THE BLACK CITY
Elizur Wright, Jr.’s, View of Early Industrial Pittsburgh

Edited by Vincent A. Carrafiello and Richard O. Curry

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Elizur Wright, Jr., gained fame in nineteenth-century America as an abolitionist, newspaper editor, inventor, and as the “father of life insurance.” The scion of a prominent Connecticut family which moved to Ohio’s Western Reserve in 1810, Wright graduated from Yale in 1826. Wright first attracted national attention in 1833 when he helped to organize the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia. In 1834, he became the society’s corresponding secretary with headquarters in New York. Before launching his career as a professional abolitionist, however, Wright spent one year, 1828-1829, as an agent of the American Tract Society in Western Pennsylvania. While there, he wrote a series of letters to his fiancée, Susan Clark, which not only reflect his intense dedication to the task of spreading evangelical Protestantism in “the West,” but describe in some detail his impressions of social and economic developments in Western Pennsylvania. In the letters printed here, Wright describes Pittsburgh at a critical stage of its development — the period when industrialization was beginning to transform “this black city” into a major metropolitan center. Wright observed a city on the make whose people were engrossed in the mundane pursuits of commerce and industry — a preoccupation so total that it shocked the evangelical soul of this Yankee purist. “... I hope at last,” he began, “to get clear of this noisy, smoky city ... where the black mud on the pavements was over shoe — where the people are all either blacksmiths, or look like blacksmiths. Such is Pittsburgh.”

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1 Philip G. and Elizabeth Q. Wright, Elizur Wright: The Father of Life Insurance (Chicago, 1937); and David C. French, “The Conversion of an American Radical: Elizur Wright, Jr., and the Abolitionist Commitment” (Ph.D. diss., Case Western Reserve University, 1970).

2 The Elizur Wright, Jr., manuscripts are housed in the manuscripts division of the Library of Congress. Typescripts are available at the Boston Public Library.
Pittsburgh, Nov. 24, 1828

My dearest Susan:

I came into the city this day to meet the Rev. O. Eastman, 3 general agent for the Tract Soc. for the Valley of the Mississippi. Hitherto I am disappointed but am expecting him to arrive every minute in the Philadelphia Stage. . . . If you had been floating about as long as I have in an ocean of strangers you would feel the worth of a letter as you cannot now. — You would grasp it like a plant sent to save you from drowning. Not that I repent of having engaged in this business — the very reverse is true, but I find myself no exception to the old saying, that we know not the value of our comforts till we have lost them. I have formed five Tract Societies, & have several others on the anvil. . . . Nov. 25. Mr. Eastman arrived just as I finished the preceding page. After a day spent in consultation with him & in efforts to excite the good people in Pittsburgh to do more in the cause of Tracts, it is very nearly determined that I shall remain in Western Pennsylvania till the whole of it is occupied with auxiliaries, which will probably be during the whole winter. I should greatly prefer to labour in my own state (Ohio), but I think it best on the whole to follow implicitly the wishes of the Am. Tract Society, which in its mighty & systematic operations is bringing blessings upon the whole land. . . . Tomorrow I go to McKeesport 12 miles up the Monongahela to form a Tract Soc. After returning & spending a day here I hope at last to get clear of this noisy, smoky city. (What would you think of a city where the black mud on the pavements was over shoe — where the people are all either blacksmith, or look like blacksmiths. Such is Pittsburgh. Ascend the hill around which the city lies and you may see hundreds of furnaces vomiting forth immense volumes of black smoke mingled with red flames. Among them are scattered little steam pipes peeping from the roofs & always snorting out their white steam like so many whales. There are foundries & glass houses & salt works & steam mills & steam factories without number. By steam the water is henceforth to [be] pumped up from the river into a reservoir on the top of a hill overlooking the city. In short so full is the city of smoke from all these immense fires of mineral coal that one cannot see from one end of a straight level street to the other. The coal is dug as free as dirt all over the country for fifty miles around.) . . .

