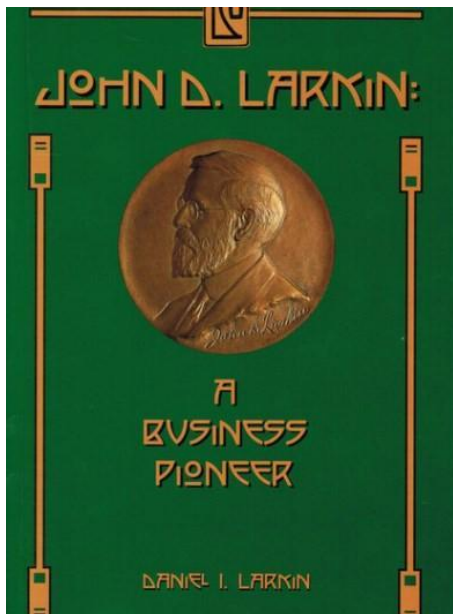
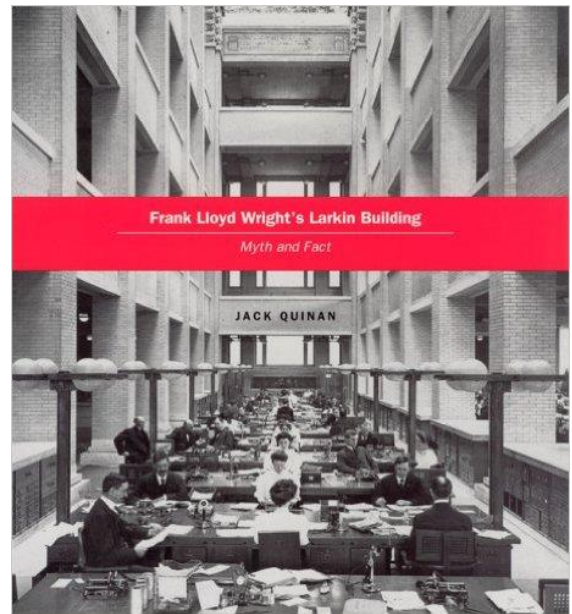


FOUNDING FATHERS (Continued #6)

Over the past few months a lot has been said in these columns about the founder of the Larkin Soap Company (LSC). This month I will focus entirely on this extraordinary man. Fortunately, a lot is known as a result of the extensive research done by his grandson, Daniel Larkin, with input from other Larkin relatives and from Prof. Jack Quinan, author of the book, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Building: Myth and Fact." Daniel Larkin's book, "John D. Larkin: A Business Pioneer," is a treasure of primary source references.



Aurora Historical Society



Amazon

JDL was one of seven children born on 9/13/1843 to Levi and Mary Ann Durant. Levi had emigrated from England in 1834 because of very difficult economic conditions there. His sister, who had moved from England to Buffalo a number of years before, had become widowed at age 26 with three young children to raise. Levi lived with her and helped support the household with his income as a blacksmith, a trade for which he had apprenticed in England.

By the time Levi arrived, Joseph Ellicott had laid out the streets of what was then Buffalo. But these were not paved streets, but troughs of mud.



Buffalo History Works

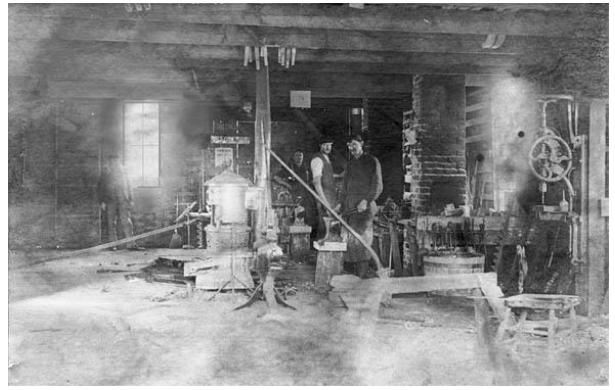
Records recount the stories like of horse teams becoming stuck in mud near Mohawk and Main, and of ladies losing their shoes while trying to cross such streets as Pearl Street near Tupper. Indians walked the streets in blankets and moccasins while pigs and cows roamed what is now downtown.

