



## ARCHITECTURE AROUND US

By Lu Donnelly

### A Late-Blooming Architect

During the 1920s and '30s, the Mellon family commissioned or were major donors to more than half a dozen building projects in Pittsburgh. Several of these projects were overseen by architect Edward Purcell "E.P." Mellon (1875-1953), who worked on two of the city's largest downtown buildings: Gulf Oil and the former Mellon Bank building known as the "Temple of Finance."<sup>1</sup>

E.P. was the second son of Judge Thomas Mellon's oldest son, Thomas Alexander (1844-1899), and nephew to Thomas' two brothers, Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon and banker Richard Beatty Mellon. Yet, this skilled architect had no works list and only a sketchy biography in the local archives. Careful study of the Pittsburgh directories revealed that as a young man, E.P. lived next door to his successful grandfather on North Negley Avenue and was well thought of in the family.<sup>2</sup> Typical of Judge Thomas Mellon's children and grandchildren, the young sons of Thomas Alexander Mellon set to work immediately after finishing high school at Shady Side Academy in 1894. E.P. and his older brother Thomas Alexander, Jr., (1873-1948) were the principals of "TA & EP Mellon Bros. Monongahela Light & Power Company" in 1901 and later ran "TA & EP Mellon" real estate firm.<sup>3</sup> The brothers are pictured in *Palmer's Pittsburgh* c. 1905, which shows E.P. as a handsome dark-haired chap.<sup>4</sup> A later photo captures his youthful swagger.



"American Country Houses," *Country Life*, August 1926.

It is unclear where E.P. attended college, but perhaps the real estate work inspired him to take up architecture, because Andrew Mellon's biographer mentions that E.P. lived in Paris in 1909 and was "studying to be an architect."<sup>5</sup> It is possible that E.P. was studying at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts.<sup>6</sup> After his wedding in Louisville on June 28, 1913, E. P. and his bride, Ethel, sailed

on the *Mauretania* for Paris and moved into their home at 55 Rue de Babylone.<sup>7</sup>

In December 1916, E.P. purchased a home at 120 East 65th Street in New York City as a Christmas present for his wife.<sup>8</sup> For the next 24 years he practiced architecture from his offices on New York's upper east side.<sup>9</sup> He designed a home for his wife and



