

LARKIN HISTORY (#41) - FOR JOHN D. LARKIN, SR., BUILDING WAS A PASSION

From the moment John D. Larkin, Sr. returned to his hometown, Buffalo, with his young family in 1875, he began building structures, both domestic and commercial. His grandson/biographer Daniel I. Larkin wrote "John D. Larkin: A Business Pioneer" (hereafter "Dan"). According to Dan, JDL loved the process of building. Architectural Historian, Jack Quinan, in his book, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Building: Myth and Fact", tells us about this otherwise quiet, subdued gentleman, that "the one indulgence that John Larkin did allow himself was a passion for construction". (p. 18)

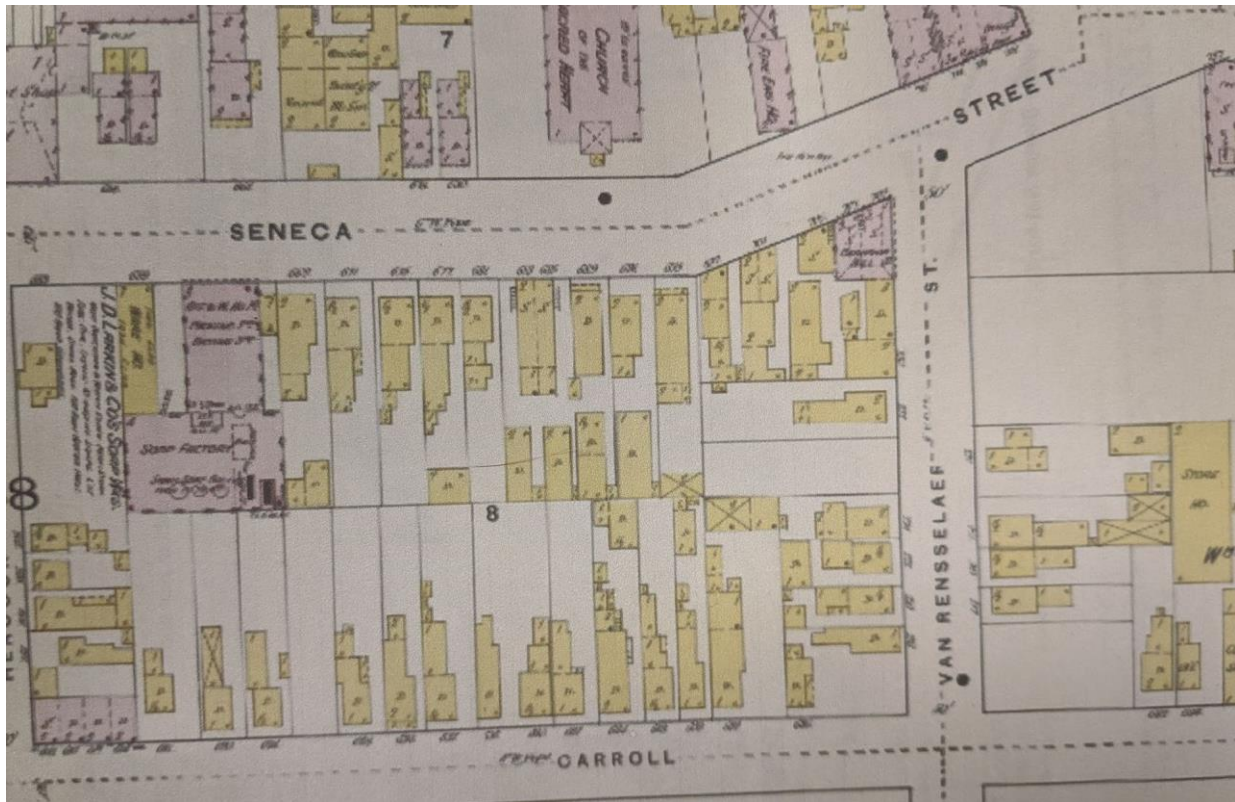
JDL had been traumatized by witnessing the Great Fire of Chicago in 1871, and as he ventured into family and business life, JDL was "determined to provide the safest and healthiest environment for his workers (or family)". He thoroughly enjoyed participating with the architects and builders; he liked having contact with the workmen on site and he always demanded the best in workmanship and materials (Dan, p.75) – but always in his gentle, respectful manner.



