The manufacture of tin products was among the earliest of Pittsburgh industries. As one of the city’s first tinsmiths, John Dunlap fabricated and sold bird cages, miners’ lamps and a full range of household and kitchen tinware. In 1839, Dunlap opened his business in a one-man shop at 26 Market Street marked with “The Sign of the Coffee Pot,” a shop which subsequently became one of the city’s oldest and most enduring tin factories. Under his guidance, the company developed into a huge complex with a sales room and six large warehouses at the corner of Second and Market streets. The history of Dunlap’s operation in Pittsburgh parallels the development of the urban tin industry in which production moved from small hand fabricating tin shops to mechanized factories. By focusing on Dunlap’s life, this article provides a picture of a nineteenth century craftsman/entrepreneur, as well as a bird’s eye view of the tin industry in Pittsburgh.

Dunlap began by producing household items out of copper and tin but quickly began supplying other Pittsburgh industries. He sold various sizes of jar caps to Curling, Robertson & Company Glass-

works, and copper pipe and fittings, factory oil cans, lamps and reflectors to three cotton factories. Dunlap’s 1878 catalog and price list includes stamped wares such as buckets, steamers, cake pans and molds, patty pans, coffee and teapots, spittoons, cuspidors, chamber buckets, toys, candlesticks and trays, to name a few. He supplied his own trade with tin plate, block tin, wire, brass, copper, iron and zinc sheets, as well as a full line of “Tinmen’s Machines and Tools.”

The introduction of machinery revolutionized tinsmithing and led to the production of machines for the manufacture of tin, in addition to household items. Although the steam power and die-stamping in the 1840s tended to be restricted to the nation’s urban centers, most tin shops used some machinery. Dunlap’s 1885 catalog included wiring, turning and burring machines, beading machines for gutters and seaming machines. The earliest known advertisement for Dunlap’s shop in the Pittsburgh Mercury sheds light on the nature of his business:

First Notice, March 16, 1842. New Establishment. John Dunlap manufacturer of Tin, Copper and Sheet Iron Ware and Dealer in Japaned Ware. No 26 Market Street (Sign of the Coffee Pot). Also keeps on hand portable tepid baths, Slipper and Shower baths, Bright or Plated (lightly hammered) Coffee & Tea Urns, Coffee Filters, Plate Warmers, etc., etc. Russia side square iron fenders, plain and beautifully symmetrical, which he will sell on reasonable terms, wholesale and retail. The public are respectfully requested to call and examine his stock of ware. Highest price paid for old metals.

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Contemporary sketches of John Dunlap indicate that he prospered through hard work and careful business management. One obituary confirms this life-long reputation:

Mr. Dunlap had been known to the business men of Pittsburgh for full a half a century and during all that time he had maintained a reputation for industry, enterprise, and probity which laid broad and deep the foundations of his fortune...the lesson of his life might be learned from his patient industry, his inflexible integrity, and his self-reliance.2

John Dunlap, born in the north of Ireland near the village of Moneymora, County Londonderry, on May 26, 1818, was of Scotch ancestry. After the death of his father, his mother decided to come to America to join her brother, Robert Brooke, established in the textile business in Paterson, New Jersey. She sailed with her six small children Lettie, Eliza, Jane, Margaret, Robert and John in the Autumn of 1826. During the cold and rough passage, Robert contracted pneumonia, died, and was buried at sea. A caring family kept one of Robert’s little corduroy suits, passing it from generation to generation as a reminder of the hardships endured by their ancestors and other emigrant families. 3

John Dunlap arrived in the United States at age 8; details about his early years in New Jersey are sketchy, with virtually no information about his formal schooling. One account4 indicates that he first found work as an apprentice in a cotton mill, followed by a clerkship in a hardware store. He apprenticed to learn the tinner’s trade in Paterson, but moved to Poland, Ohio, to work in a brick-making business for a short time. Dunlap came to Pittsburgh in 1837 or 1838 and may have worked for a time “with old Mr. Scaife.”5 In May 1839, the 21-year-old Dunlap established a small shop and began making his tinwares by hand. He signed his petition for U.S. citizenship on September 12, 1840.

Just five years later, Dunlap suffered a severe loss when the great fire of 1845 consumed 56 acres and 1,000 buildings in Pittsburgh’s central business district on April 10. According to the company’s 1927 catalog, the firm lost everything in 1845, and no insurance was paid because “nearly every company doing business in Pittsburgh was bankrupted by the fire.”

As soon as temporary quarters could be found, Dunlap started again. The family history notes that Dunlap surveyed the ruins of his company and discovered that a large pile of tinplate in the cellar could be reclaimed. At the time he had $700 in the

First advertisement for Dunlap’s early tinshop in downtown Pittsburgh, c. 1840. Dunlap began his career by working out of a small hand fabricating shop. The inscription on the ad suggests the craftsman’s faith in the Protestant work ethic. The jingle also proved prophetic.
like other mid-nineteenth century craftsmen, Dunlap successfully adjusted his trade to the new industrial order. By the late 1860s, new presses mechanized the largely manual trade and busied a work force of 60 men and women. In 1893, his firm employed 150 workers.

bank, so he went to New York, where Phelps Dodge & Company staked him a new start on the basis of his “character.” On June 10, 1845, he purchased the property that he had previously rented, a 30-foot by 80-foot lot at the corner of Market and Second, and built a four-story structure. That same year, he introduced tin roofing to Pittsburgh and personally topped one of the first buildings erected after the fire, a building at First Avenue and Market Street then occupied by William Holmes & Co. (In 1892 an obituary noted that the quality of this extant roof demonstrated that “the work of his hands still remains to show it was well and faithfully done.”)

