

Alexander Lawrie, Painter

VICTOR E. GIBBENS

When John Lawrie, an intrepid young man from New York City, came west in 1850 or 1851 at the wish of his parents to select a location for settlement in Indiana, a train of circumstances and events was set in motion which resulted in giving to the state of Indiana and to the State Soldiers' Home in particular the collection of portraits which now hang on the walls of the library at the Home.¹ The story of these events has never been told.²

John Lawrie chose a site in White County, which came to be known as Wolf Mound Farm, and to which a brother Arthur, a sister Mary, and his parents, Alexander Lawrie and Sarah Coombes Lawrie, came in 1852. A brother James and another sister Elizabeth, wife of Robert Telfer, remained behind in New York City; and another brother, Alexander, Jr., a rising young portrait painter, in Philadelphia.³ Reports from the new settlers were evidently favorable, since James, Elizabeth, and her husband had joined them in Indiana by 1860. The only member of the immediate family who still remained in the East was Alexander, Jr., about whom this account centers.

Alexander Lawrie, Jr., was born in New York City on February 25, 1828. His father was a Scotch immigrant and his mother⁴ was the daughter of Andrew Coombes, a captain in the patriot army during the Revolutionary War and brother to the officer of the squad which captured Major André near Tarrytown, New York. Nothing is known of

¹ These include 143 portraits in oil and a crayon portrait.

² The story given here is pieced together from numerous unpublished journals of the Lawrie family and from many other sources, including letters, government records and publications, and newspaper stories. The most important source is the three extant journals of Alexander Lawrie, Jr., kept respectively from April 16, 1863, to December 31, 1869; from January 12, 1870, to January 23, 1877; and from January 1, 1890, to December 31, 1896. They will be referred to as Journals I, II, and III.

³ Mary Bronson Hartt, "Alexander Lawrie," *Dictionary of American Biography* (20 vols., New York, 1928-1936), XI (1933), 54.

⁴ *Indianapolis News*, May 2, 1903. In reporting an interview with Mr. Lawrie, W. M. Herschell wrote, "His father was a Scotch tradesman, his mother an American with a love for art. Young Lawrie stood by her side in his boyhood days and saw her brush daintly blend the colors until roses and violets grew on the canvas. She was fond of flowers and painted them."

Alexander's childhood, and only a fortunate bit of reminiscing in the diary he kept in the 1890's saves the period of his youth from the same obscurity. He wrote that his early desire to become a painter was strongly opposed by his parents, who, as a compromise, had apprenticed him in 1843 to a wood engraver. This apprenticeship lasted until 1852.

During the last two or three years of the apprenticeship, he studied painting and crayon portraiture and spent some time as a student at the National Academy of Design. In 1852 he went to Philadelphia—probably at the time his parents moved to Indiana—and became profitably engaged in making crayon portraits. In 1852 and 1854 his work was included in the exhibitions of the Philadelphia Academy of the Fine Arts, at which he was enrolled as a student in 1860.⁵

On August 11, 1855, ambitious to improve himself in his work as an artist, he sailed for Europe on the "S.S. Ariel." There he studied briefly at Paris and Florence and about twenty-two months at Dusseldorf under the tutelage of Emanuel Leutze, famous for the portrait of "Washington Crossing the Delaware."

On his return to America in October, 1857, Lawrie settled again in Philadelphia where he continued his career until April 18, 1861. On that date he enlisted for three months' service with the 17th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. On September 5, 1862, slightly over a year after his initial discharge, he re-enlisted as captain of Company B, 121st Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry.⁶ The 121st Regiment saw action in the Fredericksburg campaign on December 13, 14, and 15, 1862, before going into winter quarters.⁷ Major Alexander Biddle cited Captain Lawrie as "deserving of special notice."⁸ On January 20, 1863, the Regiment started on what was referred to as "Burnside's Mud March," an utterly useless expedition from which the

⁵ From records of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

⁶ Samuel P. Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-1865* (5 vols., Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1869-1871), IV (1870), 40; *History of the 121st Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers* by the Survivors' Association (Philadelphia, 1906), 254. This information is also given in Alexander Lawrie's Journal I, June 9, 1863, and also in Lawrie's application for admission to the State Soldiers' Home, Lafayette, Indiana.

⁷ Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers*, IV, 30-31.

⁸ *History of the 121st Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 39.

men struggled back to camp on January 25.⁹ Lawrie, in an affidavit for a pension written in 1896,¹⁰ accounted for a disease of the kidneys as follows:

I attribute it to a heavy cold I caught during the middle of January 1863 brought on by being exposed then for six days and nights to a continious [*sic*] rain storm without any shelter whatever, at the time when Gen. Burnside attempted to march us against Gen. Lee.