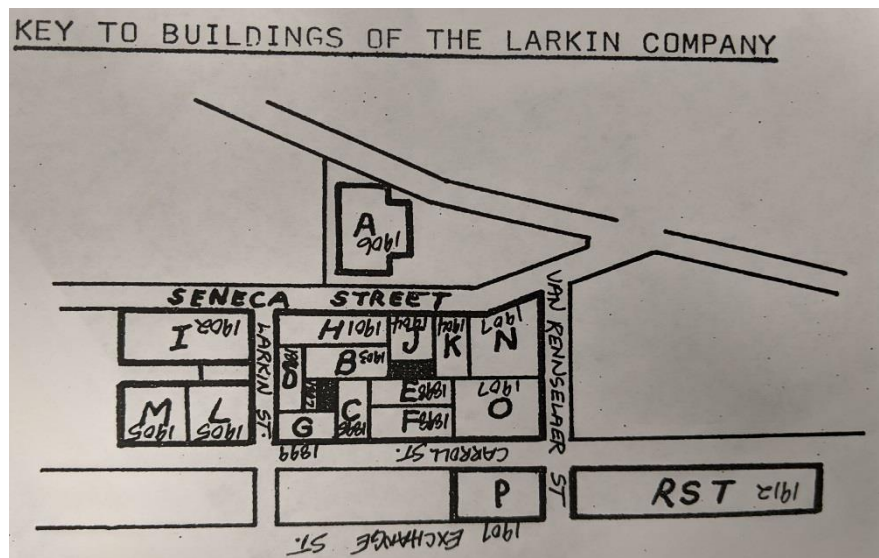
The year 1875 saw JDL and his young wife, Frances ("Frank"), move to Buffalo along with baby Charlie, where they rented a house on Eagle St., near a small factory which he leased at 196 & 198 Chicago St. JDL's soap-making business was an immediate success. Frank was happy to set up their home. And Charlie very much enjoyed his first Christmas. So apparently did John and Frank. Nine months later they had a new baby, a girl they named Frances Elberta.

Two years later, JDL began his takeover of what was to become known as Larkinville. Located east on Seneca Street, close to where his brother-in-law's (Justus Weller's) soap making business had been located and where JDL had learned the business, JDL began buying up lots. He started at Seneca and Heathcock (now named Larkin St.), purchasing the first 3 lots from the corner on Seneca. Existing houses were razed, leaving 3 lots, 30'x150'. JDL built his first factory there, it being a frame building, 50'x84'. It was equipped with a 6 HP steam engine, 2 soap kettles and 2 hand presses. By 1880, the small factory was working 24 hours per day. In 1885, it was replaced in part with a brick and steel building at a cost of \$12,000, according to

Lester Rickard, an executive at Buffalo China (also originally owned by JDL and his fellow executives). Rickard had long served as an in-house historian of sorts and had prepared a "Company History and Timeline" in 2003 for both companies. He noted that by 1885, LSC manufacturing space had grown to 45,000 sq. ft.



A review of real estate transactions at the Erie County Clerk's office reflects dozens of conveyances that look to be residential and a few from commercial sellers. The transferee was pretty uniformly Larkin Co. Rapid growth occurred between 1895 and 1900, with both tear-down of frame Larkin buildings and existing houses and buildings. They were replaced with brick, steel and concrete, i.e. fireproof materials. (Dan, p. 75) Check out the layout of the buildings as of 1912 to get an idea of the maze of patchwork that had been created. Also, visit the Larkin Gallery to take a look at the detailed survey of the buildings as of 1931 which include boxes containing info, re: what each floor in each building was being used for at that time. I will come back to the buildings of the 1900's, but now we will take a look at the other types of building that JDL initiated in these early years.



The Larkins built their first home in 1884. By then their family had grown significantly. In addition to Charlie, John Jr., Edith, Daisy (Frances) and Harry had been born. JDL and "Frank", (nickname of his wife, Frances) had become quite active in the community. They were involved in promoting the Buffalo Public Library system. The local YMCA and their church also kept them busy. They had become members of local social clubs - Frank joining the Twentieth Century Club, and both having joined the Country Club of Buffalo.

Property being developed in a new neighborhood had become available. The lot at 125 Hodge street was pleasantly situated with easy access to downtown and to Delaware Park. The lot was a good size. It was close to Elmwood with its shops and even a grocery store with a public telephone! While the house was being built to their specifications, the family rented a house nearby on Bryant St. They were quite happy when they could move into their new home. The Dodge St. house is still there today. (Dan, pp.62-63)

As the country moved into the 20th century, JDL had a happy opportunity to do some unusual building. The LSC was the only individual company to have its own pavilion in the 1901 Pan-American Exposition held in Buffalo. Its purpose was to display "the treasures his company offered the American housewife." (Dan, p.115.)

The pavilion was described at length in the "Official Handbook of Art and Architecture of the Exposition". It was of Italianate design capped by a dome in the spirit of the Italian Renaissance and was designed by Lansing & Beierl of Buffalo. In the central court were several small machines that demonstrated the final steps of soap making, i.e. milling, pressing and wrapping the soap. Each of the about 8000 visitors per day received a small wrapped bar of soap as well as a pass to ride the Larkin shuttle over to the manufacturing complex, specifically to our building, the largest of the complex at 1.3 million square feet. Visitors were escorted on a tour led by docents.



Back at the pavilion, the central area was surrounded by columns, each made up of Larkin products like tins of talcum powder, bottles of perfume, or containers of sachet. Side areas were examples of rooms such as library, reception, living room, dining room and bedroom, each furnished with corresponding products or premiums including furniture.

