



## Graycliff – A Truly American Story

*“In his unshakable optimism, messianic zeal, and pragmatic resilience, Wright was quintessentially American.”*

- *Smithsonian magazine tribute on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Guggenheim.*

Just as it is often said that Frank Lloyd Wright was truly American in spirit and style, the Graycliff story is woven out of strands that also have a truly American flavor. The American Dream, embodying the notion of opportunity for all, takes shape here in the true-to-life rags-to-riches story of Darwin Martin. The close cousin to the American Dream – the one that holds that through gumption and perseverance one may triumph – is on display as well. Perseverance, resilience, and the comeback story are all in evidence at various stages in Graycliff’s 90 years – for the Martins, for Wright himself, for the house, the region, and for the Graycliff Conservancy as an organization.

Win-win relationships where all parties pragmatically get their needs met are both a hallmark of American history and culture and a defining characteristic of relationships at Graycliff where all the key players compromised a little while holding onto their defining principles in the end. One of the most enduring and distinctive American values is the lure and promise of nature, wilderness, and the frontier and the potential of new beginnings that are implicit in the purity of nature and the fresh start that movement to a new place makes possible. This is evident in both the post-retirement reboot for the Martin family at Graycliff and the property’s roots in organic architecture in which the house rose from the lands on which it sits. Finally, there is the creation of community and empathy – building community through a retreat estate that revolved around the Martin family, and empathy in the linkage to causes and the immersion in charitable endeavors that came to define the Martin family through the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We will examine each of these in turn.

## The American Dream

From Darwin Martin's humble beginnings in the central New York villages of Bouckville and Clayville from his birth in 1865 to his mother's death in 1871 when he moved west with his father, he began to climb the ladder of success at an early age. After bouncing around from farm to farm in Iowa and Nebraska, at age 12 Darwin went to live with his brother in New Jersey and began to sell soap door-to-door for the Larkin Company. The following year, in 1879, Darwin relocated to Buffalo and began working for Larkin as a bookkeeper, taking writing and bookkeeping classes throughout his teen years and beginning his rise through the company. Taken in as a surrogate family member by the Larkins and by Larkin Marketing Manager Elbert Hubbard, Darwin perhaps gained some of the family closeness that his own birth family never afforded during his childhood and adolescence.

A breakthrough at the company came when Darwin was inspired by the library's card catalog to transfer the company accounts onto customer cards, and he spent a solid four months doing so in 1885. Not that life was all work. Darwin met and courted a grocer's daughter, Isabelle Reidpath. They were married in 1889. By 1893 when Hubbard left Larkin to go to Harvard and then begin the Roycroft community in nearby East Aurora, Darwin was made Secretary of the company, began to hold stock, and by 1900 was earning a handsome salary of \$25,000 per year.



*Darwin Martin*



*Isabelle Reidpath Martin*

By 1907, having built the homes on Jewett Parkway in Buffalo for his sister Delta and her husband George Barton as well as his own prairie style mansion designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, a Chicago-based architect he had met through his brother, Martin's worth had edged over \$1 million. It would continue to rise, along with the Larkin Company fortunes, to its peak at over \$2.5 million in 1927, two years after his retirement from the Larkin Company after a continuous run with the company of 47 years – to the day.

Having climbed from the bottom to the top of the corporate ladder, and having done so in the form popularized in the Horatio Alger stories that were the rage in late 19<sup>th</sup> century America, Darwin and his wife Isabelle rode another wave of the American Dream that was trending locally and was

otherwise emblematic of wealth and position – the waterside second home. In the 1920s the South Towns’ Lake Erie shoreline was rapidly populated by captains of industry from Buffalo. The Rumsey family which at one time owned over half the land in the city of Buffalo and loaned the city all the land that was used for the 1901 Pan American Exposition, had an estate just across Eighteen Mile Creek in the Town of Evans, and Darwin bought the 8.5 acres on which Graycliff would be built from the Rumseys in 1926 for \$2,500. Other estates which sprouted up in the years just before and after World War I were owned by legendary Buffalo families – Wendt, Kellogg, and Schoelkopf, among others - whose wealth and upper crust pastimes now spread along the Lake Erie bluffs. This was a wave that eluded the Martins in many ways – a couple who educated themselves informally, rose from obscurity, did not smoke, drink, hunt, ride, sail, or indulge in other pastimes of the wealthy. This made social life with the neighbors an occasional rather than a regular event. Tastes were just too different. The Martin family did most of its socializing as an extended family, perhaps compensating for what Darwin had missed as a child. Darwin surrounded himself with family as an adult – an adult who rose from rags to riches in the classic manner of the American Dream.