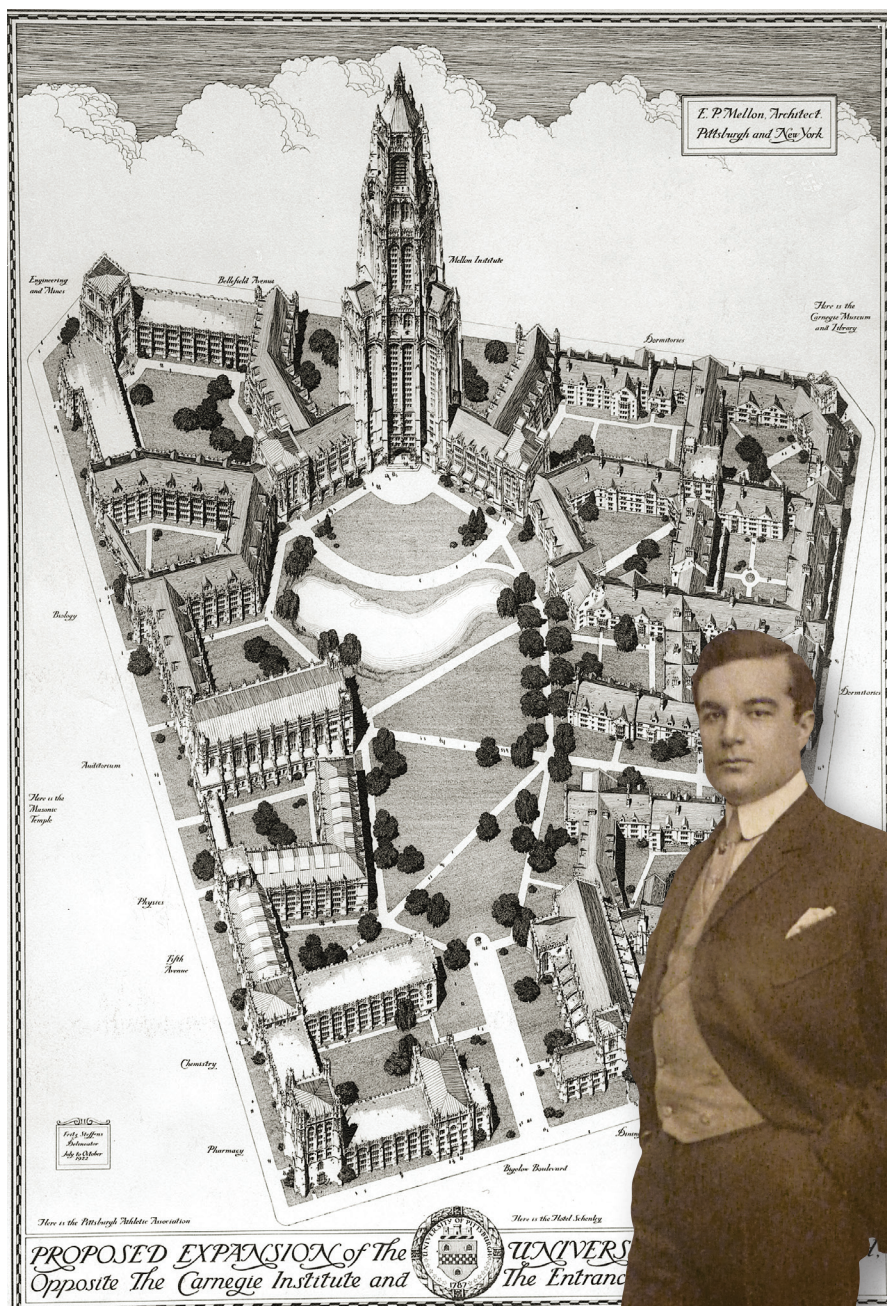


**LEFT: Rolling Rock Club, 1921.**

Courtesy Richard King Mellon family archive.

**BELOW: 1922 drawing for E.P. Mellon architect, designed by Robert Tappan, delineated by Fritz Steffens.**

Courtesy University Archives/University of Pittsburgh.



**Edward Purcell Mellon (1875-1953).**

Courtesy Richard King Mellon family archive.

two girls in Southampton in 1918, naming it “Villa Maria.”<sup>10</sup> The stucco house was built on a narrow spit of sand between the Atlantic Ocean and Shinnecock Bay. E.P.’s 1919 article in *Architecture* magazine details his respect for the natural contours of the Southampton dunes and his desire to create a casual house that would have been at home on the Mediterranean. He incorporated a deep blue plaster fanlight above the door with a bas-relief of the Madonna and Child; incorporated stone mantels from Perugia; and used an 18th-century blue and gold frieze salvaged from the Palazzo Torlonia to achieve an Italian character.<sup>11</sup> The design appears to reflect his active participation as a trustee of the American Academy in Rome.<sup>12</sup>

Mellon’s earliest known Pittsburgh commission was in 1917 at 1110 Beechwood Boulevard.<sup>13</sup> More than 20 other works have been documented from 1917 to 1940, ranging from Presbyterian University Hospital and several buildings at the Tuberculosis League Hospital of Pittsburgh<sup>14</sup> to academic buildings, some proposed at the University of Pittsburgh, and others built at Shady Side Academy and Chatham University. An early photo of the Rolling Rock Club reveals his skill at designing in a classical mode. His residential commissions included re-shaping two older Pittsburgh mansions at 5045 Fifth Avenue and Woodland Road, and the first co-operative apartment building in



# UP FRONT



**ABOVE:** Park Mansions, 1927, at 5023 Frew Street.

**BELOW:** Laughlin Hall, Chatham University, 1931.

Photos by Lu Donnelly.

the city, Park Mansions adjacent to Schenley Park.<sup>15</sup> E.P. died in 1953 near Wilmington, Delaware, and is buried in Southampton. No doubt there are other buildings that should be added to his list of accomplishments. ☀

**Lu Donnelly** is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania* (University of Virginia Press, 2010) a book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled *Buildings of the United States*. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

<sup>1</sup> Gulf Bldg. 707 Grant Street, 1930-1932; Bank, SE corner of Fifth Avenue and Smithfield Street, 1923-1924. Both with Trowbridge & Livingston.

