

## Alexander Rodgers' Family

They were married at St. Peter's Church in Lancaster, England on April 8, 1847. Her name was Jenet Pyle and his was Alexander Rodgers. Jenet Pyle was born April 26, 1829, in New Castle, England, to Adam and Mary Ann (Briggs) Pyle. Her father was a glass blower by trade and the Superintendent and General Manager of Glassworks, the largest glass blowing company in England. He was also well known for making art glass. He was born in Scotland but moved to England as a young man and started his family there. Alexander Rodgers was born on May 24, 1824, in Edinburgh, Scotland, to Alexander and Margaret (McNeil) Rodgers. His father was a successful, well-to-do farmer with a large estate. (The younger Alexander Rodgers will be referred to as Alexander Sr. for the purposes of this article because not only was his father and grandfather named Alexander but so was his son. He was referred to as Alexander Sr. in most of the articles I found.) Alexander Sr. was an industrious young man and quite mechanically inclined so he was sent to England as an apprentice at the Bolton Iron Works in Bolton, England. Sometime after relocating to England, he met and married Jenet.



In 1848, Alexander Sr. was employed by one of the finest machine shops in England but decided to move to the United States for even better opportunities. He and Jenet landed at Boston on October 11, 1848. From Boston, they moved to Maine where he worked for a couple years and helped to build the first steam-hammer used by the government and also, where his son Alexander Jr. was born in 1850. By 1854, the Rodgers had made their way to Ottawa County, Michigan, where their sons Adam F. (1854), John (1856), and Hugh (1858) were born. Alexander Sr. was working for William Ferry in his machine shop at the time. He noticed that they received a large amount of work from the lumbering mills in Muskegon because they didn't have a reputable machine shop of their own. He thought it was the opportunity he'd been waiting for, so he decided to start a machining shop in Muskegon.

In 1858, Alexander Sr. found a small shop owned by lumbermen Ryerson and Morris. They had bought it from another man who tried to start a machining business but wasn't able to make a go of it so they sold it to Alexander Sr. The first year, he worked the shop by himself doing everything – draughtsman, pattern maker, moulder, machinist, engineer, and office manager. His reputation for fine workmanship grew and his business increased. Soon, he had more work

than he could handle and needed more space and more help. He bought two acres of land on the lakefront at the ends of North Jefferson and First Streets. He formed a partnership with John Dodge and Adam Patterson. Dodge withdrew from the partnership after 3 years. They built a small machine shop there in a 25 x 50-foot shed and hired a couple of men to help. In 1861, he added a 50 x 70-foot foundry. In 1864, he bought out Paterson and added another building 80 x 100-feet with three stories and once more, he was sole proprietor of the business. That was also the year his daughter, Janet, was born. In 1865, his youngest son, Lincoln, was born and the youngest daughter, Margaret, was born in 1868. Alexander Sr. had an extensive knowledge of engines and other machinery used in the lumber mills so his business quickly grew. He had several patents and inventions that were invaluable to lumbering businesses all over the globe. In 1869, Alexander Sr., sold interest in his business to his sons, Alexander Jr., Adam, John, and Hugh, and it was reorganized under the name Muskegon Iron Works. The sons took over the operations with Alexander Sr. still being President.



In 1871, Alexander Sr., was the first Alderman of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ward. He withdrew from the office after his beloved wife, Jenet, died after falling off a chair and while hanging curtains in their home. She fell with such force and in a way that caused severe internal injuries. She died within minutes. In her last moments, when Alexander found her and asked what happened, all she could say was "I am dying". Before they could get news of her death to her father in Scotland, they received a letter from him to Jenet, asking her when she was finally coming to visit. It had been 24 years since they'd seen each other. Mrs. Rodgers was such a well-liked person that hundreds of Muskegon residents lined the streets to follow the funeral procession to Evergreen Cemetery.