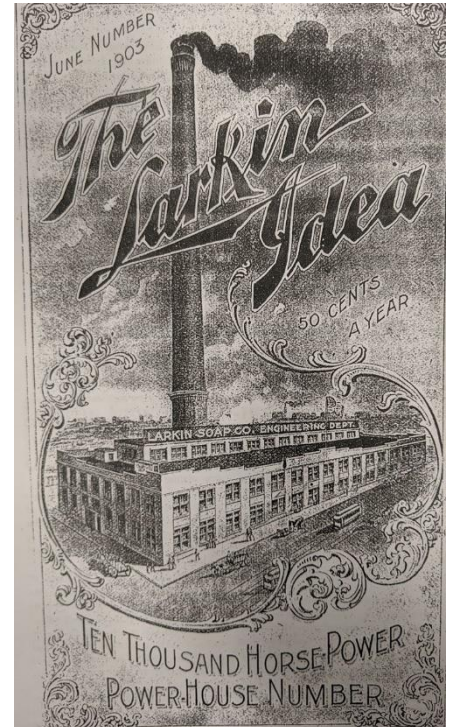
A newspaper critic wrote: "In all my travels I have never seen such a manifestation of interest by a visiting public, as a complement to a business with whom they sustained relations of trade." (Dan, p. 118)

Dan notes that JDL, though a stockholder in the Pan-Am, avoided taking any prominent position with it. He assigned Darwin Martin to serve on a committee. "It

was clear JDL was always in command of the ship, but always in a quiet, unassuming way." (Dan, p. 115).

In the meantime, JDL continued to grow and update the company's complex of buildings. "Our" building, the LCOC, was the primary manufacturing building. And was involved with that update. JDL's primary concern about the safety and welfare of his employees was planned for all of his building after 1895. First and foremost, his buildings had to be fireproof, lighted and ventilated with fresh air that was readily available. Mechanical efficiency and safety were of prime importance in all areas. It appears from the floor plan that new buildings would replace some of the older buildings constituting part of the 12-building composite of what is now the LCOC.

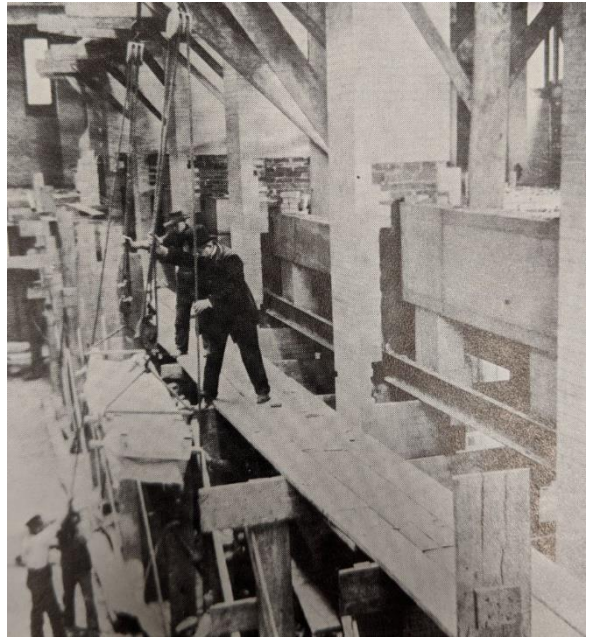
The Power House, Bldg I on the site plan, was built in 1902. Because the manufacturing areas of the company had grown so large and diversified, the need for steam and electricity had become very demanding. A state-of-the-art facility would be needed, according to Dan, to serve 20 – 500 HP boilers fed by automatic stokers (to eliminate hand stoking and keep smoke to a minimum. (LSC was using more than 100 tons of coal per day). A strong draft was needed, so a chimney that rose 250 feet above Larkin St. was required. It would be the largest and tallest chimney in the city. (Note that it is a little shorter than that now because years ago it was struck by lightning per Jim Cornell, one of the owners of the LCOC). According to an article in the Jan. 1903 edition of the "Larkin Idea" magazine, the weight of the chimney exceeded 2000 tons; its interior diameter was 14' ("large as most living rooms"). After construction was completed, JDL wanted to hold a luncheon on its top. Wiser heads prevailed and he was dissuaded from that idea. (Dan, p.116)



The most famous building created by JDL was, of course, The Larkin Administration Building. The clerical staff, especially those who received and processed mail orders for products and premiums worked in Buildings E and F, i.e. in the middle of all the manufacturing noise and dust. JDL wanted a healthier, more pleasant environment for them, but also a space that would be an efficient work area. (Dan, p. 137-9) JDL wanted Adler and Sullivan, well-known Chicago architects (and where Frank Lloyd Wright – hereafter, FLW – got his first job) to design a building and he wanted his favorite local builder, R.J. Reidpath, to build it. Darwin Martin and William Heath (JDL's brother-in-law) preferred FLW as the architect.

Darwin (DDM) and Heath went to Chicago to meet Wright and returned to enthusiastically persuade JDL to meet with FLW. Jack Quinan, noted expert on everything FLW and especially the Larkin Administration Building (LAB), has found correspondence and notes of DDM that reflect a lot of conflict between him and Heath on one side, and John Larkin, Jr. and the Coss brothers on the other side. The opponents seemed to recoil against having the open areas for the executives' offices. Perhaps they felt it was too cozy with employees as well as other officers; perhaps undignified. Ultimately JDL agreed with DDM and Heath and hired FLW (Quinan, FLW: Larkin Building: Myth or Fact," p. 8.)

Dan comments on this conflict and its outcome. "Building was a passion for him and here was a man with new ideas and the courage to put them in effect. For all his quiet conservatism, John was fascinated by new approaches to dealing with problems. Always he wanted the newest and best." (Dan, p. 138) FLW's proposal appealed to JDL because of its provision for light, clean air and quiet despite 1200 clerks and executives working there. FLW's design addressed his concerns for his employees as well as for his business.