As his business prospered, Dunlap purchased additional land adjacent to the Second and Market Street location, adding parcels in 1847 and 1855. In 1850, according to tax data, the firm used hand power, averaged 13 male employees, and had capital investments of $8,000 as well as a raw material inventory that included $9,000 worth of tin sheet. Later Dunlap added new products and expanded his production of copper and sheet iron ware. In 1854, Dunlap experimented with tin-plating, importing black sheet iron from England. Although his process was successful, the high cost of American labor prevented him from competing with imported tinplate. Some company catalogs suggest that Dunlap’s firm may have been the first to manufacture tinplates in the United States.

By 1860, the firm had a capital investment of $40,000 with an annual product of $25,000. Although the work force increased to 25 males, roofing was discontinued in 1861, most probably because this phase of the business was no longer profitable. Some items such as square lanterns, soldiers’ canteens and miners’ lamps were still being made by hand. James B. Scott affiliated with the firm in 1862, and the name changed to John Dunlap and Company. With a capital investment still valued at $40,000, the product value in japanned and stamped ware had risen to $85,000. Employing 20 females and 35 males, the firm supplemented hand work with the steam power of four
stamping, 13 cutting, and two forming machines, as well as three lathes. Six years later, the business [had] six large drop presses and four pressing machines, worked by a twenty horse power engine. Some of the work produced has still to be done by hand, and in that eight hand presses are employed. At the establishment of these works, one small warehouse 20 by 80 feet was too much for the business which now requires five ware houses. Then, three or four hands performed all the work; now an average of 60 hands are employed.7

From 1861 to 1881, the company concentrated on jobbing tinplates and manufacturing stamped, japanned and pieced tinware, and tinners' trimmings, notably “Dunlap's wax top fruit can tops and bottoms.” A large part of the tinware production was shipped to the Union armies during the Civil War. Dunlap’s success as a businessman resulted in his being listed as one of Pittsburgh’s millionaires in 1886.8 On January 1, 1887, the company reorganized, with John Dunlap, Thomas G. McClure and William A. Dunlap, son of the founder. Their trade extended throughout Western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, and Indiana.

John Dunlap, an original stockholder of the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad, was instrumental in the construction of the line. At the time of his death, June 7, 1892, he was vice-president of the Artisans Insurance Company, a director of the Tradesmens National Bank and president of Commercial Gazette Publishing Company. A life member of the Chamber of Commerce and the Exposition Society, he also served as vice-president of the Humane Society and held memberships on the Board of Free Dispensary, the Committee of 100 in 1876 and the Citizens Committee on the city sewerage question. Upon Dunlap’s death, Tradesmens National Bank passed a resolution which appeared in the Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette with this final appraisal: “His business life was characterized by ceaseless industry and the most unbending integrity. His many positions of trust were filled with such fidelity and honesty as to secure the confidence of all his equals.” The company continued to prosper under the guidance of William A. Dunlap; there were 150 employees in the factory and six salesmen on the road in 1893. The firm began to experiment with the manufacture of enameled ware in 1899, and by 1902, a plant was built at Carnegie to perfect the new product. The enamel ware proved so popular that tin production was gradually phased out, and completely discontinued in 1910. The business concentrated entirely on high grade, acid-proof enameled ware and industrial lighting goods. The large complex at Market Street and Second Avenue eventually disappeared from the landscape as did the memories of the Pittsburgh tin industry that once flourished there.

While John Dunlap busily established himself as a businessman and community figure, he also nurtured a personal life with wife and family. In 1848, after Dunlap recovered from his losses in the 1845 fire, he went to Poland, Ohio, to visit the Hugh Duncan family. The family history provides these details:

In going up the path to the Duncan house, Great Grandfather Dunlap heard someone happily singing in the rear, consequently he detoured to the kitchen door and found pretty Mary Jane Duncan with her arms in dough, kneading bread, and promptly fell in love with her. He was an old bachelor of 30 and she was 18...they were married in 1849 and went by river boat to New Orleans on their wedding trip. The first child, Emma Jane Dunlap was born in 1851.

