"Old Nick" Longworth,  
**The Paradoxical Maecenas of Cincinnati**  
by Louis Leonard Tucker

Longworth is a problem and a riddle; a problem worthy of the study of those who delight in exploring that labyrinth of all that is hidden and mysterious, the human heart, and a riddle to himself and others.

Charles Cist

He was a friend to artists and kindly to the poor, and very eccentric.

Henry Howe

If Nicholas Longworth (1782–1863) is one of the towering history-makers of nineteenth-century Cincinnati, he is also one of the most enigmatic characters of the Queen City's colorful past. In his time, he was "known" to every citizen of the community, but only outwardly. Few, if any, were able to penetrate the motivational cast of this supreme iconoclast. Even so perceptive an analyst as Charles Cist was mystified by this strange-looking little man with the bushy eyebrows and steel-like gaze. To Cist, he was a "problem and a riddle." Other contemporaries echoed Cist's judgment.

Although Longworth has not been the subject of extensive biographical treatment (which is surprising), he has always merited a section in historical expositions of Cincinnati, both by contemporary writers and by more recent researchers. His many-faceted personality emerges from these writings.

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1Charles Cist, *Sketches and Statistics of Cincinnati in 1851* (Cincinnati, 1851), 334. For a biographical sketch of Longworth, see 333–338.

2Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of Ohio in Two Volumes . . .* (Cincinnati, 1900), I, 818.

3The lack of a substantial body of Longworth documents may represent the key reason for the biographical neglect.

4The most extensive biographical sketches are to be found in Clara Longworth De Chambrun, *The Making of Nicholas Longworth* [III] (New York, 1933), 27–54; Clara Longworth De Chambrun, *Cincinnati, Story of the Queen City* (New York and London, 1939), 108–115. Miss De Chambrun's viewpoint is filiopietistic, but her study is of immense value because it is heavily based on family correspondence which was in her possession.
Initially, there is the projection of Longworth, the economic wonder of the West; the prime example of the American rags-to-riches story; the apotheosis of the American Dream. This projection is not exaggerated. Longworth was a singular example of the self-made millionaire. Before journeying to Ohio, young Longworth had resided briefly in South Carolina and Georgia, but his deep-seated dislike for slavery led him to take up a new life in the slave-free Northwest Territory. When he arrived by flatboat in Cincinnati in 1803, the twenty-one-year-old New Jersey-bred immigrant was a half step removed from abject poverty. His material wealth consisted of the contents of a battered leather trunk and a small green lawyer’s bag, and a few coins. Nor was there any possibility of assistance from his parents in Newark, New Jersey. Longworth’s father and mother had remained loyal to the Crown during the Revolution and suffered
the common fate of the Tories — social ostracism and dispossession of their property and personal estate.

Longworth’s rise to affluence on the frontier was spectacular, even by the standards of the period. Deciding upon law for a career, he apprenticed himself to Judge Jacob Burnet, brushed up on his Blackstone and other basic legal texts of the day, and soon hung out his shingle. But law became secondary to dabbling in real estate. Longworth seized upon the “main chance” and became a “regular lot and land dealer.” Within a few years, the young lawyer was a leading landholder in Cincinnati, and by the time he had reached his forties, he was a millionaire and a legend in the West.

The manner in which he acquired his fortune constitutes another dimension in the Longworth saga. One of the best-known stories of nineteenth-century Cincinnati concerns Longworth, the novitiate lawyer, and an accused horse thief. Longworth himself revealed the details of the case in an address to the Cincinnati Pioneer Association in 1859:

He [the accused horse thief] had no copper pennies, but he had a second-hand copper whiskey still and horse (not the one stolen). He had left them at the tavern of Joel Williams (we had no hotels in those days). He offered me my choice to take the horse or still for my fee. A fair presumption was that both might be stolen and the horse most likely to be recovered and I am compelled to admit that this crossed my mind but I gave him not this reason but one that excited his gratitude and caused him to squeeze my hand. I told him that I would take the still and leave him the horse for a reason greatly to his benefit, — that if he succeeded in getting his acquittal he could run away on the horse but could not on the still. He was acquitted, mounted the horse and did not even wait to bid the jailer goodbye. I went to Williams’ Tavern to get the still. He was a brother Jerseyman and I consented. The ground is now worth if vacant only seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars.5

The exchange of a copper still for a fourteen-and-a-half-acre

5The extract is printed in Charles Theodore Greve, Centennial History of Cincinnati and Representative Citizens, 2 volumes (Cincinnati, 1904), I, 457. Longworth went on to relate a second real estate venture which fizzled. He sought to purchase Judge Burnet’s thirty-two-acre “cow pasture” but was unable to effect the deal. In 1850, the property rose to a value of $2,400,000!
tract of property that rose to a value of “only seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars” — this laconic statement is, in essence, the biography of Nicholas Longworth. There were many such episodes in his remarkable career. Some observers shook their heads in disbelief and ascribed his success to mere luck. “You couldn’t throw that man into the Ohio River,” commented John Adlum, the Maryland botanist, “without his coming to the surface, a rare species of fish in one hand and a fresh-water pearl in the other.” Some saw it as more than luck. Edward Mansfield regarded him as “very shrewd, sagacious, quick-witted; with great common-sense and acquisitiveness.” Those who engaged in real estate dealings with Longworth would have regarded Mansfield as an oracle. Longworth was an opportunist of the first magnitude, the supreme “Captain” of real estate in the American West. Cincinnati was bloated with cunning real estate speculators, but Longworth was a model unto himself. At the high point in his career, he held the dubious distinction of paying the second-highest property tax in the nation. Only William Astor of New York City paid more. Longworth frequently expostulated (in the third person), “There’s Longworth; it takes $30,000 to pay his taxes, and it keeps him poor to raise the money.”