It isn't addressed in any literature I have seen, but I suspect the fact that JDL was not an elitist, also made him feel comfortable with FLW's plan. He felt no need to have walls separating him from his employees, or even from his fellow executives.

The new administration building was, however, controversial. Critics found it uncomfortable and awkward. For example, the issue of the 3-legged desk chairs from which employees occasionally tumbled was a frequent complaint. Some called it the "suicide chair."

A young German graduate student showed up one day in my office several years ago having been pointed to me by the Buffalo History Museum and by Jerry Puma. She had come from Germany all by herself to research her graduate degree thesis, the topic of which was FLW's LAB. She had gone to the History Museum, hoping to be pointed to sources of information. She found a gold mine! Not only was there extensive information at the Buffalo History Museum, but she spent a day perusing and copying the Larkin Scrapbook of Interoffice memos from 1899-1903 which was then in my office. It just so happened that FLW's Graycliff was having a gala at the LCOC. She attended as my guest and met many of the "players" in the FLW/JDL history community as well as got a guided tour of the LCOC and visited the remaining pier of the LAB on Swan St. Christine subsequently wrote her thesis and at my suggestion, presented it at a conference held by U.B. in 2016 about LSC being the incubator of the Arts and Crafts movement in WNY.

Christine's paper, responding to critics who complained about the clumsiness of some of FLW's design elements in the LAB, quoted William Heath (JDL's brother-in-law and an attorney and executive of LSC):

"The Office Manager has endeavored to hold this building and its equipment in intact. If we didn't, nothing would stand very long. Desks would be moved, desks would be exchanged, lights would be changed, ventilation would be changed, air would be changed, and I am not quite sure that we would not build the building over again. With all of the criticism of discomfort, etc. that we listen to so patiently, still we have the best provision for employees that I know of in any large office in this country..."

*Schnaithmann, Christine, "Machine, Church, Organism: FLW's LAB"
Oct. 18, 2013*

Dan Larkin, the biographer of his grandfather's life, and who also worked for him in the 1940's, likely in the LAB, speaks of that amazing building with a quiet reverence, describing what JDL could observe from his ever-open office. In one direction, he could see his sons at their desks. "The two men he had come to rely on so heavily... William Heath and Darwin Martin, sat at open desks surrounded by the women and the men who made the operation possible." Dan quotes a letter JDL had written to DDM in 1899: "Our opportunities for doing good to our fellow men increase with the growth of our business, and we must not do anything to reduce or limit the far reaching influences which we have in our power to extend." (Dan, p. 140)

I could go on and on about the LAB but so many books have been written about it. But I must say, the LAB best expresses in an artistic and poetic way, the extraordinary beauty and goodness, as well as creativity of John Larkin, Sr.

As an aside, I note that the LAB was one of FLW's favorite projects. In later years he criticized JDL, Jr. severely for making some changes to the LAB, including cutting windows into its fifth-floor walls. He was also disappointed that the Larkins, unlike LSC executives like Darwin Martin, William Heath and Walter Davidson, did not retain him to design their homes. FLW, in his Autobiography, says, "In architecture they were still the pall bearers for the remains of Thomas Jefferson and subsequently built colonial houses for themselves in Buffalo."

The last building to be added (in 1912) to the LSC campus was the RST Building, a warehouse used for storing and shipping products. The ground floor was a train terminal with 580-foot-long boarding platforms that ran the length of the building. Trains were hauled in and out of the building by "Larkin the First," a railroad engine. It could haul up to 30 standard freight cars in and out of the building and also provided similar service at the warehouse, Building P, located across Van Rensselaer St. immediately behind the LCOC building. (Dan, p. 176). Note that P Building was the only building of the complex to be destroyed by fire. By the 1950's the LSC was selling off assets to cover its debt. Bldg. P was sold to Bison Waste and Wiper Co. to use to store scrap paper and tires. A huge fire occurred on March 8, 1954 which blazed for several days as fire companies came to assist from as far away as Pennsylvania. Interestingly, the building withstood the fire and was still sound, but the smoke damage and debris made it impossible to clean, so it was torn down.