On February 1, Captain Lawrie's company was detailed for duty at the headquarters of General John F. Reynolds.¹¹ Lawrie left the camp on sick leave on April 14. Bringing his war service to a close, on June 9 he submitted his resignation grounded on a surgeon's certificate of disability and received his honorable discharge on June 21, 1863.¹²

In the meantime, his family had been taking an active part in the course of events out West. His brother John, the most restless member of the family and an ardent abolitionist, had fought with the free state forces in Kansas in 1856.¹³ His brother Arthur had participated in an exploring expedition to northeastern Texas in 1854 and 1855.¹⁴ John

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41. The full account follows: "Here [in winter quarters] it [the Regiment] remained until January 20, 1863, when it started for Bank's Ford on what was known in the army as 'Burnside's Mud March,' under command of Lieutenant-Colonel Davis, Colonel Biddle having received a leave of absence. Rain began falling at the start and continued day in and day out until the roads were so muddy that it was almost impossible to travel. Many of the men left their shoes sticking in the mud, and often they themselves had to be hauled out of the mud by their comrades. The artillery stuck fast, and so did the pontoon trains, which had finally to be pulled out of the mud by the infantry. The army was, in fact, stuck in the mud, and could not budge one way or the other. Finally, on the 25th, the men managed to get back to the camp at White Oak Church, completely fagged out and more dead than alive—the worst looking set of 'Yanks' possible to imagine."

¹⁰ The affidavit is in the files of the State Soldiers' Home.

¹¹ *History of the 121st Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 41.

¹² Alexander Lawrie's Journal I, April 16, June 9, and October 13, 1863. However, this date is recorded as July 21, 1863, in Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers*, IV, 40; and *History of the 121st Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 254.

¹³ Victor E. Gibbens (ed.), "Letters on the War in Kansas in 1856," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* (Topeka, Kansas, 1931-), X (1941), 369-79.

¹⁴ An account of this trip is given in one of two extant diaries of Arthur Lawrie. The first journal contains scattered entries dating from 1851 to 1856; the second, daily entries from November 21, 1897, to March 27, 1899, and deals mainly with routine life on Arthur Lawrie's White County farm. His journal states "northwestern Texas," but it is obvious that his exploring took place in what is now called northeastern Texas.

had also participated in much fighting in the Civil War, and James had been a soldier but did not see active service.

Though by 1863 the family roots had become firmly fastened in Indiana soil, Alexander had not travelled west of Philadelphia, and it was to be a long time before any idea of making Indiana his home entered his mind. A desire to see his close relatives, however, led him on his first journey west in 1867 for a brief visit.

At the conclusion of his war service in 1863, he turned eagerly to his painting. In June he left Philadelphia for a period of convalescence in the Lake George region of New York, where, during that summer and the following summers throughout the 1860's, he was to fraternize with many of the landscape painters who have since been referred to as the Hudson River School.¹⁵ Among them were Asher B. Durand, one of the two "fathers" of the school; Homer D. Martin; Sandford R. Gifford; Thomas Hicks; R. M. Hubbard; Jervis McEntee; and other painters occupying important places in the history of American painting. He was especially close to Durand, who took an almost fatherly interest in him, and to W. T. Richards, who accompanied him on his trip abroad in 1855 and with whom he shared a studio for some time on their return to Philadelphia.¹⁶

In April, 1864, Lawrie resolved to spend the summer at Elizabethtown, New York, and then to try his fortunes in New York City in the fall. October found him established in his new location, where he remained until 1878 except for a few trips to Philadelphia to make oil and crayon portraits. The winters were spent in the studio in town; the summers, in the Adirondacks and the Hudson Highlands. This period marked the zenith of his career. From 1866 to 1877 inclusive, except in 1867 and 1874, his paintings were represented in the annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design,¹⁷ to which he was elected an associate member first in 1868 and again in 1876.¹⁸ His portrait of a Mrs. Henry Marks

¹⁵ Samuel Isham, *The History of American Painting* (New York, 1905), 232-54.

¹⁶ Harrison S. Morris, *William T. Richards* (Philadelphia, 1912), 21.

¹⁷ National Academy of Design, New York City, to Gibbens, November 7, 1940.