*The Martin Family at Graycliff upon the occasion of its opening – July 22, 1928.*

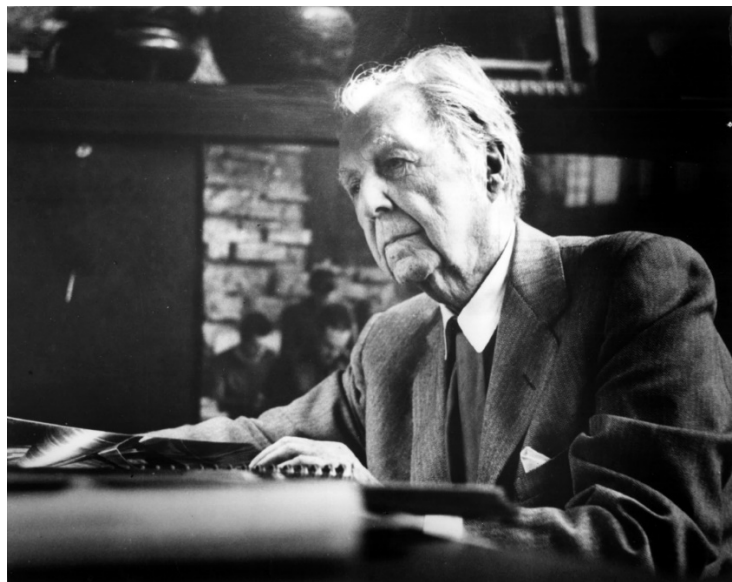
### The Power of Perseverance and the Thrill of the Comeback

Perhaps because of our country’s origins as the underdog in a David vs. Goliath battle for independence, Americans have always reserved a special place of reverence, in business, in health, and perhaps especially in sports, for those who persevere against the odds, who demonstrate resilience, and who stage rallies to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. While perseverance is certainly an element of the iconic rags-to-riches story, the quality is also featured prominently in several other places in the Graycliff narrative.

The longest-running example of perseverance and resilience in the Graycliff story is Isabelle Martin's health. Beginning in her teen years and running the entire course of her adult life, Isabelle was afflicted by scleritis, an inflammation caused by eye ulcerations accompanied by pain, decreased vision, light sensitivity, and loss of depth perception. In addition, however, she suffered from a number of other maladies: typhoid fever, shingles, injuries from falling, and a social phobia. Over her lifetime, she sought care from doctors, nurses, and Christian Science. What's most remarkable is that these constant maladies did not slow Isabelle down. Certainly there were days when she was confined to bed, including the entire summer of 1920 when she battled ochlophobia, but overall she kept up a busy pace with social obligations around Buffalo and a surprisingly ambitious travel schedule which included annual trips to the Lake Placid Club in the Adirondacks, travel throughout the United States, and several voyages to Europe. Through her various health difficulties, Isabelle persevered over the course of a lifetime, rarely letting the afflictions get the best of her.

This notion of the empowered, independent woman, while not wholly American, is nevertheless an evident theme at Graycliff. Graycliff was built for Isabelle Martin's needs and tastes and at key points in its development, she asserted her will to get her way. After the houses were completed and attention turned to landscaping the grounds, the Martins brought in Ellen Biddle Shipman, the dean of American Arts and Crafts landscape architects, to detail the landscape work that Wright had only sketched. By placing Isabelle and Ellen in powerful design roles, the progressive empowerment of women became a feature in the building of Graycliff.

The appreciation of resilience and a comeback would certainly be incomplete without examining the career trajectory of Frank Lloyd Wright. Celebrated widely for his prairie style architecture prior to World War I, Wright achieved a level of recognition that slipped into notoriety when he went off to Europe with Mrs. Cheney to produce the Wasmuth Portfolio, then subsequently left the American scene during the war when he spent years in Japan building the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo. Returning to the United States in 1922, Wright's limited work was concentrated in California, and by 1925 he had pretty much faded from American view with little work and mounting debt.