3 Rev. O. Eastman was the general superintendent of the American Tract Society.
health & spirits & greatly pleased with the work in which I am engaged. If heaven preserves you & me as it ever has done, it will do a thousand times better than I deserve.

Elizur

Pittsburgh, December 12, 1828

My own Susan,

... I am to operate in this western part of Pennsylvania for the present. The people here are not in the habit of meeting on a week day for any purpose whatever. It is almost necessary therefore that an agent preach to them on the Sabbath, & for this reason I have made application to the Portage (Ohio) Presbytery for a license. Whether they will grant one or not is uncertain of course, but they have appointed the second Wednesday of January next to examine me. ... This western Pennsylvania will take me till about the first of August. After that the Am. Tract Soc. wishes to have me take hold of the Western Reserve. ... This work is far more pleasing to me than anything I have ever been engaged in before. It promotes the health both of the soul & the body. My business for a fortnight past has been to raise funds to enlarge the depository of this city. The subscription now amounts to $250.00, most of it paid. I find a great many very agreeable Christian friends who aid me with all their might. These I set off against the cold hearted who are not rare.

As I have a little leisure today, you shall have a word or two more about Pittsburgh. The sun is shining today in a clear blue sky & it is warm enough to walk out with a coat unbuttoned. The furnaces all around me however are doing their best to hide the azure vault. All manner of hammers too are making a mock of silence. This city of blacksmiths cares little what the day is overhead. If you could walk out with me, tho' I could not afford you very clean side walks & you might even go over shoe in black mud at the crossings, yet I could show you some things worth being seen. ... At Mrs. Morgan's boarding house just after dinner I say, are you ready to walk my love? Well, you catch hold of my arm & we sally out into Third St. Turn to our left into Market St. Then down St. Clair St. Here we come to a long and [illegible] bridge across the Alleghany. I pay the publican that keeps it 8 cents both for you and me, going and coming. This is a roofed bridge, 400 yards, or nearly a quarter of a mile long, perfectly straight & level, resting on six stone piers so high that a steamboat may pass under & having footwalks built on the outside in the manner of a
piazza. These footwalks afford a delightful promenade, I am told, many people in summer pay the toll, 4 cents, just for the pleasure of walking over on one side & back on the other. The whole is painted white & makes a fine show at a distance. We are now in Alleghany town. See a splendid mansion on the bank of the river, across the Pennsylvania Canal which connects Pittsburgh with Philadelphia with the exception of about 40 miles land carriage over the mountains. It is new, and has not yet been filled with water. We rise [to] the second bank, & walk along in front of the Penitentiary. It has a fine appearance being 8 square (?) and having a high circular tower at every angle. The front [is] very lofty, built of stone, covering six acres. From the Penitentiary, we ascend a high hill where we find 30 or 40 Irishmen at work levelling down the site of the Western Theological Seminary. They have tumbled an immense mass of rocks down the steep side. This building will not be founded on the sand. Turning towards the city, we see it far beneath us, sending up the same murky cloud which has never ceased to hang over it from its birth. We are filled with admiration at the result of human industry — What a great hill a parcel of little ants will raise. At our feet starts the sublime Ohio for his march . . . [illegible]. We cast our eyes upon the Alleghany above [the] Bridge & see huge stone piers rising from the surface, some of them already 30 feet above it. Upon these a branch of the canal is to be carried across into the city. The aqueduct is to be covered like the bridge. We descend, recross the Alleghany, walk (?) up Liberty St. till we come to the canal, turn to our right among a multitude of stone cutters. Ascend Grant’s Hill. Here the canal enters a stone arch & passes through, or will pass through when the arch (or tunnel) is completed, the hill [being] quite out of my map. It comes round and enters the Monongahela. They cut the hill down from the top about 70 feet, make an arch of stone & then put the earth back upon it. All this to take the canal to the steamboats which lie in the Monongahela, & because there is not room for it to go through the city. The tunnel will be I should guess at least 300 yards long. We pass along the top of the ridge where [there] is a large reservoir, like a great cellar, just built to supply the city with water. It is about 100 feet above the surface of the river. They propose to fill it from the Alleghany by a pump driven by steam. This they have been trying to do for a week past, but the pressure of the water has burst the great iron pipe in two or three places, tearing up the pavement and deluging the streets &c. The water is to be carried from this in iron pipes all over the city. Here we have another good view of the city, & the
beautiful village of Alleghany town which we have just left. There are but two steeples in the city. One, of the court house, & the other of a Gothic, Episcopal Church — a square tower with four minarets at the corners. There are eight or ten meeting houses, plain brick buildings. We have a beautiful view also of the Monongahela bridge. It is like the other except that the cat walks are inside. It is 500 yards long and rests on 7 piers. We see iron works, glass works, paper mills, cotton factories &c, &c, all moved by steam. Cross Smithfield St. & pass down Wood St. to the Monongahela. See the river full of all manner of boats, their flags flying. They look better than the Eastern boats, having their cabins all above. Frequently they have four tiers of windows one above the other, like a four story dwelling. We go on board the Robert Fulton, admire the sumptuousness of its cabin, the strength of its machinery &c. Here we see them landing huge piles of lead from Galena, there molasses from New Orleans — Iron, cotton, corn, flour, pork, are everywhere in the way. As we ascend the bank which overlooks the river, The Delaware, S.B. fires her signal gun, bears away from the wharf, passes up the stream to show herself, downs her flag staff, and goes under the bridge, chimneys standing, turns and sweeps back before us, fires her farewell gun & away she goes. The gun was nothing [compared] to its echo which came thundering back from the opposite mountain as though all its rocks were tumbling into the river. This mountain rises almost perpendicularly from the river to a great height. It is full of stone quarries & coal mines. The top is a table land. Here having seen enough of the "Smoky City" you vanish away & leave me to get to my lodgings & drink my tea & write this history alone. . . .