<sup>2</sup> Judge Mellon said he was one of "three interesting children" in Thomas' family. "Alexander, the oldest with much of his father's nature, and Edward, with the good traits of both father and mother, are now at school [Shady Side Academy]" *Thomas Mellon and His Times*, p. 383.

<sup>3</sup> From 1900 to 1903, E.P. is listed as the treasurer of the Fort Pitt Gas Co. The brothers were involved in and/or directors of several businesses in the region.

<sup>4</sup> *Palmer's Pictorial*, 1758-1905, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> Cannadine, David. *Mellon: An American Life*, 2006, p. 199. He neither attended nor graduated from the University of Pittsburgh, Yale, or Princeton—schools favored by his relatives. Many architects at the time apprenticed and then opened their own offices.

<sup>6</sup> E.P. was 34 years old in 1909; it is assumed that he attended L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, but not clear which atelier.

<sup>7</sup> "A Tattler's View," *The Index*, Saturday, July 5, 1913, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> "Mr. Mellon purchased the house early last week, and had a quick search of title made so that he was able to present the deed to the property, which was held at \$75,000, to his wife on Christmas morning." The house is described as a "four-story modern dwelling." *New York Times*, December 27, 1916, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Ward, James. *Architects in Practice, New York City, 1900-1940*, p. 53. He rented office space at 52 Vanderbilt Avenue for five years (1916-1921); then 350 Madison Avenue for 18 more years (1922-1940). Between 1938 and 1940 he practiced with W.L. Smith.

<sup>10</sup> He married Ethel Churchill Humphrey (1880-1938), the daughter of a Louisville, Kentucky, judge. (*The Index*, July 5, 1913, p. 12.) They had two daughters, Mary (b. 1914) and Jane (b. 1917). Having both a mother and daughter named "Mary" may have inspired the name of the Southampton house, "Villa Maria."





<sup>11</sup> "Villa Maria on the Dunes," *Architecture*, 40, Nov. 1919, pp. 307-309.

<sup>12</sup> Oja, Carol J. "Establishing an American *Prix de Rome*: 'Picked Men,' Enabling Women, and Emerging Composers" (2009). Manuscript article on line.

<sup>13</sup> *Builders Bulletin* (Pittsburgh), 1, no. 35, p. 5 (April 28, 1917):5. Harry E. Sheldon was the president of Allegheny Steel Company in 1917-1919. The Sheldon house and its neighbor, the McClintic house at 1130 Beechwood Blvd., also a Mellon design, have both been demolished. E.P.'s uncle Richard Beatty Mellon lived northwest of these houses facing Fifth Avenue. His house, designed by Alden & Harlow, has also been demolished.

<sup>14</sup> 2851 Bedford Avenue. Mellon designed the Men's Pavilion (1921), Main Hospital (1929), and the Dispensary (1940).

<sup>15</sup> 5045 Fifth Avenue was built for James Rees in 1878 and reconfigured for J. H. Hillman in 1922. His uncle Andrew W. Mellon purchased the 1897 Woodland Road home of George Laughlin in 1927 and had it reconfigured that year. Park Mansions, 5023 Frew Street, 1927, with Thomas Roy Hinckley, accommodates 30 distinctive apartments, several with cathedral ceiling living rooms.