¹⁸ Alexander Lawrie's Journal I, June 15, 1868, and Journal II, May 11, 1876.

occupied the place of honor in the 1876 exhibition. An art critic discussing the Academy Exhibition of 1877 praised a portrait of his as follows:

There is a portrait of a three-quarter length by Mr. Lauire [*sic*] (456) that is simply admirable—admirable in execution, in the rich simplicity of the dress, in the fresh liveliness of the face, in the union of boldness and strength with gentleness and delicacy.¹⁹

In the period of his greatest successes, Lawrie was elected to membership in the Athenaeum Club, the Century Club, and the Artists' Fund Society. He served as secretary of the latter from 1870 to 1873 and is recorded as a member through the 1878-1879 membership list.

In addition to the painting praised by the *Art Journal*, a landscape called "Autumn in the Hudson Highlands" seems to have been highly regarded. It was displayed, along with another painting called "Monk Playing a Violoncello," at the Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia in 1876.²⁰

By 1878 commissions had grown so scarce that Lawrie moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where, hoping to find a more profitable location than New York City had become, he remained until 1881. Since there are no journals covering the 1880's either of Lawrie or of any of his relatives, why he gave up residence at Hartford is not known. A reasonable assumption, however, is that commissions were no more plentiful there than in New York City. At this time Lawrie moved to Indiana, where he lived until August, 1887, except for a brief trip back to New York in 1884, a year in Chicago in 1885 and 1886, and about two months in Battle Creek in 1886.²¹ He had returned to New York City by August 30, 1887, where, since he makes no mention of being elsewhere and since he was there on January 1, 1890, it is likely he spent the next two years and four months. In October of 1890 he departed for a six-month residence in Denver, where his hope of commissions turned to great disappointment at finding hardly any painting.²² He returned again to New York to live in growing anxiety at his inability

¹⁹ "The Academy Exhibition," *Art Journal* (New York, 1875-), III (1877), 157-60. Quoted in Clara E. Clement and Lawrence Hutton, *Artists of the Nineteenth Century* (2 vols., Boston, 1884), II, 44.

²⁰ Hartt, "Alexander Lawrie," *Dictionary of American Biography*, XI, 54.

²¹ Alexander Lawrie's Journal III, May 11, 1890.

²² *Ibid.*, entries from October 15, 1890, to April 27, 1891.

to make a living; though he sold an occasional portrait, he found himself going more and more deeply into debt.²³ Finally in 1895 he severed all connections with New York City and departed to make a permanent home with his brother Arthur in Indiana. After a family disagreement, however, several years later,²⁴ he went back to New York and on July 18, 1898, obtained admission to the Southern Branch of the National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers at Hampton, Virginia, where he was an inmate until April 5, 1900.²⁵

Following a short stay in New York City where he was ill in Bellevue Hospital,²⁶ he returned for the last time to Indiana. In December, 1901, he applied for admission to the State Soldiers' Home at Lafayette, to which he was admitted on January 12, 1902.

Though Lawrie was then almost seventy-four years old, he was as eager to paint as he had been upon his resignation from the army in 1863. He began to paint portraits of Indiana generals who had fought in the Civil War; and his original plans for doing forty portraits²⁷ were extended again and again until, with a few paintings which he brought with him when he entered the Home, he had over 150 in various stages of completion when he died on February 15, 1917. Lawrie bequeathed all the portraits to the state, which had furnished the art materials and the frames.²⁸ In 1907 he

²³ *Ibid.*, entries from October 15, 1890 to April 27, 1891.

²⁴ Arthur Lawrie's Journal II, June 3, 1898, ". . . Rob't tended corn on N. 80 all day. I worked in garden and potatoe patch—War at the dinner table! Bro Alex went to Chalmers this afternoon. We will now have peace!—Monday, June 6th 1898. Bro Alex went off to New York this morning."

²⁵ Veterans Administration Records, Kecoughtan, Virginia.

²⁶ Indianapolis *News*, May 2, 1903; and Indianapolis *Star*, July 11, 1909.

²⁷ Indianapolis *Star*, July 11, 1909.