In 1875, Alexander Sr., became a lumberman. He started a first-class lumber manufacturing mill in Lakeside, being able to manufacture between 20,000,000 to 25,000,000 feet per year.

In 1877, Alexander Sr. married Caroline Wilhelmina Lange. The Rodgers family home was located at the bottom of 1<sup>st</sup> Street, near the south shore of Muskegon Lake, not far from the foundry. Alexander Sr. built a beautiful Victorian style home on Lake Street, currently known as the Port City Inn. A few years later, in 1882, Alexander Sr. purchased a spacious home with a wrap-a-round porch on Morris Street from lumber baron and former mayor, O. P. Pillsbury,

who had decided to leave Muskegon. Alexander Jr. and his family took over the Lake Street home.



In 1882, the business was incorporated as “Rodgers Manufacturing Company. By 1884, the Rodger’s Iron Manufacturing Company released a “statement of affairs” to the Chronicle. It stated the company has Capital Stock, authorized at \$90,000 (today that would be \$2,640,342.86), Capital Stock paid in at \$80,000 (\$2,346,971.43), and total indebtedness of \$24,977.27 (\$732,761.74). It listed Alexander Sr. as President, and the Board of Directors as: John Rodgers, Alex Rodgers, Sr., Alex Rodgers, Jr., Hugh Rodgers, and W. F. Chrystal, with Mr. Chrystal as Secretary. This once, one man operation, would grow over the years to employ 100+ men and be one of the most successful businesses in Muskegon. After the lumbering industry started winding down, the company focused on marine and stationary engines, boilers and pumps. One was the Wolverine Direct Acting Steam Pump used in pumping stations or for fire protection in buildings and shops.

By 1888, the availability of timber for the mills in Michigan was greatly reduced, so Alexander Sr. moved the operations to Tomahawk, Wisconsin, under the name Somo Lumber Company with his son, Hugh, assisting him in the management of the mill. Hugh would later partner with brother, Lincoln, in the endeavor.

Alexander Sr. was not only a successful businessman and lumber manufacturer but also had an excellent eye for real estate. He managed to acquire some of the most desirable land in downtown Muskegon, and most of what would come to be known as “brewery hill”. He purchased large tracks of land in Lakeside, including the property that would later become the Central Paper Company. He also owned a large amount of land in North Muskegon. Mr. Rodgers was a very wealthy man.

On August 19, 1897, Alexander Rodgers Sr., dies of Bright’s disease (now referred to as Nephritis – an inflammation of the kidneys, caused by toxins, infection or autoimmune conditions). His funeral was held at the Muskegon Opera House. Not only was the Opera House filled with family, friends, business associates, and his fraternal brothers, but hundreds of people were also standing outside on the street. I’m sure, if you know any Muskegon history, you will recognized some of the names of those in attendance: Jiroch, Hume, Emery, Mann, Hovey, Billinghamurst, Wilson, Hills, Hoyt, Erwin, Sanford, Tillotson, Arms, Riordan, and Hackley, just to name a few. All his children were there except for Adam who was working in California and couldn’t make it back on time. Alexander Sr. was a well-respected and much-

loved man, with a reputation for fairness and honesty throughout the community. He was a member of Muskegon Lodge No. 140 of Free & Accepted Masons, the Muskegon Commandery No. 22 Knights Templar, and the Muskegon Chapter No. 47 of Royal Arch Masons. He was a stockholder in the E. H. Sheldon Co., the Heap Manufacturing Co., and the Muskegon Valley Furniture Co. He was Supervisor of the 4<sup>th</sup> Ward and a member of the Board of Public Works. He was Vice President and a Director of National Lumberman's Bank.

I was surprised to find out that Alexander Sr. did not have a will. In 1902, with Alexander Jr. as the executor of his father's estate, the children devised a plan that they thought would be fair to all. They drew lots...yes, lots. Every piece of property that was part of the estate, was written on a separate card with the location and approximate value. Then the cards were placed in a box and one by one (in order by their age) they each drew a card, and they continued taking turns until all the cards were gone. According to the Chronicle, Hugh and Janet were the luckiest in the lottery but they all did quite well. His wife Caroline had already been awarded the house on Morris Street.

