

Sewickley Valley Historical Society

Signals

XLII, Number 2

October 2014

Wednesday, October 22, 2014
7:30 p.m.

Sewickley Heights History Center, 1901 Glen Mitchell Road

James Laughlin IV and the New Directions Publishing Company

A PowerPoint Presentation by
David N. McKnight



David McKnight is Director of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library in the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts at the University of Pennsylvania. From 1990-2006, he was a Librarian at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. At the time he left McGill, he was Director of the Rare Book and Manuscript Department and founding Director of the McGill Libraries' Digital Collections Program. In April 2006, he moved to Philadelphia to continue his professional career at the University of Pennsylvania. Among his scholarly interests are the history of the book and the transmission of knowledge, literary publishing in the twentieth century, and, especially, the career of James Laughlin and New Directions Press. Beyond his professional life, he is an avid book collector, and he includes among his collecting interests New Directions imprints, literary modernism, the city of Paris and the Beatles. He holds a BA (1985) and an MLIS (1992) from McGill University and an MA (1993) in 20th Century Literature from Concordia University in Montreal.

James Laughlin IV (1914-1997) was, perhaps, the most important independent American literary publisher in the twentieth century. Born in Pittsburgh in 1914, "J" (as he preferred to be called) was the great-grandson of James Laughlin, the wealthy Pittsburgh banker and merchant who was the partner of Benjamin Franklin Jones. By the end of the 19th century, Jones & Laughlin was one of the most formidable steel manufacturing companies in the United States.

James Laughlin IV grew up in wealth and privilege. In 1934, on a leave of absence from Harvard, the young Laughlin traveled to Europe, hoping to pursue a career as a poet. As fate would have it, his mentor, poet and ex-patriate Ezra Pound, advised him to give up poetry and use his wealth to start a publishing company. The result was New Directions, which he founded while still an undergraduate, using money from his father, publishing books at his aunt's home in Connecticut and storing copies in his college room. His first book, *New Directions in Prose & Poetry*, an anthology of experimental writing, was published in 1936.

Throughout his sixty year career as a poet, Laughlin wrote a number of autobiographical poems recalling growing up in Pittsburgh and environs. In his presentation, Mr. McKnight will draw upon Laughlin's words to illustrate, through the lens of his wry and often poignant poetry, his memories of his family's and Pittsburgh's past. In October, New Directions will honor James Laughlin with a new comprehensive edition of his collected poetry.

In a 1998 column in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Bob Hoover wrote of James Laughlin IV, "Funny, isn't it, that as we watch the last remnants of J&L [Jones & Laughlin]—the Hazelwood coke works—struggle to survive, Laughlin reminds us that the most enduring legacy of Pittsburgh's industrial past is literary?"

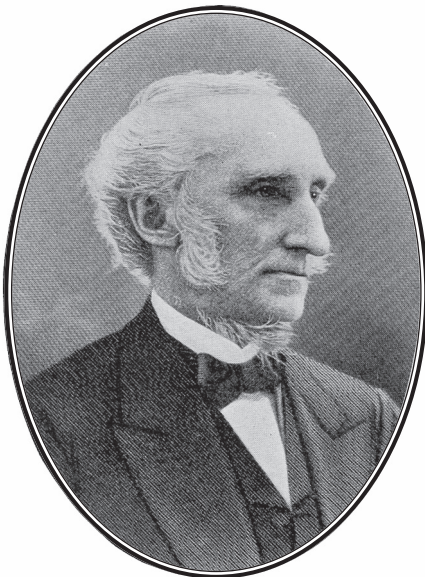
**PLEASE NOTE THAT THIS PROGRAM WILL BE HELD AT
SEWICKLEY HEIGHTS HISTORY CENTER, NOT AT THE OLD SEWICKLEY POST OFFICE.**

The mission of Sewickley Valley Historical Society
is to promote interest in and to record, collect, preserve, and document the history of the Sewickley Valley.

Who were the Laughlins ?

The Laughlin name is well known in the Sewickley Valley, but it is important to note that there are several different families involved. Let us distinguish among them.

First of all, who was **JAMES LAUGHLIN IV**, the subject of our lecture this month?



