

INDIANAPOLIS LITERARY CLUB

MEMORIAL TO HARRY ROLL MACLAUGHLIN, FAIA (1922-2017)

By William L. Selm

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I first met Roll MacLaughlin in April 1982 here at Park Tudor on the occasion of the annual meeting of Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana. I had completed graduate school and was temporarily back in my native state examining the historic structures and sites of Vigo County. I was told that he was the person to meet. I cannot remember if I were introduced or that I introduced myself to the great man whom I would later call “The Godfather of Historic Preservation in Indiana.” I renewed my acquaintance with him in 1983 when I returned to Indiana to serve as the staff Historian of the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission. I succeeded James Glass in that position. My appreciation of Roll’s work and passion for historic buildings deepened over the years, especially as I worked on the update and expansion of the Historic Area Plan for Lockerbie Square Historic District. Roll’s DNA was all over Lockerbie Square in several ways.

Lockerbie Square is the city’s oldest surviving and most famous neighborhood. It is a collection of wood-frame cottages and houses of the ante-bellum and immediate post-bellum period with a sprinkling of brick buildings, including the jewel in the crown, the 1872 Italianate house where the Hoosier Poet, James Whitcomb Riley lived the last two decades of his life. The importance of Lockerbie Square was eventually recognized as the context for the house where Riley lived. It was the Hoosier Poet’s neighborhood. Roll championed the neighborhood in the late 1960s and the 1970s as a place where the dilapidated housing could be reclaimed and restored and could become a famous neighborhood

again – famous as Riley’s neighborhood and famous as an example of urban renaissance.

Roll was a visionary who looked both forward and backward, seeing the value and beauty in the buildings of the past. He was seen as an eccentric, if not as a nut of some kind. But he had credentials; he was a licensed architect, he dressed well, and he knew who was who. In the Post-War Era, the thinking was Urban Renewal, which meant the destruction of historic urban fabric on the scale of blitzed European cities during the Second World War. Out with the old and in with the new. And the new was the Brave New World of Modernism—the future. Roll was swimming upstream against a very strong current. Yes, he could design new buildings such as this one where we sit and its companion buildings on this campus, but he had a passion for the buildings of the past. Few other architects shared that view; there was little money or interest in that old stuff. He could have been merely a voice crying out in the wilderness, except that his voice was heard by a few other like-minded people who agreed with him, such as Eli Lilly. Mr. Lilly shared Roll’s interest in Indiana’s past and its historic buildings. Like Roll, he had deep roots here and also deeper pockets.

Roll was an active participant in the cult of ancestor worship. (I am as well.) The planets aligned in the early 1970s with Mr. Lilly’s funding and prestige, growing interest in Lockerbie Square, and ancestor worship. Roll honored his ancestors, Joseph and Magdalena Graf Staub, by restoring their house on College Avenue. His Alsatian immigrant great grandfather built the brick, two-story house in 1859. It was Roll’s labor of love. Around the corner on Lockerbie Street is where Roll’s grandfather, Harry W. Roll, built his house and lived. Roll had deep Lockerbie roots

Roll was a product of Old Indianapolis and a proud German-American. To tell you the truth, I do not know if Roll's MacLaughlin paternal side, were Scots, Irish, or Scots-Irish. He always spoke to me of the Staubs and yesterday he was entombed in the Staub mausoleum in Crown Hill Cemetery.

On 20 April, I received an email from James Glass entitled "Sad News," wherein he forwarded the email from Roll's son the announcement that Roll had died that day around 1:00 P.M. My wife and I had just returned home after burying her mother in Rushville that day. I read the email with another veil of sadness. Retrieving the mail I found an envelope addressed to me, printed in perfect architect's block letters. Inside was a touching message from Roll, dated 1 April, written in the same steady block letters. He was responding to my earlier letter with a news clipping about the Athenaeum's and the Monument's National Historic Landmark status. He congratulated Jim Glass and me on our work, which is a continuation of his work. On the day of his death I read his invitation to help him "fill in some blank spots" on the history of his German maternal side of the family.

I would have loved to have done that.

Farewell Harry Roll MacLaughlin, you are the Godfather of Historic Preservation in Indiana.

Thank you and may you rest in peace.