Levi owned his own blacksmith company, making iron fences, stair railings and window shutters. One day, at a church social (he was a Baptist who attended a Baptist church located at Washington

and Seneca) he met lovely Mary Ann Durant.

Mary Ann had emigrated from England at the age of twelve, to Guelph, Ontario. She had walked the 100 miles from Guelph to Buffalo with friends and soon after attended the fateful church event. They were married in 1838 at the church at Swan and Seneca. JDL was the third of seven children born to them.

Levi continued to operate his metalworking business, and also was a volunteer fireman. They bought a home at 13 Clinton Street across the street from the courthouse (the Buffalo Public Library now occupies the courthouse site). He made a decent living, but was not a wealthy man.



Cogen Web

When JDL was 4 years of age, there was a huge fire that destroyed the nearby Eagle Tavern and neighboring buildings. When ashes landed in the courthouse belfry, it is likely that young JDL was watching from across the street as his father heroically climbed a ladder onto the roof and smothered the flames with his coat. Two years later, in 1852, Levi fought another large fire, left it exhausted and shortly thereafter suffered from pneumonia and died.

Mary was now a widow at age 35, leaving her with seven children, the youngest, a mere 3 months old, and the oldest, 13. The family was forced to leave their home and were nearly destitute. Family helped as they could while Mary remained dignified and as independent as she could be. In 1855, daughter, Harriett, age 3, died of whooping cough.



Atlas Obscura

JDL had been attending P.S. 15 but 1856 was to be his last year for school attendance. He, and his brother, Levi, dropped out of school to work and help support the family. Their mother, Mary, also worked as a "nurse." Initially JDL, at the age of 12, worked as a messenger boy for Western Union Telegraph Co., then in several capacities for a millinery company which sold fine products to wealthy people. He exhibited a "quiet, steady disposition" and an aptitude for business management. He was described as being a handsome lad with a sense of fun that added "a light

touch to a serious matter of fashion." Dan Larkin speculates that this experience gave JDL his "first taste of business and his first glimpse into the fashionable world of Buffalo's wealthier families."

There JDL remained for four years, till his sister, Mary, wed Justus Weller,

a fun but enterprising young man who had opened a soap factory. Where? "on Seneca Street north of the NY & Erie R.R. crossing." (I am not sure, but that may be where the Power House is now.) Over the next ten years, JDL worked on and off for Weller in Buffalo, interspersed with his efforts to "find himself." He became somewhat of an activist, becoming staunchly Republican, and joining in the tumultuous welcome of Abraham Lincoln in February, 1861 at the Exchange Street railroad station. There is no record, however, of his having participated in the Civil War.

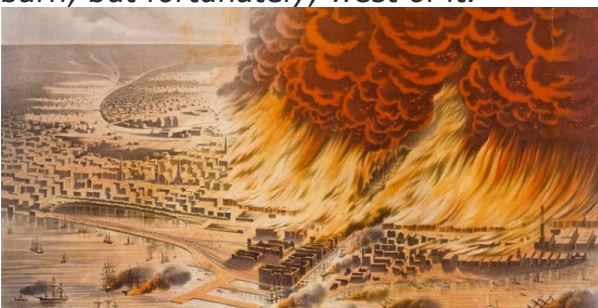


Buffalo History Works

In 1865 JDL enrolled in probably a bookkeeping course at Bryant and Stratton, which had opened the year before (Darwin Martin was later to attend that course as well). By the end of that year, JDL and Weller had entered into a partnership to market Weller's soap products in New York City. The assets of the company were: one horse, a wagon and frame, a harness two pails, a dipper and 10 steam pipes. JDL was its sole employee. His first trip was made very difficult by the assassination of Lincoln and the national mourning that brought Lincoln's body to NYC, then on to Buffalo. The marketing venture failed, and by September, 1865, JDL was headed back to Buffalo.