James Laughlin (1806-1882)

The great-grandfather of James Laughlin IV, James Laughlin I (1806-1882), was a partner of Benjamin Franklin Jones (1826-1903) in the famous firm, Jones & Laughlin Steel. Laughlin was born in Ireland and remained there until age twenty, when, after the death of his mother, he and his father emigrated to America and joined his elder brother Alexander (1790-1867), who had come to Pittsburgh in 1819. Upon arrival, James entered

into a partnership with his brother Alexander in a provisioning and pork packing house in Pittsburgh and Evansville, Indiana. This partnership was dissolved in 1835, and James continued in business with a new partner.

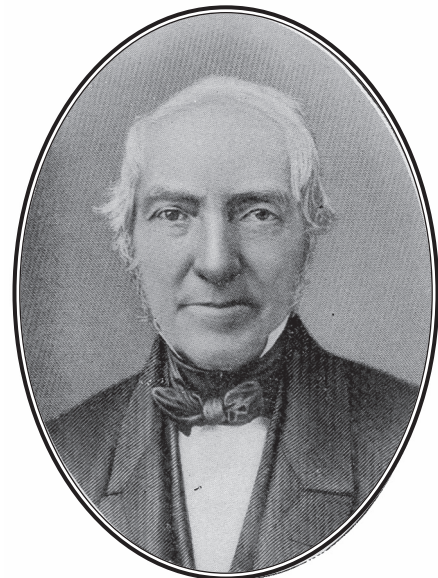
In 1837, James married Ann McCully Irwin (1813-1892), and they had a daughter and four sons: Henry A. (1838-1922), Irwin B. (1840-1871), George A. (1842-1908), Elizabeth Irwin (1844-1929) and James II (1847-1919). James Laughlin I was one of the organizers of the Fifth Avenue Savings Bank, later called the Pittsburgh Trust Company and, later, the First National Bank of Pittsburgh, which was the first national bank in Allegheny County. James Laughlin I became President of that bank.

In the 1850s, James Laughlin I retired from the provision business and turned his attention to the manufacture of iron. Benjamin Franklin Jones was partners with Bernard and John Lauth in a small mill in Pittsburgh called the American Iron Works. In 1854, Laughlin joined the group and bought out the Lauths' interests. In 1861, James Laughlin I and his sons Henry and Irwin and B. F. Jones and his brothers, George and Thomas, formed the firm of Jones & Laughlin, which would later use Lake Superior ore and Connellsville coal to make the finest iron and steel.

James Laughlin II, fourth son of James Laughlin I and Ann Irwin, married Sidney Page (1848-1925). They had sons named James Laughlin III and Henry Hughart Laughlin. Henry Hughart Laughlin married Marjorie Rea, and they were the parents of James Laughlin IV, named after his uncle, James Laughlin III.

Who, then, was **ALEXANDER LAUGHLIN, JR.** (1844-1881), who married the eldest daughter of B. F. Jones, and who, with his family, became the second generation of the Joneses to live at Franklin Farm, the family estate on Sewickley Heights?

Benjamin Franklin Jones married Mary McMasters (1829-1911) on May 21, 1850, and they had four children: Mary Franklin (1851-1931), Elizabeth McMasters (1862-1939), Alice (1866-1939) and Benjamin Franklin Jones, Jr. (1868-1928). Mary married Alexander Laughlin, Jr., in the 1860s. He was the son of James Laughlin's brother Alexander Laughlin (1790-1867), mentioned above, and his wife, Mary Ann Bailey. Therefore, this Alexander Laughlin, Jr., was the nephew of B. F. Jones' partner in the steel business, James Laughlin.



Alexander Laughlin (1790-1867)

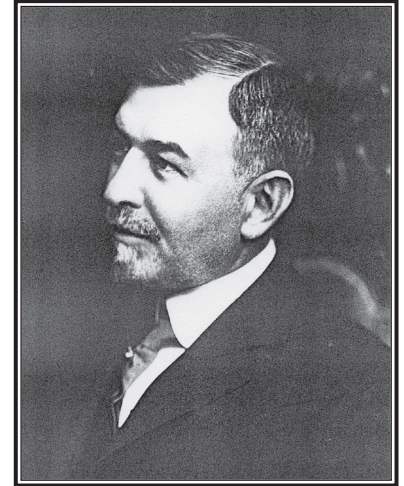
Finally, who were the **ALEXANDER LAUGHLINS** who lived where the Sewickley Academy faculty housing is located today in a house called *Linganore*; who constructed a handsome library in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, in memory of their son, Alexander Laughlin, Jr.; and who were instrumental in the founding of the institution today known as the Mary and Alexander Laughlin Children's Center, located in Sewickley?