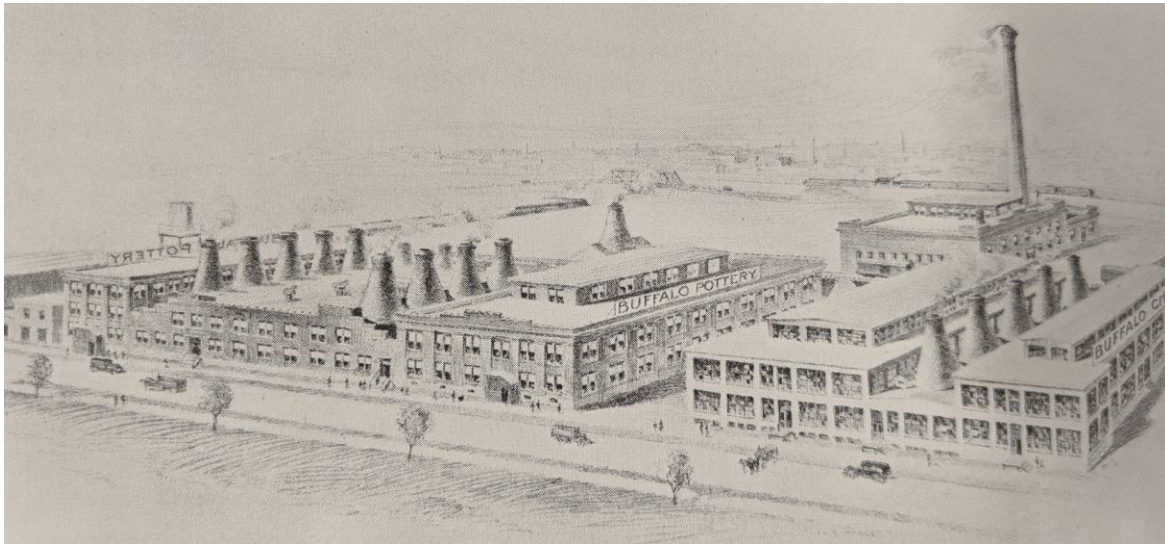


The RST building still stands and today is known as Larkin at Exchange and it fronts on Exchange Street.

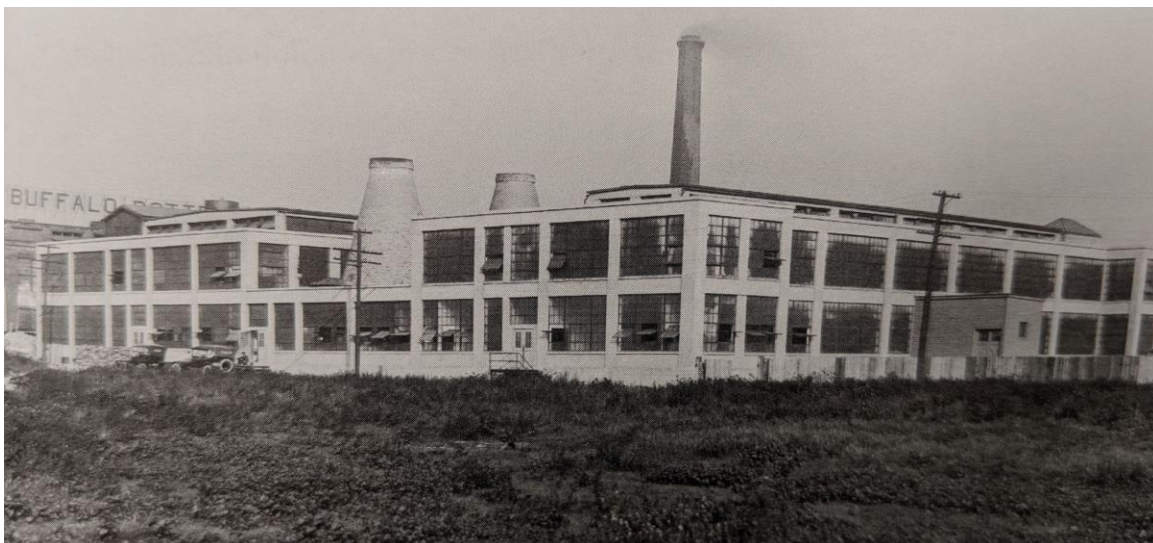
In 1901 another major business and manufacturing complex was created by JDL. Because so much china and other dishware was being given to customers as premiums for their purchase of Larkin products, JDL decided that the company could save money by producing its own. Buffalo Pottery was created, its buildings

constructed just a few miles further east down Seneca Street near Bailey. The corporation had the same officers and directors as did LSC.

Its 8 fire-proof buildings were constructed over the next few years on the 8 ½ acre site bordered by the Pennsylvania, Lehigh and Lackawanna Railroad. The trains delivered clays from all over the U.S. as well as England undisturbed in its shipment containers until arriving at the factory. There the clay would be transferred directly into the bins from which the slip would be made and then moved to the molds and kilns. (Altman, Violet and Seymour, "The Book of Buffalo Pottery," 1969, p. 22)



LSC employee, Charles R. Wiers, visited the Buffalo Pottery complex in 1904 and described it in an article which he wrote for the LSC employee newsletter, "Ourselves," Vol. 1, No. 22, March 15, 1904. "As one approaches the Buffalo Pottery he is impressed with the ideal location of the plant and the great brick buildings erected for the handling of its product." On a tour of the plant, "the first point of interest is the powerhouse – a perfect beehive of modern electrical energy." (p. 1) Wiers goes on to describe the equipment and processes that he observed on the tour and then concluded: "It is no exaggeration to say that the Buffalo Pottery is one of our city's greatest industries. Its modern facilities are not excelled by any other similar establishment in the United States." (p.2)



Back on the home front, JDL and "Frank" had longed for a house in Canada, where Frank was born and raised. Easy access had been nonexistent till 1899 when the suspension bridge was built near Lewiston. In August 1900, they found the home that met their needs. They did not build it from scratch; the house had been built in the 1830's. It was a large colonial style house located on the cliff overlooking the Niagara River far below and facing Lewiston; it was in terrible condition. The roof leaked, the basement was damp and musty. But it must have had "good bones" because, according to Dan, JDL and Frank snapped it up. (Dan, pp.122-3) Likely JDL saw what he could do structurally to bring it back to glory. No doubt what Frank saw were the extensive – though badly neglected gardens and lots of beautiful trees. They went to work.