*Frank Lloyd Wright*

The revival of Darwin Martin's patronage with the Graycliff commission in 1926 helped to fill an empty period in Wright's design career and build a bridge to the era of the Taliesin Fellowship, Fallingwater, and the many architectural triumphs of the second half of his career, one that started, arguably, with Graycliff.

Beyond the personal level, this resonant theme of perseverance and resilience plays out in larger ways in the Graycliff story as well. The rise, decline, and comeback of Buffalo and the western New York region certainly fits here. In 1900 and at the time of the Pan American Exposition in 1901 where Buffalo played host to the world in showcasing industry and the emerging power of electricity, Buffalo was the 8<sup>th</sup> largest city in the country and a leader in manufacturing and transportation given its strategic location as the link on the Great Lakes between the east and west (what we now think of as the midwest.) As we all know, changes in the economy, industry, transportation, and demography have combined in the last century to advance the decline of Buffalo and the region in terms of its economic vitality and population. In recent years, however, a comeback by the city and region has been staged, fueled by several new pillars of economic development which are now poised to lead the region: education and health care, advanced manufacturing, agriculture, and heritage tourism.

Graycliff itself merits mention in the comeback story. In 1997, the Piarist fathers put the property on the market, and its future may have been as a condo development had it not been for a grassroots group of preservationists who had an interest in saving and restoring the property. This grassroots group became incorporated as the non-profit Graycliff Conservancy in 1997 and has worked over the past two decades to raise funds and invest them in the restoration of the property to its condition in 1931 as defined in Graycliff's petition for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. Over twenty years and nearly \$10 million later, Graycliff has persevered, shown resilience, and staged a comeback that will be fully showcased with the completion of restoration in 2019.

### Win-Win Relationships

*New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman reminds us that one of the hallmarks of American statehood, the present regime excluded, is that the country and its leaders have always found a way to broker win-win solutions to seemingly intractable problems, including the provision of vast humanitarian aid to the world following World War I and the generous rebuilding of Europe and Japan through the Marshall Plan after World War II. Through these arrangements, and many others that have been graciously devised that speak to the enduring pragmatism of the American outlook, each party has been able to save face, get their needs met, and look like a winner.

And so it has been with the key personalities at Graycliff. Throughout the design and building process beginning in 1926 and extending to 1930 when planting and landscaping projects were brought to completion, a fundamental tension existed between the Martins, who wanted a "simple summer cottage" and by all means wanted to keep the cost down, and Wright, who eased his own financial burdens of the day by increasing the cost and who required that his design have the customary integrity of a Wright project. This tension, as it played out in correspondence, in the design and revision process, and in the building and furnishing of the houses and grounds, tested but did not disrupt the 30 year friendship between the Martins and Mr. Wright.



*Graycliff under construction – July 5, 1927.*

In Brendan Gill's *Many Masks* biography of Wright, he notes, "It is commonly said of Wright that in designing a house for a client he would brook no interference with what he believed to be in the client's best interests and that therefore the client was obliged to become the silent victim of Wright's aesthetic tyranny. This was sometimes the case but not always; moreover in fairness to Wright it ought to be noted that when a strong-willed client collided with Wright the consequence was often a worse house instead of a better." In the case of Graycliff, a balance was struck that worked for all.

Through voluminous, often daily correspondence between Martin and Wright, patterns of flattery and good-natured humor were established over time that preserved the capacity for each party to get what they needed: for Martin, a response to a technical question or design feature that would keep the project on track; for Wright, the capacity to ask for and likely receive money through his fees, the sale of a Japanese screen, or as an advance on future work.

Perhaps the most classic example of a design clash that pitted the parties against each other was infamous window in the chimney – the window in Isabelle's bathroom which sat entirely within the massive stone fireplace chimney. She herself wrote to Wright on July 29, 1927:

*"I do not wish to appear obstinate about the bathroom with the outside window, but to me it is not a question of ventilation. From first to last a good deal of time is spent in the bathroom, and I like that sense of the out-of-doors. With all the realm of architectural design at your command your unparalleled genius will surely not balk at this small problem."*

On August 15, in a reply to Darwin that included other items, Wright replied:

*“The bathroom was well off where it was but for the idiosyncrasy of looking outdoors while in it. I will do my damndest, as she seems to be doing. ‘Angels can do no more.’”*

These exchanges illustrate the give-and-take required in a relationship that is built to stand the test of time. In the end, all parties got what they needed: Mrs. Martin got a bathroom with a full-sized window; Mr. Martin kept the project on a schedule and a budget; and Mr. Wright was able to preserve architectural integrity by deftly deflecting the many cost-saving cuts that were tossed his way. The end result was a win-win and a sustained if not strengthened relationship.

