James W. Ellsworth: If You Seek His Monument
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Early this year a story in the New York Times announced the death of Mary Louise Ulmer Ellsworth, widow of the Polar explorer, Lincoln Ellsworth (1880 - 1951), who had spent the last several decades of her life at the Waldorf Towers. It was noted that private services and burial would be at Hudson, Ohio. What followed was the final epilogue in the story of James W. Ellsworth who had died in Italy in 1925 and was brought home for burial in the Ellsworth family plot at Markilie Cemetery in Hudson. In turn, his son, Lincoln, who died in New York in 1951, was also brought back to his father's native village for burial. Now in 1993, Lincoln's widow, who had virtually no other tie with Hudson, was quietly returned to the town which had become something of a monument to a man she never knew. An Episcopal burial service was read as the remains of Mary Louise Ulmer Ellsworth were interred at Markilie one cold afternoon in March.

A few days after Mrs. Ellsworth's interment, another article in the Arts section of the New York Times noted that Rembrandt's "Portrait of a Man" would soon be added to the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art as the result of a gift of Mrs. Lincoln Ellsworth who had donated the painting many years ago, but retained life rights to it. Valued at several million dollars when it was appraised about 25 years ago, the Rembrandt was now considered a masterpiece beyond price. It was stated the painting would go to the museum "as a memorial to Lincoln Ellsworth", the Polar explorer. What the New York Times story failed to mention was that this Rembrandt had been purchased by James W. Ellsworth from the Princess de Sagan in Paris in 1889 and that Ellsworth himself considered it one of his greatest triumphs as a connoisseur. "I did not sleep for three nights because of my desire for its possession," he later admitted with a candid remark that provides insight into the character of the man so often portrayed as stern and calculating or as a businessman mogul known for his icy reserve. One historian adds that in obtaining the Rembrandt, James W. Ellsworth "practically bullied" the Princess into giving up the painting and that "in triumph he himself removed it from the wall of the Hotel Sagan." Now in 1993 the public at large can share in the appreciation and enjoyment that Ellsworth felt when he bought the Rembrandt over 100 years ago.

This year also marked the centennial observance of the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago, which opened in May, 1893, and of which James W. Ellsworth was one of, if not its principal, Directors. One of the treasures he obtained after the Fair closed was the Cross of La Rabida which had been sent to Chicago for exhibit in the Spanish pavilion. The story attached to this artifact is that it was from the Monastery of Santa Maria de la Rabida in Palos, Spain where Christopher Columbus stayed immediately prior to his voyage of discovery in 1492. Ellsworth brought it to Hudson in his retirement and gave it to Western Reserve Academy, the preparatory school he so generously endowed. The cross now hangs in the Academy Chapel in a place of honor.

These stories indicate that the interests and legacy of James W. Ellsworth continue to have impact even today. There is no single building that bears such an indelible imprint of James W. Ellsworth that we could call his monument. But because he had such an enormous impact on the kind of place his native town became in the 20th century, one would have to borrow the tribute to Sir Christopher Wren and apply it to Ellsworth and Hudson, Ohio: "if you seek his monument, look around you."

James W. Ellsworth was born in Hudson on October 13, 1849, the second son of Edgar Birge Ellsworth and Mary Holden Dawes Ellsworth. His grandfather, Elisha Ellsworth, had emigrated from Torrington, Connecticut in 1816 and purchased 273 acres of land in and around the village of Hudson. His younger brother, John, came to Hudson ten years later and obtained 126 acres in Hudson Township. Two years later, Elisha and John encouraged their widower father, John Ellsworth to join them in Hudson, and within a year he had opened a store and had married again. He continued in the mercantile business for the next twenty years, founding Ellsworth and Buss, the family store that faced the Green. Young James was born in a fine Greek Revival house then located next door to the store, and grew up in a household where his great-grandfather was fondly remembered, his grandfather still part of the business, and his father its proprietor, active in the life of the town, serving as Mayor of Hudson, 1853 - 1855. Edgar Birge Ellsworth, James' father, had built the handsome two-story brick store adjacent to his home in 1841, and by 1850, in addition to his lots facing the Village Green, Edgar Birge Ellsworth owned another 229 acres in Hudson.

Certainly James W. Ellsworth grew up in reasonably comfortable circumstances. He attended the local school, and spent two years at Western Reserve Academy when it was still part of the College that had been
founded in Hudson in 1826. He frequently helped in the family business and later commented that “nothing made me happier than when my father would have some business for me to attend to.”