Soon the house was again elegant, and Frank had created fine English style gardens adorned with a lovely Japanese style garden and tea house. From the beginning, family and friends visited, enjoying Frank's gracious entertaining. That fall FLW and his wife visited, declaring the garden and tea house to be a great success. In 1905 a



popular author Blanche Elizabeth Wade, visited and wrote a book inspired by the gardens, "A Garden in Pink" featuring photos of the Glencairn gardens. Published by A.C. McClurg of Chicago, the book became a best seller. (Dan, p. 123) All enjoyed the dramatic views.

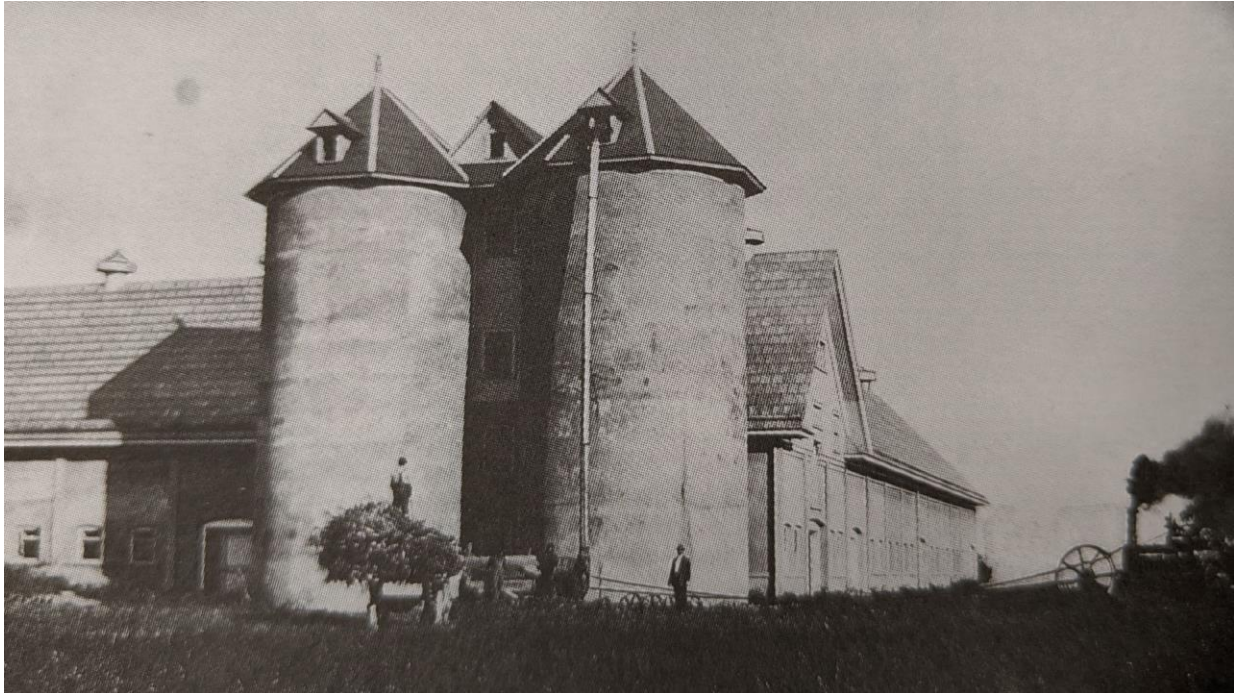
The Larkins built a log cabin in their woods to which son Harry and some of his cousins retreated with glee. They called it "Slabsides". Because there was quite a bit of acreage at Glencairn, JDL built three houses overlooking the gorge for their children, Charlie, Harry and Frances. (Dan, p. 124)

They were quite content there for years. JDL still worked daily at LSC, but he made the trip to Glencairn whenever the family was there. Often, rather than using the suspension bridge, he would row across the river and climb a dirt trail up to the house. He loved going there to play with the children, and soon, with grandchildren. However, the joy they felt there came to an end with the outbreak of World War I in 1915. Canadian soldiers established a border guard post on their land, making Frank very anxious. The final blow came when her brother, Elbert Hubbard, and his wife, Alice, were killed when the "Lusitania" was torpedoed by the Germans. (Dan, pp. 123-125)

JDL had a passion for farming, having worked on one as a youth. Beginning in 1901, on top of all the responsibility he had with LSC and Buffalo Pottery, he began buying farmland in Canada, naming it Larkin Farms. Dan describes it as being a total of "1900 acres of rich farmland". (at p. 126) Specifically, it included 900 acres on the

escarpment south of the Brock monument (now covered by the reservoir that supplies the power plant on the Canadian side of the river). The remaining acreage consisted of several farms located north of Glencairn extending towards Niagara-on-the-Lake.