He continued working for Weller, and in November, his life become much easier. His mother happily remarried a man who also had children and they became a very happy family. The pressure was off JDL though he helped them at their farm in Hamburg and may have invested in cows for their farm. He continued off and on with Weller in ventures in WNY, and in 1870, went with Weller to work in his new soap business in Illinois.

Big things happened there. JDL became a partner with Weller in his business, that was quite successful. But on October 8, 1871, Mrs. O'Leary's cow knocked over a lantern in its barn, starting the great Chicago fire. The Soap company was just a few blocks from that barn, but fortunately, west of it.



Huffington Post

The winds blew the fire east and into the heart of Chicago. Weller and JDL rushed to the scene and watched in horror as flames consumed buildings, heard the screams of people and witnessed their struggles to escape the conflagration. It had to have left an indelible scar on JDL.

But in 1872, joy swathed into JDL's life. Weller invited his cousin, Francis (more commonly referred to as "Frank"), who lived further west in

Illinois, to visit him in Chicago. JDL and Frank met, quickly falling in love with each other.

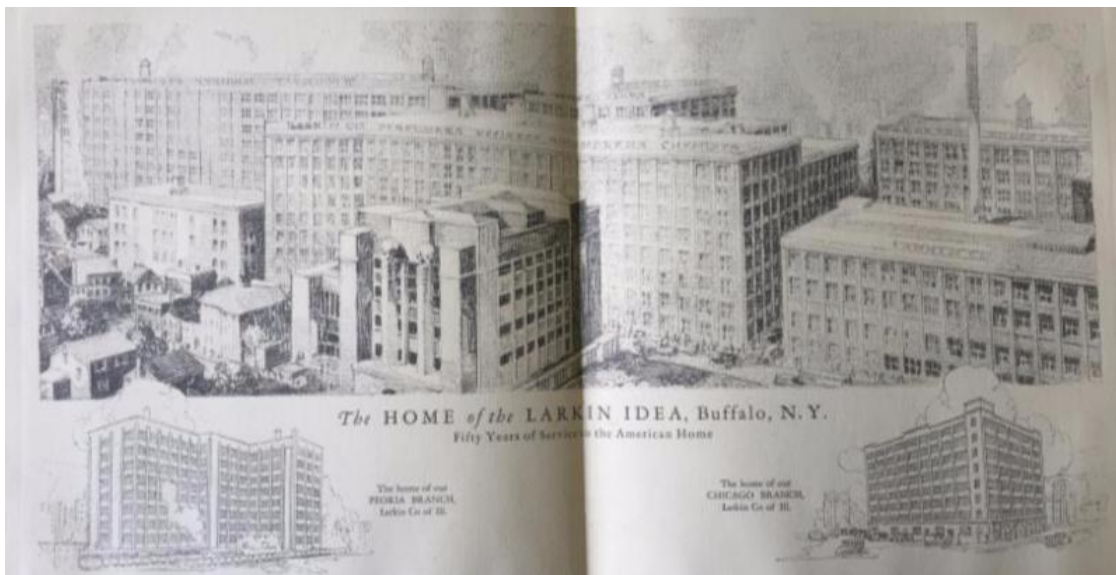
Frank's diary describes a very different person than who we think JDL is from his austere photos: "As we stood on the balcony, a small, handsome, dark-eyed young man, with brown side whiskers, came running up the steps. Mother greeted him... John started to speak to me, but I was bashful and dodged back through the French doors, he following me around and around until it became a game, and finally reversing, he caught me and kissed me."

Frank noted that JDL loved picnics and outdoor frolics, was fond of music, loved skating

and exhibited profound thoughtfulness. Despite Frank's obvious enchantment with JDL, however, she seemed apprehensive of the prospect of marriage. JDL persisted, writing long, beseeching letters, and finally persuaded her. They were married in 1874 in Illinois, where they set up housekeeping a block from the Weller home.

