FLW's Walter V. Davidson House: An Examination of a Buffalo Home and its Cousins From Coast to Coast." He is also the architect from the firm of Lauer-Manguso and who does a great deal of design work on the build outs here at LCOC. Mahoney designed the "ghost pier" in homage to the remaining piece of the Administration Building which are bookends of the wall between Seneca and Swan Streets. Mahoney takes a different view of the design of the Davidson House, finding it to be "a particularly livable arrangement for a client who walked with a distinct limp from polio." P. 38. (Just as a related comment, Mahoney and I visited the Laurent House in Rockford, Illinois last year. That astonishing house had been designed by Wright for a war veteran who was a paraplegic confined to a wheelchair. Every bit of the house design took into account making room to negotiate a wheelchair in every room and creating built in furniture including dining room table, bed, dressers and the like so that they would be accessible to the disabled client.)

Back to WVD - the Davidson House is now owned by Russell Maxwell, whose company, Medical Answering Services, LLC, is a tenant at the Larkin Center. He graciously opens his home for occasional tours or receptions. As recently as last month he hosted a wonderful reception for WVD's granddaughters who had come from California and Millerton, New York to see the house and to visit our Larkin Gallery. Jean Cross donated to the Gallery a copy of a thank you letter for the then children's Christmas card dated December 28, 1918 and signed, Your Loving Grandfather, J.H. Isham. It was on LSC stationery.



During the time that WVD worked at LSC, , the LSC hired FLW to design a pavilion to showcase Larkin products and premiums at the Tercentennial Exposition to be held in Jamestown, Virginia in 1907. The project began in 1906 and it is highly likely that WVD featured in the planning of the space and the displays.

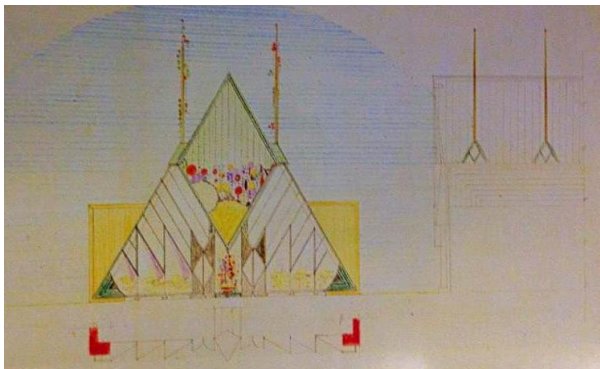
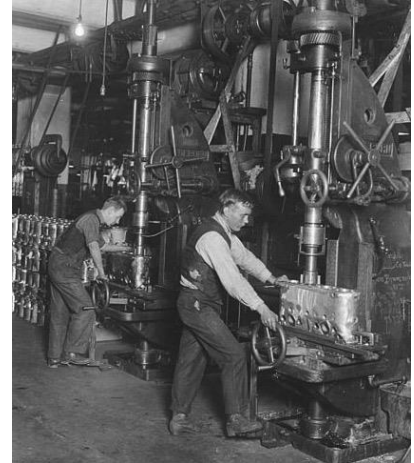
Davidson left LSC in 1913 to found the Davidson Shoe Co. on Ellicott Square with a second store later located on Genesee Street. At that time, he moved out of the FLW house to live with his in-laws. Perhaps anticipating that his income would decrease so that he could no longer afford to pay the mortgage held by LSC. The shoe store business continued into the 1920's, but in 1918 he moved to Queens where he was employed as an accountant. by the Wright-Martin Corp., an aircraft manufacturer.

During World War I he worked in the Hog Island shipyards near Philadelphia. There his organizational skills were used as he developed systemized inventory, purchasing and payroll operations.

When the war ended, Davidson returned to New York City where he established his own office as a consultant in management and systemization.

Over the next few years, during a very difficult time for FLW economically, Davidson, Martin and Heath bolstered FLW's sparse practice with suggestions for projects.

Mahoney notes that these three men had the longest professional relationship with FLW of Wright's career. (Again, this belies Quinan's contention that WVD did not have a good relationship with FLW.) In 1927 WVD commissioned FLW to design a store front for a chain of "Davidson Markets" a project WVD wished to develop. His idea was in response to the call by President F.D.Roosevelt., in dealing with the economic depression, to urge people to resort to agrarian jobs and lifestyles.



This was perhaps the first "Farm to Table" movement which stressed not only the healthiness of fresh food, but the elimination of the middleman. The concept was totally in line the WVD's commitment to efficiency. As time went by, the concept was expanded to include the entire building rather than just a store front to be attached to an existing building.

In 1930 the Walter V. Davidson Corp. was created for the project with WVD (of course) as president. Dialogue continued between WVD and FLW re: the details of the building space. Since Wright apparently seemed to be more concerned about aesthetics than function, WVD wrote to him, "You may not be familiar with the fact that my particular talent in the business world is the physical planning of retail and warehouse operations. Motion study has been my specialty for years." Quoted by Mahoney, p. 108.

The project never got off the ground because, though he tried very hard, WVD was never able to get financing for the project. But a new idea emerged that was actually more ambitious. Called the "Little Farms Project" and nicknamed "Mary", WVD proposed

creating 200 farms of one to five acres each to be built in conjunction with his Davidson Markets. Products would be sold from the wayside market directly to the consumer. WVD wrote to FLW, " You see, Frank, there are no middlemen, no cost to the farmer of finding a market, no cost to him for delivery, no cost of railroad transportation, no waste, and no losses from payment collections...The market volume will be vast, because produce and flowers on the day gathered will be beyond all competition." See FLW: Unpacking the Archive," p. 44 of MoMA's catalog book for the current exhibit.

(See - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhAFNR9_h3k)

FLW created a model for the farms, which is now on display at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, along with the architectural drawings of it and the store front of the Davidson Market.

WVD and FLW's secretary, Karl Jensen, met with architectural critic and cultural theorist, Lewis Mumford, to discuss the project and were met with much enthusiasm - but no money. WVD also approached Lessing J. Rosenwald, chairman of Sears -Roebuck and Company who, like his father before him, was known to be a benefactor to many worthy ventures, to no avail. See Mahoney, pp. 109-110.

Tensions developed between WVD and FLW. The project was never built as designed, though FLW adapted the concept of the little farms in his "Broadacre City" plan a few years later. The Davidson's discussed with FLW the idea of his designing a home for them in Greenwich, CT, but it never came to fruition.



FLW Broadacre City concept. Metropolis

After a short illness, WVD died at the age of 65 in 1941. His obituary was published by the New York Times. Mahoney noted its contents: "He spent six years as the comptroller of the Larkin Company and had been in charge of all business records while at Hog Island Shipyards." His business achievements and associations were summarized and the widespread use of the Davidson system in reducing warehousing expenses was mentioned. Mahoney, p. 116.

~From the Desk of Sharon Osgood