This Alexander Laughlin was born in 1866 in Wheeling, West Virginia, son of Alexander and Lisette Lamping Laughlin. He was educated in Wheeling schools, the Hill School and attended Washington and Jefferson College. In 1883, he began his career as a clerk at the Laughlin Nail Company of Wheeling, later working at the Junction Iron Company, also in Wheeling.

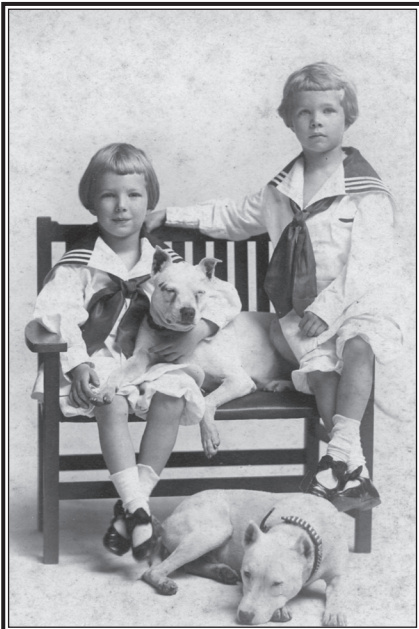
In 1887, he married Mary Bushnell Mead, and they had one son, Alexander Laughlin, Jr. (1889-1926). In that same year, Laughlin decided to go into business for himself and came to Pittsburgh, where he engaged in the design and construction of furnaces in iron and steel mills, trading as Alexander Laughlin & Company. His firm went on to design and build many of the largest steel plants in the United States.

In 1904, Laughlin purchased the Pittsburgh Steel Construction Company in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, and shortly thereafter purchased land in Economy (later Ambridge), where he built a modern structural steel plant. This operation was discontinued in 1909 and sold to the Central Tube Company, which had been organized by Mr. Laughlin. In time, five pipe mills would be constructed in Ambridge. He was also later involved with the Verona Tool Works.

The Laughlins moved to Sewickley in 1891, not long after their arrival in Pittsburgh. Mrs. Laughlin founded the Sewickley Fresh Air Home in 1901, a structure consisting of twenty five rooms on Big Sewickley Creek Road in Fair Oaks intended to provide “for needy children from Pittsburgh’s tenement neighborhoods,” with an emphasis on “fresh air, nourishing food and plenty of healthy exercise.” Later, the home served crippled and convalescent children. The Fresh Air Home continued to offer services into the 1950s. When Mary Mead Laughlin died in 1953, leaving money for the continued support of children’s services, the home was combined with the Child Counseling Center of Sewickley Valley (sponsored by the Child Health Association of Sewickley) to form the Laughlin Children’s Center, which opened in 1956.



Alexander Laughlin (1866-1943)



Robert Wilson and Fred Way, Jr., in their sailor suits (minus hats), with Bob and Casey

Fred Way, Jr., and the Laughlins

The first sentence I remember speaking was “Electric lights in Laughlin’s house,” which came out more like “Lickrish lecht in Lawn howze.” Prodded by my mother to repeat this sentence in the presence of elder spectators, I felt obliged always to comply and did so with alacrity, and seldom with improvement. Perhaps I had learned that tampering with such brilliant success dulls the sheen of the joke. A child learns this earlier than one might suppose. It is nice to be the center of attention.

Those “lickrish lechts” which attracted my young eyes were across Hazel Street from us, high on the hill, where stood the home of Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Laughlin. Their big red brick mansion, for this surely was a mansion, was called “Linganore” and oftentimes Wilson and I would climb the hill to peek across the preened lawns and driveways, never daring to go closer because of a lurking “enemy” who guarded the property, a gardener whose name we didn’t know, but who felt it his duty to run off little boys with verbal roars and a brandished rake. This made the adventure the more fascinating inasmuch as always we managed a safe escape.