### The Wonders of Nature

An idea that has always had resonance in America is that of the bountiful frontier, the unexplored wilderness, the cleansing beauty of nature that allows for the fresh start and the new beginning. Originally advanced by Turner in the late 1800s, the frontier and the continuing reconnection with nature was seen as the defining process in American history, nurturing “a restless nervous energy and a buoyancy and exuberance that comes freedom.” The notion of starting afresh and embracing nature’s freshness and purity come together here. Wright, heavily influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson, insisted that American artists saw what people have always seen, the universal principle in nature, and that they express that principle in their own unique way, one in which nature spoke to the American character better than the city. From Thoreau, Wright adopted the principle of simplicity and wove the reliance on organic form and simplicity together to form the basis of his Organic Architecture philosophy. In Wright’s view, various core principles are at work in organic architecture which give a structure authenticity. Among the most important are:

- Building and Site: The site should be enhanced by the building and the building derives its form partially from the nature of the site. The building grows out of the site as naturally as any plant. Its relationship to the site is so unique that it would be out of place elsewhere.
- Materials: They are used in a way that enhances their innate character and optimizes their individual color, texture, and strength. One material is not disguised as another.
- Nature: Nature is an architect’s school. The creative possibilities of form, color, pattern, texture, proportion, rhythm, and growth are all demonstrated in nature. Organic architecture is concerned with natural materials, the site, and the people who occupy the buildings.



*Graycliff's stone massing reinforces its roots in the land upon which it sits.*

With its stone and stucco exterior harvested from the site and the interior walls made of sand from the beach below, Graycliff, with its simple lines and authentic materials, has become a key example of Wright's organic architecture – buildings that are at one with their site.

Also at work in this narrative is the quintessentially American occupation with the fresh start. In the *New York Times*, columnist David Brooks writes, “We have a national predilection for fresh starts. Coming to this country is for many people a new beginning. We turn every new presidential administration, every new sports season, every graduation ceremony into a new beginning. It's said Americans don't settle arguments, we just leave them behind. The story of America, then, can be interpreted as a series of redemptions, of injury, suffering and healing, fresh starts.”

In the human dimension, as superintendent of construction in his new retirement mode, Darwin Martin was indeed making a fresh start. Wright, for his part, was working on one of only two realized commissions earned in the latter half of the 1920s. For him the project represented a fresh start as well.

### Empathy and the Charitable Impulse

A recent series in the *Washington Post* examined the question of what unites us as an American people. Chief among the responses was the sense that to be American is to build community and display empathy for others. Truly, ever since De Tocqueville's prescient observations in the 1830s, Americans have been strongly identified with the capacity to empathize, the drive to build community, and the capacity and will to give to others less fortunate.

These distinctive American qualities are consistently expressed by the Martin family in the Graycliff story. In his professional life, Darwin Martin helped to build a company that was a leader in American welfare capitalism. The Larkin Company pioneered in the reduction of standard work hours, the provision of paid vacation, and the development of benevolent and loan funds for the benefit of its employees. A Wright-designed office building was built with amenities for the workplace that made it a desirable place to be, while opportunities to learn, recreate, and socialize with peers were abundant. The Larkin Company was consciously developed with a family culture, the patriarchal leaders and executives giving to their family members.



*The Larkin Administration building in Buffalo*

This charitable orientation was extended by the Martins toward education as well, particularly the offering of educational opportunities to boys in a way that brought to mind the opportunities Darwin himself missed as a boy. With annual “subscriptions” and the donation of a car to the George Jr. Republic, service on the Board of Directors, including many years as President, of the Pine Mountain Settlement School in Kentucky, regular correspondence with Booker T. Washington and charitable support of his Tuskegee Institute, and the eventual endowment of a chair in Mathematics at the University of Buffalo, the Martins indeed expressed their charitable support for education.