**Main Hospital, former Tuberculosis League, 2827 Bedford Avenue, Pittsburgh.**

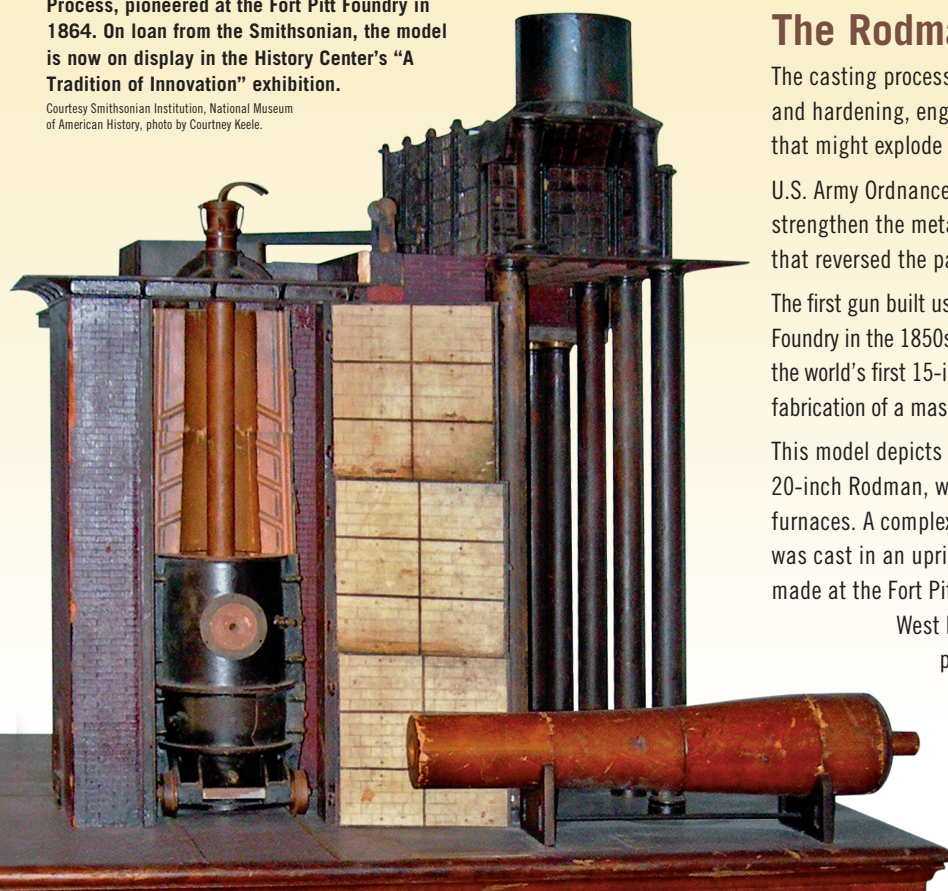
Photo by Lu Donnelly.



## Smithsonian Connection

**A model of the equipment used in the Rodman Process, pioneered at the Fort Pitt Foundry in 1864. On loan from the Smithsonian, the model is now on display in the History Center's "A Tradition of Innovation" exhibition.**

Courtesy Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, photo by Courtney Keele.



## The Rodman Model

The casting process of large iron cannons, which involved a sequence of cooling and hardening, engendered weaknesses toward the outer surface. And a cannon that might explode upon firing made it a weapon of questionable value.

U.S. Army Ordnance officer Thomas Jackson Rodman studied factors that could strengthen the metal and developed a process (using a water circulation method) that reversed the pattern of stresses by cooling cannons from the inside out.

The first gun built using the Rodman hollow casting process was made at the Fort Pitt Foundry in the 1850s. In 1860, the War Department commissioned Rodman to build the world's first 15-inch cannon. By 1864, Rodman had also supervised the fabrication of a massive 20-inch gun (that is, made to fire a 20-inch-wide projectile.)

This model depicts the intricate casting apparatus used to produce the first 20-inch Rodman, which required nearly 80 tons of molten iron poured from three furnaces. A complex four-piece mold was required to shape the cannon, which was cast in an upright position. The completed 20-inch gun barrel, one of six made at the Fort Pitt Foundry, weighed 117,000 pounds. This model educated

West Point Military Academy cadets on the casting techniques pioneered in Pittsburgh.

**See page 33 for a photo of the Rodman Gun.**