

# THE FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT NEWSLETTER

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## FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S BUFFALO CLIENTS

by Jack Quinan

*This is the first of four profiles of Frank Lloyd Wright's Buffalo clients: John D. Larkin, Darwin D. Martin, William R. Heath and Walter V. Davidson. The objective of the profiles is to amplify Grant Manson's fundamental study, the chapter entitled "The Buffalo Venture," in Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910, Rheinhold Publishing Corporation (New York, 1958), and to correct some of the misinformation on the Buffalo clients that has circulated in the Wright literature during the past two decades.*

### John Durant Larkin (1845-1926)

As President of the Larkin Company, John D. Larkin was ultimately responsible for three designs by Frank Lloyd Wright: the Larkin Administration Building (1903-1906), the unbuilt designs for Larkin workers' housing (1904), and the Larkin Exhibition Building in Jamestown, Virginia, of 1907. Furthermore, Mr. Larkin can be considered indirectly responsible for all of Wright's thirteen Buffalo projects and buildings because, with the exception of a house design for Alexander Davidson, a lawyer, in 1906, all of Wright's Buffalo clients were employees of the Larkin Company.

John D. Larkin was born in Buffalo in 1845, the son of Levi Henry Larkin, an

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iron founder who had immigrated from Beckley, Sussex, England, in 1833, and Mary Ann Durrant, who immigrated to the United States from Glowham, Kent, England, by way of Canada. They were members of the Baptist faith. The early death of his father forced the young Larkin to begin work at the age of twelve in a local millinery store, but when his older sister, Mary, married Justus Weller, the owner of a small soap-making firm, John Larkin was hired on as a clerk. He learned the business quickly, and when Weller decided to relocate in Chicago in 1870, John Larkin became a partner. There was much that a bright young man could learn in Chicago in the 1870's: Trade was brisk; powerful businesses were just being established; there was the frightening spectacle of the Great Fire, and, for John Larkin, there were invaluable personal alliances as well. On a visit to the home of Dr. Silas Hubbard, Weller's uncle, in Bloomington, Illinois, Weller met his personable cousin, Elbert Hubbard, and persuaded him to join the company as a salesman. Two years later, in 1874, John Larkin married Elbert Hubbard's sister, Frances, in Bloomington. In the meantime, Justus Weller's marriage to Mary Larkin had begun to falter, and in 1875 John D. Larkin resolved to return to Buffalo to establish his own soap manufacturing business. Elbert Hubbard accompanied him as his principal salesman.

The subsequent growth of the Larkin Company owed much to the innovative use of premiums and mail order techniques, and not a little to John D. Larkin's