When mother introduced Mrs. Laughlin to Wilson and me, on the occasion of a social call for which we had been tubbed, scrubbed and fitted into stiff-starched sailor suits, topped off with sailor hats, I was a mite surprised to find she was not the ogre man-eater I had hoped she might be. This, I think, was my first lesson, the initial dawn of knowing that old-line wealth established in massive architecture often shelters nice, kindly, thoughtful humanity. Nevertheless we did not make peace with the gardener.

*The above is from Fred Way’s unpublished autobiography, Sewickley Valley Stern Marks.
To see the relationship between the houses of the Ways and the Laughlins, see the last page of this newsletter.*

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*Thanks to the following, who have supported Sewickley Valley Historical Society
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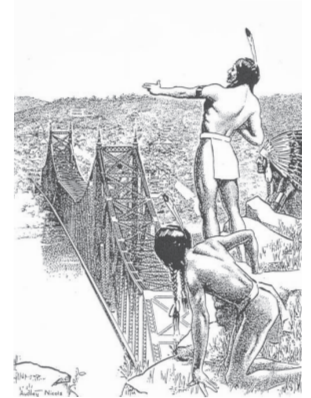
In Memoriam

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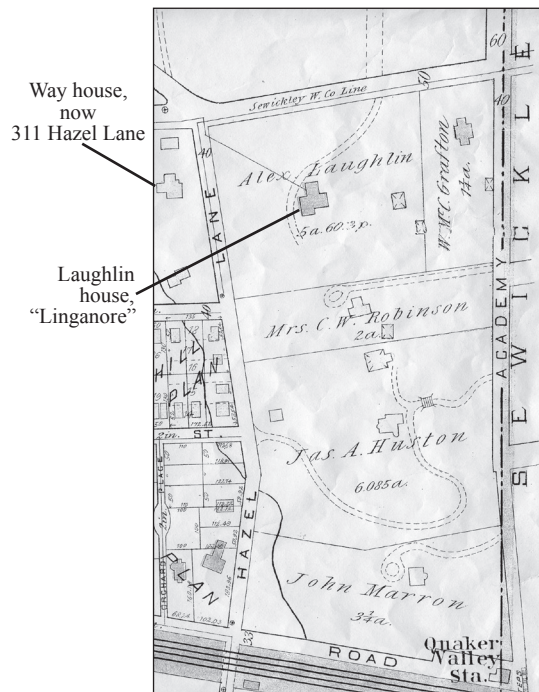
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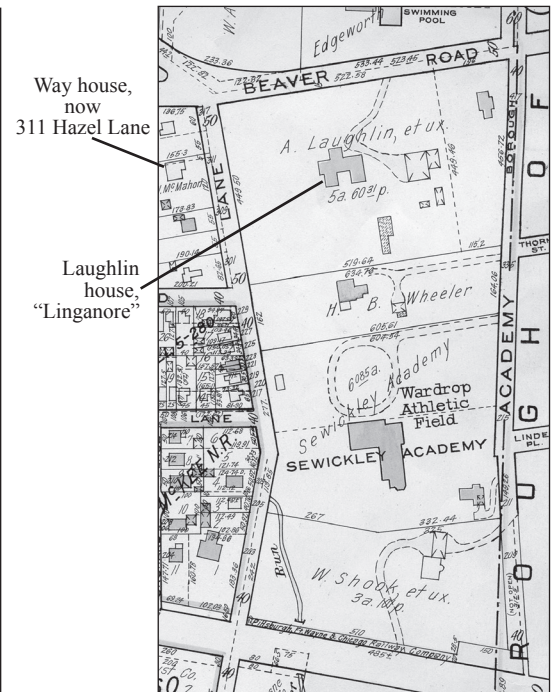
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The Ways and the Laughlins



From the 1906 G. M. Hopkins Company Plat Book of the Northern Vicinity of Pittsburgh, plate 10



From the 1940 G. M. Hopkins Company Plat Book of the City of Pittsburgh, Vol. 11, plate 23