In March, 1875 JDL and Frank's first child, Charles was born. A week later, in a planned breakup of the partnership between JDL and Weller, they executed a contract agreeing to terminate their business relationship and Weller bought JDL out. JDL began scouting other locations to set up his own soap business; Frank's brother, Bert Hubbard, also assisted with the search. Ultimately, as we all know, JDL settled on his home town, Buffalo.

On April 9, 1875, JDL signed a lease for a soap factory on Chicago Street. The young family moved into a house at 213 Eagle Street. By mid-May, JD Larkin Manufacturer of Plain and Fancy Soaps was created and making its first product, Sweet Home Soap. The business steadily grew in every way; diversity and volume of products, marketing technics and physically. In 1877 JDL purchased two 30 foot by 150 foot lots at Seneca and what is now called Larkin Street, these being 663, 665 and 667 Seneca. The company continued to grow till by the 1910's it comprised of 21 fireproof buildings covering 65 acres of floor space. In 1906 the company added the Larkin Administration Building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright to house the mail order business and employee relations programs. As discussed in last month's article, JDL was committed to the comfort and health of his employees. His fun loving character persisted in his encouraging company picnics, athletic teams, concerts and the like.



JDL's preoccupation with fire was evidenced by his use of construction materials that would reduce the risk of fire. But his preoccupation with fire became tragically personal. The family, members of an association called Idlewood which had purchased land on the south shore of Lake Erie and bordered by Eighteen Mile Creek - near where Darwin and Isabel Martin built a home called Graycliff designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, had gone to that property to camp out in tents, swim, row boats, fish and picnic. On August 16, 1885, Edith, age 6, got too close to a fire the children had built. Her dress caught fire and she was horribly burned. There were no burn treatment centers, no immediate medical help. Edith died on the 19th. The family was devastated. Frank never returned to Idlewood though JDL remained on its board till he sold his interest in 1892.

Besides running his business, JDL was very much a civic minded person. Dan Larkin, noted that JDL's "quiet but firm integrity, his deliberate good judgment, together with his positive attitude and his consideration for others won him the respect and affection of his fellow businessmen. His advice was sought, and at times his help." One interesting example of the latter attribute was that John Albright ran out of money while building his art gallery, so went to JDL to help him out with giving him a loan. His financial wisdom led to his being named as Vice President of Central National Bank of Buffalo, and as was the custom at that time, he was the signatory on \$5 and \$10 bills issued by the bank. He was also an officer at Marine Midland Bank.

In the social world, JDL was a member of the Country Club of Buffalo. Frank was a member of the prestigious Twentieth Century Club. And also of Buffalo's chapter of the DAR.

JDL and Frank, in their later years, travelled to Europe several times, thoroughly enjoying the sights and each other. In 1900 JDL accomplished a an acquisition he had long yearned for - a home in Canada. There was an old colonial house overlooking the Niagara River in Queenston. JDL and his son, Harry, rowed from Lewiston across the river to see it. Though it needed a lot of work, he and Frank were thrilled with it, and spent their time working on the house and gardens. Called Glencairn Hall, the house had been built by the brothers Hamilton, who had been shipbuilders, on a site of a battery of the War of 1812. The city of Hamilton, Ontario, was named after them. Frank, however, became disenchanted with it when, in 1915 the Canadian military officers, which had set up a border guard post on the property, told them about spies being caught, a dynamite trap having been discovered and other tales that made her very uncomfortable. Frank refused to return to the property but JDL bought considerable parcels of farmland along the escarpment. He hired workers for the farms, and like LSC, they were a success and fine examples of beneficent employee management. Glencairn stayed in the family, with the Larkin children and their spouses, as well as JDL, using it.