In 1913, The Rodgers Iron Manufacturing Company went into the hands of a receiver on a voluntary petition for bankruptcy. The business was instructed by the court to continue operating. In 1914, it was reorganized under the name of Lakey Foundry and Machine Company with William B. Lakey as Vice-President and General Manager and Otto G. Meeske was the President.

Alexander Jr. worked for his father and then became President of the Rodgers Iron Mfg. Co. and a member of the Board until 1913. He married Margaret Schehn in 1873. They had 5 children: Mabel R., Janet M., George H., Fred B., and Adam A. He moved to Detroit, Michigan in 1916, and died there in 1923.

Adam worked in the Rodgers Iron Mfg. Co. for a time and learned the trade as machinist. He later worked as a Travel Agent and was Superintendent of the Wood Packaging & Basket Company. He married Sophronia Campbell in 1877, they had no children and later divorced. He moved to California where he worked as a machinist in different companies. He also worked in Colorado and Oregon. Adam F. Rodgers died in Portland, Oregon, in 1911.

John also worked for his father and became Vice President of Rodgers Iron Mfg. Co. He worked for the company for 30 years until he retired in 1911. He married Carrie E. Moore in 1880 and had 2 sons: John E. and James E. John died in Traverse City, Michigan, in 1915.

Hugh worked for the family business for a time and then went to work in his father's saw mill learning the business from the ground up. He moved around the country engaged in different endeavors for a few years then returned to act as representative for Rodgers Iron Mfg. Co. He later partnered with his father and helped to build the saw mill in Tomahawk, Wisconsin and served as an Alderman for that city. He married Alice LeBoeuf in 1885, and had 6 children, Alexander, Pyle R., Eugene, Hugh Jr., Rosa, and Carrie. Hugh died in Detroit, Michigan in 1931.

Janet married Frederick H. Miller in 1885, and had a daughter named Margaret. Janet died in Los Angeles, California in 1949.

Lincoln started working for his father when he was 15 years old. He learned the business through on-the-job training. He later partnered with Hugh in the lumber mill in Tomahawk. After the mill burned in 1899, he came back to Muskegon and partnered with Edward Behrens in the Rodgers Burner & Boiler Company. He was elected to the Michigan State Legislature in 1901 for two terms representing the interests of Muskegon. He married Emma Behrens in 1898. They had 2 children: Abigail and William. Lincoln died in Tulare, California in 1947.

Margaret married Harris J. Morris in 1889. They later divorced. They had two children: Janet and Margaret. Margaret died in San Francisco, California, in 1946.



Have you ever gone through Evergreen Cemetery and noticed a large, beautiful monument of a young girl reading a book? That is the monument for the Alexander Rodgers Sr. family plot, where Alexander Sr., Jenet, Lincoln (and some of his family) along with Hugh are buried. It is opposite the mausoleum; in case you ever decide to visit. Many of the other family members are buried in Oakwood Cemetery.

Sources: Genealogybank.com – Muskegon Chronicle, Findagrave.com, Hackley Public Library Local History & Genealogy Dept, Lakeshore Museum Center, Muskegon and Its Resources (Muskegon Board of Trade), The Advantages and Surroundings of Muskegon (Muskegon Board of Trade), Romance of Muskegon (Alice Prescott Keys), Ancestry.com, The Lumber & Forest Industry of the Northwest pg. 237, The History of Michigan (C. Moore), Historic Michigan, Vol III Muskegon County, and Commemorative Biographical Record of the upper Wisconsin Counties (J.H. Beers & Co) Note: Except for birth and death dates, any other dates are approximate because the dates varied, depending on who was writing the articles I found.