It was not surprising that young Ellsworth would choose a business career for himself, and after a year of apprenticeship with a Cleveland drug store, he set out for Chicago at the age of 20 with a strong intention to succeed. The year was 1869 and both Chicago and the rest of the country were poised and ready for the great period of unbridled growth that coincided with the election of Grant and which Mark Twain would title, “the Gilded Age.” Ellsworth became a commission agent for a coal company and rapidly advanced in the business world, establishing his own company within a decade. He married a Chicago socialite, Eva Frances Butler, in 1874, and the young couple became parents to a son, Lincoln (born in 1880) and a daughter, Clare (born 1885). In 1888, Eva Butler Ellsworth died, and three years later in 1891, Ellsworth’s mother, Mary Dawes Ellsworth, died at her home in Hudson.

Shortly after the death of his wife, Ellsworth sent his two young children to live with their grandmother in Hudson, and it was about this same time that he began to enlarge and embellish the family estate on Aurora Street, calling it “Evamere” in honor of his late wife.

By the time Andrew Carnegie published his “Gospel of Wealth” philosophy in the June, 1889 issue of North American Review, James W. Ellsworth at the age of 40 had already become one of a small group of Gilded Age business moguls who were to dominate the American economy for another generation. He had amassed a large fortune selling coal to the railroads from his Chicago headquarters and earning a reputation as President of the Union National Bank. He proved himself to be ambitious, competitive and aggressive, exactly the kind of man who could persuade governments and captains of industry to support the World’s Columbian Exposition.

“Of all his achievements,” Lincoln Ellsworth later wrote, “Father himself was proudest of his work for the World’s Fair. He could justly claim to have been one of a small handful of Chicago men who made the Exposition the artistic and cultural triumph it became.” Congress had chartered the Fair in 1890 and Chicago won in the competition among several cities to host it. But it is now recognized that the general plan for the Exposition was set forth in a letter from James W. Ellsworth to landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted with the intention of persuading him to design the landscape plan. His vision of what the Fair could become was enough to convince Olmsted.

A similar power of persuasion was employed to retain architect Daniel H. Burnham whose classical revival buildings around the reflecting lagoon would leave a major impact on the design of public buildings for the next three decades. Burnham paid tribute to his mentor when he wrote, “Order was brought out of chaos by James W. Ellsworth... He kindled Olmsted’s enthusiasm with the prospect of developing 600 acres at an outlay of 15 million dollars. Mr. Ellsworth, almost alone among the directors at the beginning, saw the vision.”

Late in 1891 James W. Ellsworth went to Europe as a special envoy commissioned by Secretary of State James G. Blaine to solicit the leading European powers to loan their art collections for the Exposition. This was how the Cross of La Rabida came to Chicago. In Russia Ellsworth’s hopes that the government of Czar Alexander III would loan works of art from The Hermitage met with less success. At home sculptor Daniel Chester French was commissioned to produce the monumental statue, “The Republic” which stood at one end of the Exposition’s Grand Basin lagoon. At the end of the Fair, the dismantled statue joined the cross of Columbus in helping fill up “the sheds and vacant lofts” at Evamere Farm in Hudson “with debris from the World’s Fair.”

By 1898, James W. Ellsworth had married a second wife, wealthy New York socialite Julia Clark Fincke, and had moved his business empire to New York City to better monitor the great project he had begun at the Ellsworth Mines in Washington County, Pennsylvania. It was with this project that James W. Ellsworth began to respond more directly to Carnegie’s “Gospel of Wealth” philosophy. Here in the coal-fields of western Pennsylvania, Ellsworth decided to plan a “model town” to serve the workers at his mines. He was consciously following the model of his Chicago business colleague, George Pullman, who had established Pullman, Illinois as his company town. In terms of architectural design, Ellsworth favored what he always called the “Colonial,” building a replica of the John Hancock House like the one exhibited at the Exposition in 1893. Not only did Ellsworth, Pennsylvania get a John Hancock House replica, but Hudson, Ohio was to get one twenty years later after Ellsworth took his “model town” concept back to his native village.