²⁸ The Indiana State Library has a manuscript signed by Alexander Lawrie which lists his paintings in the collection at the Soldiers' Home. Lawrie's introduction to the list follows: "A list of portraits in oil, painted by Alex Lawrie of U.S. Generals of both Regular and Volunteer served in the war of 1861-5, on the Federal side. This collection is now framed and hanging in the Library building at the Indiana State Soldiers Home. There are one hundred and thirty portraits contained in it. Seventy two of these portraits are of generals from the state of Indiana, 59 of volunteer service and 12 of the regular army. (72 in all.) This collection of Indiana Officers represents the *whole* list of those who served from the state of Indiana, and is of the greatest historical value to those of a coming generation. It is earnestly desired by the painter and many other persons, that a suitable and properly lighted gallery should be built in the city of

had donated approximately one hundred books and manuscripts, mostly longhand translations of French books on painting, to the John Heron Art Institute of Indianapolis.²⁹

Only one other collection of Lawrie's paintings is known—that of six portraits of generals which is in the possession of the United States Military Academy.³⁰ Three oil portraits, one of which is a self-portrait, a crayon head, and two small landscapes are owned by a great-nephew, Robert Telfer, of near Lafayette. Mrs. Nancy Telfer of Fort Wayne has a self-portrait of Lawrie in his Civil War uniform, and other relatives possess a painting or two each. Mrs. Brantz Mayor of New York owns a painting called "Lady Writing in a Parlor," which was exhibited as a part of the Metropolitan Museum's "Life in America" show in conjunction with the World's Fair in 1939.³¹ A portrait in oil of Judge Sutherland belongs to the New York Bar Association, and a crayon head of Richard H. Stoddard was bequeathed at the poet's death to the Authors' Club of New York City.

Of the portraits at West Point, Colonel R. G. Alexander, professor of drawing at the United States Military Academy, writes:

While I am not qualified to estimate the artistic merits of our Lawrie paintings, I should judge them to be good. They do not, of course, rate with our most valuable portraits, those by Stuart and

Indianapolis, under the supervision of a competent architect, for the preservation of this collection of historical portraits, because the Library gallery at the Soldiers Home is badly constructed and there is not sufficient light by which to enable one to see the portraits as they should be seen, besides, the book cases in the Library building are in the way, and effectually prevent the portraits from being seen to proper advantage.

"Here follows a list of the portraits finished and now hanging in the gallery, 130 in all. There are 25 more to be added when they are finished which will make a total of 155 portraits."

²⁹ Indianapolis *News*, February 16, 1917. The article states, "His gift was the foundation of the present library of the institute." According to the librarian at the Institute, this is a misstatement; the gift was actually of little importance.

³⁰ Five of these portraits are mentioned in Kendall Banning, *West Point Today* (New York, 1937), 117, 151, 152, 153. Banning fails, however, to mention Lawrie's portrait of Major General G. K. Warren, which hangs in the U. S. M. A. Library.

³¹ A photograph of this painting is shown in the Metropolitan Museum's publication called *Life in America, A Special Loan Exhibition of Paintings Held During the Period of the New York World's Fair April 24 to October 29* (New York, 1939), 168.

Sully, but on the other hand I think them considerably better than many others in our collection.³²

When asked about Lawrie's paintings, Wilbur Peat, director of the John Herron Art Institute, wrote, "I have not seen the portraits in the Old Soldiers' Home painted by Lawrie, but judging from some of the reproductions I would say that they were very well painted."³³

Alexander Lawrie was never married. His earliest diary records a brief romance in the summer of 1863 and the following winter. Its collapse is evident only in the sudden and unexplained cessation of all reference to the girl involved. A newspaper story of 1909 gives the information that no one at the Home knew whether he was ever married, that he avoided women and had no confidence in them, and that "it is said that during his youth he was deceived by a girl of whom he was very fond. He will not speak of such a subject."³⁴ A more likely explanation is that Lawrie himself was at fault, as his diaries indicate that, to his own remorse, he often drank too heavily and that he had an unhappy faculty of antagonizing people. Statements in the Indianapolis papers that he was modest, unassuming, bright, and cheery³⁵ are to be questioned, for too much evidence exists that, in his old age at any rate, he was quarrelsome and irascible.

In defense of his shortness of temper in his later years, it is necessary only to point out that his kidney disease, contracted in 1863, was acute and that he was bothered by other ailments common to advanced age. That he succeeded in painting nearly 150 portraits from his entrance to the Home in 1902 to his death in 1917 despite his poor health and that the portraits are as good as they are testify to a talent far above average. Though their artistic value may not be exceptional, their historical value, as their painter prophesied, has increased with a new generation; and to the hundreds of visitors who yearly view the paintings at the Soldiers' Home, his labors have made the history of the state a little more vivid.

³² Gibbens to Colonel R. G. Alexander, December 12, 1942, with a brief reply from Colonel Alexander written on the letter.

³³ Wilbur D. Peat to Gibbens, October 23, 1940.

³⁴ Indianapolis *Star*, July 11, 1909.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, July 11, 1909; and Indianapolis *News*, May 2, 1903.