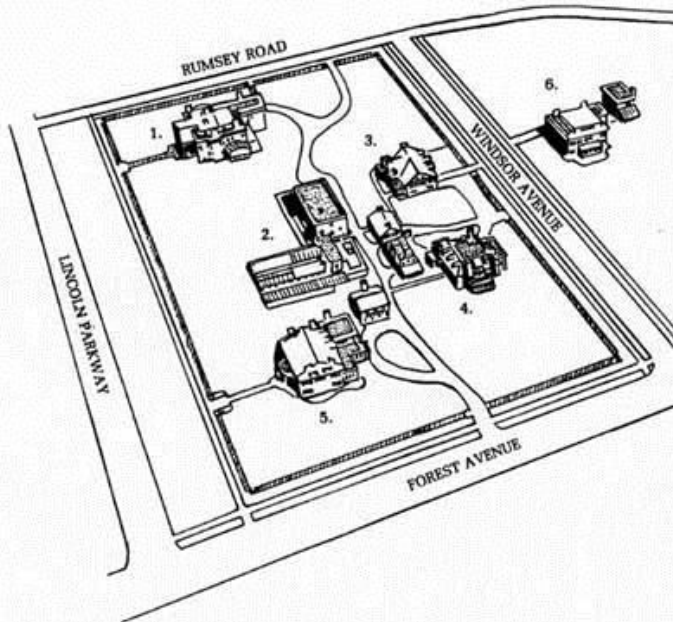
Over the years the Larkin family lived at 118 Swan Street, then moved to 125 Hodge Street and then to 237 North Street. But the coup de gras came in 1909 when JDL purchased The Rumsey estate comprised of a block fronting on Lincoln Parkway, Rumsey Road, Windsor Avenue and Forest Avenue. Homes were built for JDL and Frank, but also for each of their four remaining children. The area became known as Larkland.

LARKLAND

HOMES BUILT BY JOHN D. LARKIN 1910 - 1914 ON PROPERTY PURCHASED FROM THE ESTATE OF DEXTER P. RUMSEY IN 1909 IN THE AREA KNOWN AS RUMSEY'S WOODS. AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN 1924.

KEY TO BUILDINGS:

1. 107 Lincoln Parkway - home of John D. Larkin 1912 - 1926, and of his daughter Ruth Larkin Robb (Mrs. Walter B. Robb) 1923 - 1939. Demolished 1939.
2. Carriage House and Greenhouses belonging to 107 Lincoln Parkway.
3. 176 Windsor Ave. - home of John D. Larkin's daughter Francis Larkin Esty (Mrs. Harold M. Esty) 1912 - 1963, and of her daughter Elberta Larkin Esty 1912 - 1986.
4. 160 Windsor Ave. - home of Mr. & Mrs. Harry H. Larkin 1914 - 1939, and of Mr. & Mrs. Walter B. Robb 1939 - 1975.
5. 65 Lincoln Parkway (LARKIN HOUSE) home of Mr. & Mrs. John D. Larkin Jr. 1914 - 1948, and of their daughter Mary Frances Larkin (Mrs. Howard Kellogg Jr.) 1948 - 1953. Given to the Buffalo Seminary by Mr. & Mrs. Kellogg in 1953.
6. 175 Windsor Ave. - home of Mr. & Mrs. Charles H. Larkin 1914 - 1918, and of Mr. & Mrs. Walter B. Robb 1918 - 1922.