### Conclusion

Graycliff tells a series of stories that are American to the core. The Graycliff adventure brings together some of the most classic themes our country is built on:

- *The American Dream – climbing the ladder of prosperity.* Darwin Martin rose from the bottom to the top of the Larkin Company and Buffalo society through sheer pluck and determination.
- *The comeback from adversity to greatness, and the support that sometimes makes it possible.* In the mid-1920s, Frank Lloyd Wright was down and out, beset by bankruptcy and scandal and was then offered a helping hand that turned his career around.
- *The power of relationships, their will to survive – and the way empathy builds the charitable impulse in Americans who care.*
- *The progressive empowerment of women and their quiet emergence as leaders.* The design and building of Graycliff was driven by Isabelle Martin’s tastes and needs, while the landscape was completed by noted Arts and Crafts designer Ellen Biddle Shipman.
- *The celebration of nature and the joy of living in harmony with it.* Wright channeled the great American naturalists in using Graycliff as a powerful example of his emerging organic design style.

Today, Graycliff stands majestically on the shore of Lake Erie as a monument to one of the greatest American tales ever told. It’s a story about a wealthy businessman’s ambition of building a breezy, summer retreat for his family; a woman’s steadfast influence in an otherwise male-dominated society; an acclaimed architect on the downward slope of his early career; and a country on the brink of a financial crisis that threatened to extinguish it all.

More than a home, Graycliff is one of Wright’s clearest examples of organic architecture, and to visitors, an unexpected departure from his signature Prairie style. At one with its surroundings, Graycliff blurs the distinction between man’s creation and nature’s generosity—built using sand, rock, and wood harvested from the grounds and coastline, then flooded with natural light. Embracing the serenity of the gardens and the sweeping Lake Erie vista, Wright redefined modern architecture not through opulence and grandeur, but by exhibiting a mastery of subtlety and restraint.



The Graycliff Conservancy is dedicated to restoring Graycliff's structures and landscape to its former glory, preserving its legacy for future generations. A spirited extension of Buffalo's rebirth, you are invited to experience this unforgettable setting where a family's resolve was tested and one man's struggle turned into triumph.

And who doesn't love a great American comeback story?

## Endnote

### The Piarist Era

*The Piarist Fathers, an educational order of priests from Hungary, bought Graycliff in 1950 from the estate of Martin family who had not used the estate since Isabelle's death in 1945 to serve as their North American headquarters. In 1955, near the main entrance to the Graycliff property, a two story concrete block school building was erected. This building originally was used as a school, but by the early 1960's was converted to a boarding house for students attending Calasanctius High School. The high school was located on Windsor Avenue in Buffalo, and ironically was only a few blocks from Darwin Martin's home on Jewett Parkway. Due to financial difficulties the school closed in 1991.*

*At the Derby House, as the Piarists called it, the garage and apartments were also enlarged into living space to accommodate a novitiate. The first novices arrived in 1966 and the novitiate program lasted until it was transferred to Florida in 1982. Duties for a young novice consisted of cutting the grass, painting where needed, general maintenance and shoveling snow. Afterward this building, the former residence of Isabelle's daughter, was eventually used for religious retreats. During the course of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, refugees were temporarily housed at Graycliff while they sought asylum or were in transition. Additionally, the Fathers constructed a gym at the south end of the property in 1957.*

*By the late 1980's, enrollment at Calasanctius High School was declining and the number of Piarist Fathers who could staff the school was dwindling. To continue in the spirit of the order, the Evans Pre-School Center was opened at the site of the former school building in 1979. Later, St. Michael's School, a Catholic elementary institution, was formed in 1987. Both schools unfortunately did not remain open for extended periods. In 1997, with no students and only a handful of elderly priests in residence, Graycliff was put up for sale and was purchased by the Graycliff Conservancy. The Piarists, while not active locally, are still thriving worldwide with school and education missions under way in 13 sites throughout the Americas. Their United States headquarters are now in Devon, Pennsylvania and Fort Lauderdale, Florida.*



Thanks to Paul Lubienecki, Ph.D. whose blogpost in the New York Historical Review informed the Piarist era end note.



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