He maintained apple orchards, other fruits, hogs and sheep. He became known for his fine livestock, such species as Jersey and Aberdeen Angus cattle, Dorset and Southdown sheep and pedigreed hogs imported from England. (Dan, p. 128)

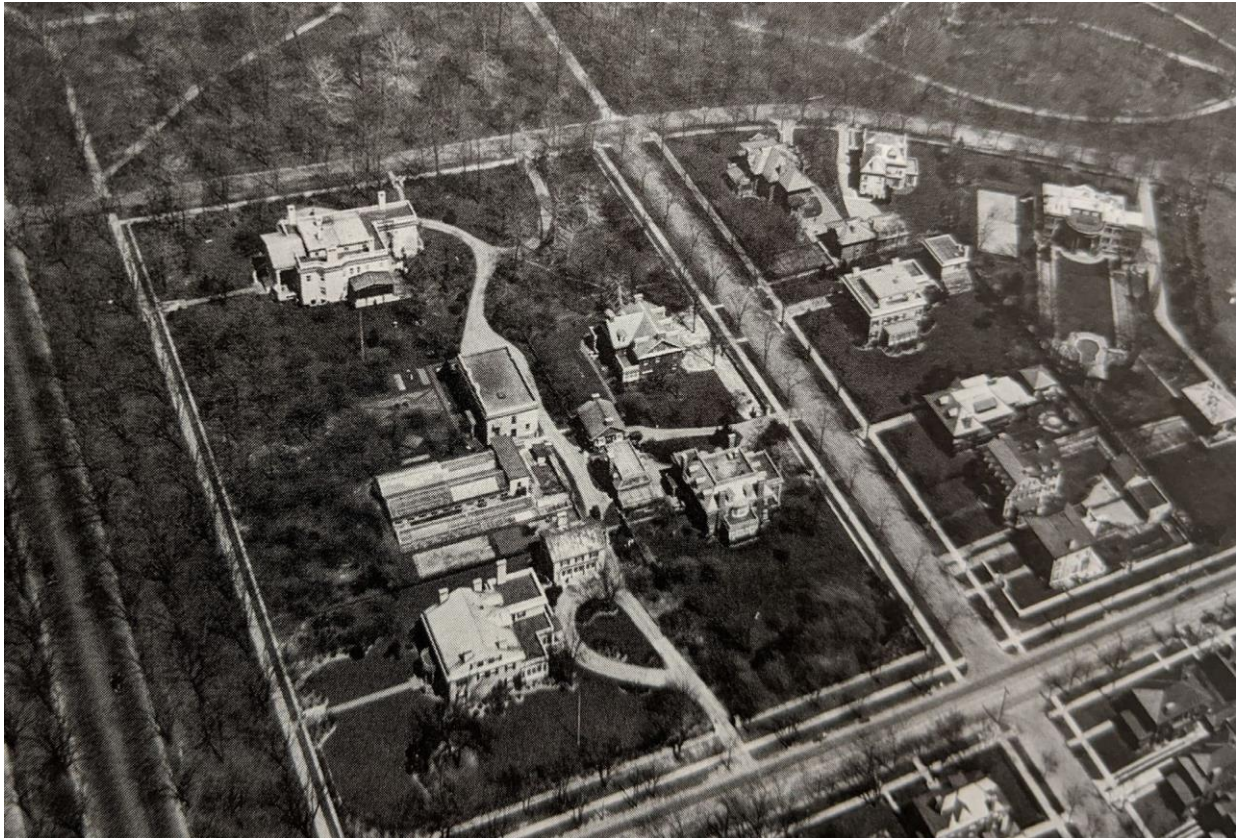


Dan tells us, "John's approach to farming was like his approach to manufacturing: managers chosen for their knowledge and integrity, efficient business methods, and concerns for the well-being of his employees." (at p. 126) "His aim was always to build a plant that would be at once permanent, efficient and safe. At the same time, the plant must provide a comfortable, healthful and satisfying workplace." Incredibly, not only were JDL's farm buildings "impressive," (Dan, p127}, JDL also built homes for his employees. Dan describes them as built on a common plan: 35x38 feet with 3 bedrooms, 3 clothes presses, dining room, kitchen, living room with front and back porches, full cellar and a garden plot. (Dan, p.127)

Farm equipment is described as the latest and best to deal with a huge volume of produce: 12,000 apple trees, 4,000 peach trees, 10,000 bushels of wheat and oats. He built shipping and loading facilities at each of the farms. Dan describes a tractor hauling 1000 bushels of wheat on seven wagons to the Shredded Wheat plant in Niagara Falls, N.Y. (Dan, pp. 127-128)