Gift of Sally Larkin Kryder and Daniel I. Larkin - 1989

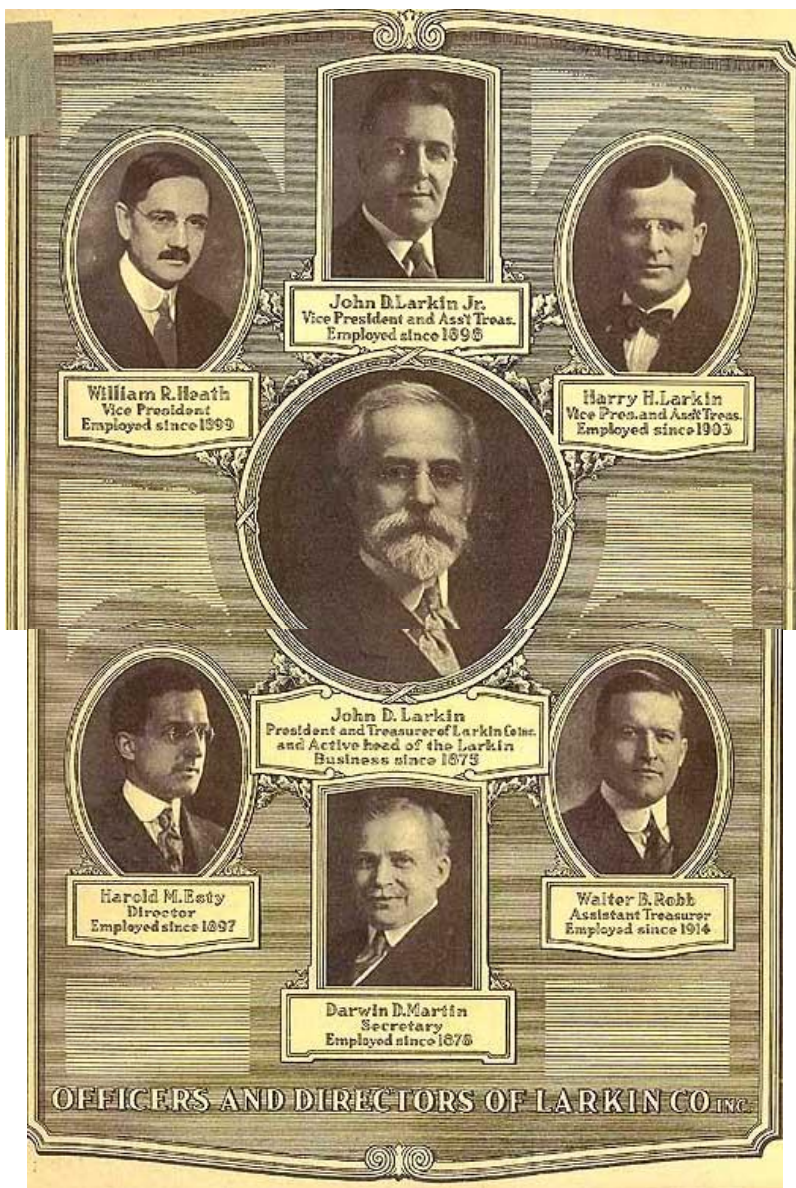
Buffalo AH

In 1922, Frank died. JDL felt deeply the loss of his true companion. Daughter, Ruth, and her husband Walter Robb, moved in with their children, which was a huge comfort to JDL. He continued, now in his late 70's, to go every morning to the title company office, which he had founded in 1916, and then to his office here at 701 Seneca. At age 79, JDL was busily planning the 50th anniversary of his company; calling the celebration, "Fifty Golden Years." As a gift to his employees, he purchased and had installed at the Administration Building a Moeller Concert Organ with 101 stops and 7396 pipes. He also gave them two harps and a Steinway Concert Grand Piano, all placed on the balcony overlooking the main floor of the Administration Building. The celebration took place joyfully on May 1, 1925. JDL was thrilled and doing well physically.



savewright.org

But in February he became ill - "the grip"- beginning a rapid downhill course. On February 15, 1926 he died. The pall bearers included some of the most important men of Buffalo: D.D. Martin, Wm. Heath, George F. Rand, E.J. Barcalo, John Lord O'Brian, Norman E. Mack, Edward H. Butler, George B. Mathews, Joseph H. Morey, Ansley Wilcox and Elbert and Sanford Hubbard. He was buried alongside Frank and daughter, Edith at Forest Lawn Cemetery.



Buffalo AH

He died having been an extraordinary businessman, philanthropist, family man and friend to many.

~From the Desk of Sharon Osgood