Emma reached adulthood, but other Dunlap children did not fare as well. John was a frequent traveler and went abroad for both business and cultural interests. In 1854, he returned from one trip to Europe to find crepe on his door for 2-year-old Mary Rachel, who succumbed to a cholera epidemic that swept through the city that year. He learned that his mother had also passed away during his absence. In sorrow, Dunlap made plans

Mary Jane Dunlap and daughter Anna outside the family home in Oakland. While Dunlap tended to his business, his wife concentrated on raising 11 children.
to build a house on Robinson Street, just above Soho, and left again for Europe. Another child was on the way, but Mary and little Emma were left to oversee the construction of the new home. James was born in December 1855. We do not know if Dunlap returned from Europe in time for the event. He was home when a tombstone inscribed with the date of James’ death, November 13, 1859, was placed in the family plot in Allegheny Cemetery. Another grave marker shows that Eliza Dunlap was born in December 1857 and died on November 20, 1859, within seven days of James.

Judging from dates on Dunlap’s private letters, he was back in Europe by February 1860. While on this excursion, he learned that his sister Jane was gravely ill. He wrote on July 3, 1860:

I need not say that am much depressed, my eyes are blinded with tears while I pen this, alas are we going to have no respite from the chilling sorrow of bereavement...my thoughts have become still more

icy when dwelling on the remembrance of loved forms and joyous days likely forever gone.

Jane died December 9, 1860.

The respite did not come; six of the 11 Dunlap children were lost. John, born in September 1861, died December 23, 1863. Ida came into the world in May 1863 and died November 15, 1870. Robert lived from December 19, 1866, to February 28, 1868. Most of the Dunlap children succumbed around the age of 2, early deaths not unusual in the nineteenth century.

In 1888, The Social Mirror: Women of Wealth in Pittsburgh reported that Mary Dunlap,

whose husband has a fortune of perhaps $2,000,000, is a pretty, dark-eyed woman, sweet and unassuming, charitable and kind. Although prominently connected with several organizations, she does not limit her giving to them but in a quiet way renders many of her fellow creatures happier and better than they would
have been without her. They have a lovely home in Oakland, including a green-house, surrounded by about thirty acres of fine pasture land. The house is large and beautifully furnished.  

Dunlap, in addition to his factory and warehouse holdings, developed his residential property on Robinson Street and purchased about 20 undeveloped acres on the north side of the Allegheny River, in what was then Allegheny. He was fond of literature and acquired a well-selected personal library. It included *Elementary of Useful and Polite Education*, dated 1811, two 1826 volumes on the history of New York and a *Treatise on the Art of Measuring*, 1831. Dunlap’s bold signature is emblazoned on the inside cover of each volume.

Some of his tin and enamel wares have also survived with their original guarantee labels intact. His products and tax assessments attest to his ability as a manufacturer; the burial plot in Allegheny Cemetery tells another story. One wonders why he seems to have responded to his personal losses by leaving the family at times and journeying alone to Europe. His trip diary reflects his feelings but not his reasons:

Spent the evening in reading and felt lonely but no desire to return home, alas when I thought of home as it once was, my eyes immediately responded to the feeling of my heart...melancholy at times when my thoughts travelled homeward, the final impression was always an unbroken family, but the sweet illusion was soon dispelled by a stern recollection of the sad truth, the thoughts of which are forcibly urging me onward. God only knows where or to what purpose...the question often arises where am I going, what am I trying to leave behind, often asking counsel and guidance from on high.

There is no clue as to Mary Dunlap’s reaction to the European trips; she seems to have directed her attentions to community affairs and to her children. Surviving after John’s death were: Emma, who married Nelson P. Reed, publisher of the *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*; William Anson Dunlap, who took over management of the works and stamping department in 1887; Ella (Mrs. James Stevenson); Anna (Mrs. James H. Gray); and John S. Dunlap, the youngest of the family.

Just as the presence of a tin industry has been lost in Pittsburgh’s image as an iron and steel town, details of the Dunlap family have also faded into the past. The grave markers in the family burial plot, though difficult to read, tell one story; John Dunlap’s onion-skin letters crowded with words, tell another. More than travel accounts, these letters reveal his careful attention to all things financial. For example, on a margin of one of his 1860 letters to Mary he sent word back to the company that business communications should be sent on onion paper, as “the French allow only 1/4 ounces, over that it is double.” Judging from the total content of Dunlap’s letters, it was the business man who went to Europe, eager to learn all he could about the Old World. His long narratives about what he “examined” far outweigh his reflections of personal problems and grief.

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1 The history of John Dunlap, personal family items, as well as a portion of his library including private papers, company catalogs and a ledger were provided by William Dunlap Pettit, his great-great grandson. These materials are housed at the Division of Anthropology, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh.

2 *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, June 9, 1892.

3 This suit is in the collection of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. It was passed along from the William Pettit family. This story was also briefly mentioned in the family history.

4 *Biographical Review*, vol. XXIV, (Biographical Review Publishing Co.:1897), 653.

6 The reference may be to Jeffery Scaife, whose business is listed in city directories beginning in 1815 and continuing through 1837, when Scaife is listed under William B. Scaife & Co.

8 This refers to wares coated with any of a variety of varnishes to produce a high-gloss finish; however, the term is applied to any of the decorated tinwares which came into vogue after the middle of the nineteenth century.

7 George Thurston, *Pittsburgh and Allegheny in the Centennial Year* (A.A. Anderson & Son, printer: 1876), 228.