If the 1890’s seemed to be the decade of James W. Ellsworth’s greatest triumphs: the directorship of the
World’s Columbian Exposition, the Presidency of the Union National Bank of Chicago, the friendship with Mark Hanna and William McKinley, the crucial role played at the 1896 Republican Convention, the establishment of the Ellsworth Mines in Washington County, Pennsylvania and the building of his company town—all of these Gilded Age successes were but a prologue to the work of his retirement years in Hudson, Ohio. So it was that in 1907, following the sale of the Ellsworth Mines, James W. Ellsworth at the age of 58, turned his attention to his own hometown. Grounded in Carnegie’s ideas which he had already tested with a large measure of success in Pennsylvania, Ellsworth came home with a determination to set Hudson, Ohio on a course that would change it irrevocably.

In the early 1890’s Ellsworth had begun his efforts to improve the quality of life in Hudson by enlarging Evmere Hall on his estate about a mile east of the Green. Improvements to his property included the damming of a brook into a pond he called Evmere Lake, the building of a number of barns and outbuildings including a Clock Tower on the driveway approach to his house. At his own expense he had Aurora Street widened and graded from the square to beyond the entrance of his estate and with the consent of property owners and local officials, lined the road with sizeable elm trees which he scoured the state to find and had them moved into place. By the 1920’s those elms formed a shady tunnel of beauty that led to his door. A letter to his cousin, Elisha, dated February 12, 1901 gives further instructions and details about Ellsworth’s expectations for the beautification of Hudson, particularly with regard to trees.

As early as 1903 when Western Reserve Academy was finally forced to close its doors, its Principal, Charles T. Hickok wrote to Ellsworth suggesting that he help endow the school in order to keep it in operation. Ellsworth proposed that the entire campus be sold for one dollar to a business group who would pledge to continue it as a private preparatory school. When the attempt to salvage the school failed, Ellsworth wrote to the Treasurer of Adelbert College, H.O. Haring, stating “I do not see any way that I can interest myself in Western Reserve Academy...”, pleading his commitments in Pennsylvania. The school shut down and remained closed for the next thirteen years.

Now in 1907 when James W. Ellsworth had divested himself of his industrial responsibilities, the threads of those other interests coalesced into a vision for the overall improvement of Hudson. He hired Cleveland engineer D.M. Hosford to estimate the feasibility of constructing “sewerage, water supply, and electric light systems” for Hudson. A proposal to rescue the abandoned campus of Western Reserve Academy would be included with Ellsworth’s monumental proposition as well as suggestions for the systematic lining of streets with elm trees, the removal of all overhead wires and placing them underground or at the rear of property lines, and finally the adoption of a prohibition ordinance within the corporation of the Village of Hudson. Initially, these proposals were presented informally to village officials with the specific intention “that my name must not be given or published in the press in connection therewith.”

But someone leaked the story to the Cleveland Plain Dealer which headlined “Makes Big Gift, Hides Identity, James W. Ellsworth, Big Coal Man” and a story about the proposal that infuriated Ellsworth and prompted him to write to village officials that he had decided to withdraw his offer. This drew even more notoriety and a round of articles describing his decision to withdraw the proposal. Yet once his anger was vented, Ellsworth proceeded as he had intended, working quietly behind the scenes, contacting President Thwing at Western Reserve University about the transfer of the Hudson campus, and on October 20, 1907, barely a month after the initial furor, Ellsworth formally presented his proposal to Hudson Village Council.

The public announcement of the improvements caused excitement among Hudson residents and created a stir in newspapers who waited to see if the town would give up its saloons in order to receive Ellsworth’s benefaction. The Village Council voted on December 10, 1907 to accept the proposition and incorporated the nine major proposals into an ordinance. On December 23, 1907 voters went to the polls in a special election and voted to accept a limited prohibition ordinance which was extended to a 50 year moratorium on alcohol after a hotly-contested debate on the issue in February 1910. By this time, the national press had become interested in Hudson and Ellsworth’s “model town” which provided enough material for a series of somewhat scurrilous articles that appeared between 1908 and 1910.