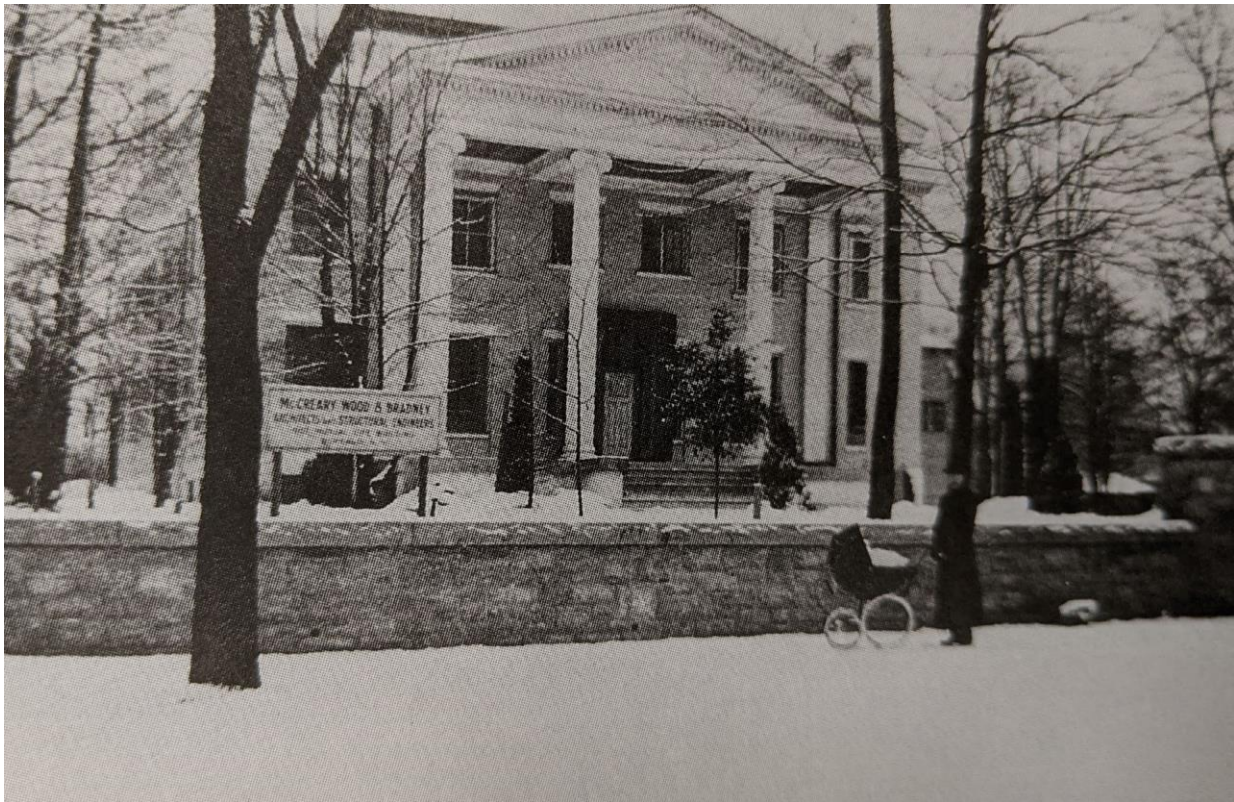
I shake my head even as I write this. How did JDL manage all of this? The LSC, Buffalo Pottery, this enormous farm. Even with good employees, I would have thought he would be worn and stressed. Yet despite all this responsibility he always made time for play with his kids and grandkids. He and Frank had an active social life; they even took time to travel.

Which brings me to his last residential building which came to be known as Larkland. JDL was such a family man. He was never happier than when his family was around him. One doesn't get the sense that he had a 'controlling' relationship with his family, nor that the children were unhealthily dependent on him. It seems they sincerely liked being close. So, it is no surprise that when the children came of age, JDL wanted them still to be near. In 1909, JDL made an offer that made the newspapers: to purchase the area between Lincoln Parkway, Forest Ave. and the Rumsey Woods, just south of Delaware Park. The Parkway was an Olmsted designed street. The papers termed it "the most important sale of the year," though the actual sale price seems not to have been disclosed to the public. (Dan, p.169)



He started to build on the parcel in 1910 and by the end of 1911, JDL had built 5 large, elegant-looking but conventional, homes in the neo-colonial style. First came the home for daughter, Frances, and her husband, Harold Esty at 176 Windsor. The "big house" at 107 Lincoln Pky. came next. Because of its size, it was not completed until 1912. Then the last three houses, for Harry at 160 Windsor, John, Jr. at 75 Lincoln Pky and Charlie, at 175 Windsor, were completed by 1915.

The "Big House" was, of course the hub. It was here that the family gathered to open presents beneath the large Christmas tree. Dinners for family and friends were enjoyed in the large dining room. One of the granddaughter's debutante ball was attended by 350 people who danced to the music of an orchestra. 200 young people attended a New Year's Eve ball in 1914 to honor the daughter of Frances Folsom Cleveland, the President's widow. The President of Poland, who was also a pianist, stayed at the "Big House" when he performed at a concert in Buffalo. (Dan, pp.171-173).



But much as JDL and Frank enjoyed their social life, it was the nearness of family that meant most to them. They were able to easily spend time with each other while still having their own homes. That began to be challenged when Charlie moved to California in 1919. When Frank died in 1922, however, it was very traumatic for JDL. Daughter, Ruth, and her husband, Harold Esty and their two small children moved into the "Big House" with him. Having the little ones there, buoyed him up. (Dan, p. 186)

But there would be no more building. He continued to go to his office to oversee the LSC and monitor Buffalo Pottery. The farm in Canada continued to be very productive. When he came down with "the grip" it did not seem too serious, but on February 15, 1926 he quietly died in his sleep at home. The funeral was held in the "Big House". The Builder of so many and varied structures was gone. (Dan, pp.187-188)

- From the Desk of Sharon Osgood