Adieu my dearest & may He that never slumbers keep you.

Your Elizur.

Pittsburgh, Feb. 26, 1829

My dearest Susan,

Yesterday I received a communication from Dr. Day, President of Yale College, inviting me to accept the office of Tutor in that College. At first I was inclined to say no. But as there is no haste, my second thoughts were that a little deliberation would do me no harm. I therefore replied that I would consult my friends on the subject & give a decisive answer before the 15th of April. The duties of a

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4 Wright did not accept the offer to teach at Yale but went to teach at the Western Reserve College.
Tutor are merely to hear the short recitations per day & attend college prayers. He receives about the same salary that I did in Groton, & enjoys the privilege of the college libraries, and the instructions of the Professor of Theology, &c. It gives a man an opportunity of getting a good library, laying a foundation for greater usefulness in the future, & coming out if he pleases a little richer than he went in. On the other hand if I would accept it, it would delay the union which we anticipate, next fall, at least a year for one may keep the office from one, to as many years as he pleases, if he will abstain from matrimony. Now what I wish you to say for me is, yes or no. Don’t say “Do as you please.” You know that I need more education — Say yes, and you may send me to school till you are satisfied & perhaps may thus cast your own lot in some place that you may like better than the back woods of Ohio. While I am at that school you can see me at least three times in the year. Say no, and with equal pleasure I shall pursue the plan which I have heretofore proposed to you. Do not think I want you to say Yes. My inclination is on the side of saying no — on which side duty is I can hardly tell. If you have any preference, it is very important for me to know it & to act accordingly. My dear father & mother have been delighting themselves with the idea of my coming home to live next fall, but I suppose my father would still be better pleased with anything that would encourage my education for he is very firm in his notion to make a preacher of me. The business of the Tract Society goes on but heavily in this Black City. Men are too much engaged for themselves to mind the welfare of others. Every man here seems to be straining every nerve to get rich with the hope of spending his money someday or other in a place that is cleaner. Such a whirl of business is not to be seen in any other city of my acquaintance. The people are so much engrossed in it, that they do not mind\(^5\) washing their faces. As ever, your own Elizur.

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\(^5\) “Mind” is used in its archaic form as a verb, indicating their lack of personal hygiene.