Ellsworth himself had gone to Italy to relax at his favorite home, the Villa Palmieri in Florence where he was when the first election deciding the fate of Hudson was held. In March, 1908 Ellsworth returned to Hudson and held a public meeting in order “to have a heart to heart talk with the people”. At this meeting he announced his decision to remodel the old Straight and Son cheese warehouse into a town clubhouse complete with a billiard room and a library “where everybody can be made welcome.” He announced he
would dismantle the old Pentagon Building, build a new parsonage for the Congregational Church, and undertake other improvements at his own expense. This unusual public forum helped to solidify sentiment in favor of Ellsworth's proposals and defused the skeptics who complained about being blindly "Ellsworthed" into submission. But it did not satisfy papers like the Cleveland Plain Dealer which reported that Ellsworth wanted "to be a feudal lord" and that Hudson citizens "don't quite agree on the scheme of improvements."

But the work slowly began to take shape. The Village planted about 350 elm trees in 1908, work on the water treatment plant and electric company began in the summer of 1908, but plans for removing the telephone wires met an impasse when the two small companies that served Hudson refused to comply. At another public meeting Ellsworth called for a boycott, and eventually in July, 1910 they ceased operation as Ellsworth started his own company, Western Reserve Telephone, which today is Alltel.

Only the proposal to acquire the title to the Western Reserve Academy campus remained unresolved in 1910, the year the State Legislature passed a bill to create a Normal School (state college) in northeastern Ohio. Ellsworth was convinced that he could win the new college for Hudson if he could officially tender the old campus as a site. In July, 1910 the trustees of Western Reserve University transferred the ownership of the Hudson campus to a new corporation directed by five trustees headed by James W. Ellsworth. "There must be nothing left to chance about this school being located in Hudson," Ellsworth wrote to one of his associates. Indeed everything possible was done to convince the Normal School Commission: letters were sent to Governor Harmon and each of the commissioners, a petition signed by nearly every Hudson resident was gathered, letters from alumni were solicited, apparently hundreds of letters in all which preceded the visit of the commission in September. Ellsworth's optimism was shattered two months later when the commission announced the location of the new Normal School would be Kent.

Undaunted, Ellsworth decided to reopen the old school as a private academy or college and began to formulate plans that would take another six years to bring to fruition. Meanwhile, other improvements continued: overhead wires went underground in 1911, indoor plumbing became a reality that year, and fifteen families installed electric wiring in anticipation of the electric plant functioning. Arc lights were placed along the streets and on January 12, 1912 the lights went on in Hudson—not that you could yet count on around-the-clock service. Village operation of the new utility plants left much to be desired, but on February 6, 1912, James W. Ellsworth and his wife made a personal appearance before Village Council and presented the deeds to the utility plants.

About the same time the world was mesmerized by the news of the sinking of the Titanic, Ellsworth suggested that Hudson residents paint their houses white with dark shutters. The new Club House opened officially, and his plans for a Clock Tower on the Green took shape, supposedly a secret, but everyone knew who the donor was certain to be. It was completed in October, 1912. During that same busy year, Ellsworth set forth plans to combine the public schools with his still-dormant academy, formed a Committee of Twelve who were expected to support his proposals and help influence public opinion, and started to alter the landscape at the old campus by removing the dilapidated Middle College building. Ellsworth now proposed an elaborate plan for the public schools to share the campus, a proposal which was defeated by voters in November, 1913 when they elected the anti-Ellsworth party to village office.

Humiliated by the defeat of his hand-picked candidates, Ellsworth withdrew his offer to the public schools, but continued to search for a proper tenant for his campus. Seymour Hall, the Federal-style classroom building designed by Cleveland architects Page and Corbusier, was finished in 1914, but still no corporation was found to operate a preparatory school. Finally, in February, 1916, Ellsworth made a generous offer to the College Board of the Presbyterian Church who reopened the Western Reserve Academy in September, 1916.

For the last nine years of his life, James W. Ellsworth concentrated his attention on the improvement of the Academy, requiring of the new owners only that if "any further building or buildings are added to the school, they shall be of pure Colonial architecture." The Bicknell Gymnasium (1920), a replica of the John Hancock House, and Cutler Hall (1922, now known as Ellsworth Hall) followed his mandate. When he died in 1925, he left a handsome endowment to the Western Reserve Academy which "reopened" in 1926 on the James W. Ellsworth Foundation.

Although Ellsworth was never as prominent a Gilded Age industrialist as his better-known contemporaries, his impact on his time was considerable. But his monument, if we can call it that, is the impetus he gave to the historic preservation movement in Hudson and the re founding of a great preparatory school, Western
Reserve Academy. Both seem destined to outlive the memory of this mogul who both exemplified and transcended the pieties of the Gilded Age.

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