As Henry Howe, among others, pointed out, Longworth was an eccentric millionaire. Although he possessed great wealth and resided in a stunning mansion, “Old Nick,” as he was affectionately called by the townspeople, adhered to simple values in his personal life.

6Quoted in De Chambrun, Cincinnati, 114–115.
7Edward D. Mansfield, Personal Memories, Social, Political, and Literary (Cincinnati, 1879), 145–146. Mansfield wrote that Longworth’s name was “spoken as often as that of any other man in Cincinnati.”
9Howe, Historical Collections of Ohio, I, 818. Longworth was exaggerating his tax payment.
10In 1830, Longworth purchased the thirty-room home built by Martin Baum on Pike Street in the 1820’s. For a description and history of the house, which is now The Taft Museum, see [Works Project Administration], Cincinnati, A Guide to the Queen City and Its Neighbors (Cincinnati, 1943), 165–167; Carl Vitz, “A Brief History of Lytle Square, 1789–1964,” The Cincinnati Historical Society, Bulletin, XXII (April, 1964), 113, 118–119.
11He preferred to be called “Old Longworth.” De Chambrun, Making of Longworth, 27.
He employed numerous laborers and servants, but, as an ardent horticulturist, he insisted on tending his garden. Moreover, when performing this menial task, he was usually attired in clothes that were a cut above the sartorial dress of a pauper. It was a costume not strictly reserved for the garden; he often appeared this way on the streets and in the drawing room. According to a contemporary, he always dressed in black clothes and "there was nothing about his dress which indicated that he had ever given it a thought."12

These latter traits of eccentricity are key elements in one of the celebrated stories of Cincinnati history — Abraham Lincoln's visit to Longworth's garden in 1857.13 Lincoln, then a relatively obscure "prairie lawyer," was in Cincinnati to participate in the McCormick Reaper patent case. Having been excluded from the main proceedings by Edwin Stanton, Lincoln lumbered about the city enjoying the

13There are many versions of this locally famous Lincoln-Longworth story. My account is based upon that of De Chambrun, Making of Longworth, 36–37. While there is a possibility that Miss De Chambrun embellished her dialogue to achieve dramatic effect, it is reasonable to assume that her general description is accurate. Assuredly, "Old Nick" told this story often to his children and grandchildren, who then passed it on to their offspring.
sights. Since Longworth's garden was acknowledged to be among the finest in the West and since the owner was known to him, the lanky Illinois lawyer decided to drop by and inspect it. He entered the grounds of the estate and encountered a small man who was busily weeding shrubs. The man was Longworth. "Loose pantaloons lay in folds over 'Old Nick's' latchets, and a shirt with a huge collar almost obscured his ears." Lincoln assumed that the mousey figure grubbing in the ground was the gardener and requested permission to inspect the premises. Longworth responded:

My master is a queer duck. He doesn't allow strangers to come in, but he makes an exception every time someone does come. He would be glad in this case, to consider you as a friend, sir. But, before viewing the garden, perhaps you would like to taste his wine.14

Lincoln then recognized Longworth and apologized for his mistake. Longworth replied:

Not at all. I am quite used to it; in fact, you are the first to find me out so soon. That's my loss, perhaps. Sometimes I get ten cents and sometimes as much as a quarter for showing visitors my grounds. In fact, I might say that it's the only really honest money I ever made, having been, by profession a lawyer.

The eccentric nature of a great many of Longworth's philanthropic deeds constitutes another significant aspect of his historical image. Some of his "do-good" deeds were of a conventional order; for example, he sponsored a weekly bread and corn dole for hundreds of indigent German and Irish widows.15 And he housed and fed, free of charge, the numerous laborers who toiled in his vineyards.16

But many of his deeds manifested a peculiar theory of philanthropy. He had a special penchant for assisting ne'er-do-wells. A fellow townsman, also a philanthropist of sorts, once chided

14Longworth was singularly responsible for establishing a wine industry in the Cincinnati area. He developed vineyards on his own property, provided bounties to others to do likewise and, in time, made the wine industry one of the chief economic enterprises in the Queen City. He produced a sparkling Catawba wine of excellent quality. For accounts of this industry, see Cist, *Cincinnati in 1851*, 266–267; Cist, *Sketches and Statistics of Cincinnati in 1859* (Cincinnati, 1859), 361–362.

15One of these elderly Irish ladies, who had received Longworth’s support for years, stated that "she would leave, in the life to come, her golden throne in the skies to bring him a cup of cold water down below." See De Chambrun, *Making of Longworth*, 33.

16Ibid.
Longworth for helping the dregs of society. Longworth testily replied:

You must find giving money only to those who are irreproachable citizens, a very economical method. For my part, I don't meet very many Bayards among paupers. My charities are for the Devil's poor, because I am the only man in the city imprudent enough to help them.17

Such stories are legion. Charles Cist once went about the city soliciting money to aid a destitute widow and he approached Longworth. "Old Nick" inquired if she were a deserving recipient. Cist assured him that she was. "I had good reason," Cist states, "to believe that she bore an excellent character, and was doing all in her power to support a large family of small children." Longworth stunned Cist with his response:

Very well, then, I shan't give a cent. Such persons will always find plenty to relieve them. I shall assist none but the idle, drunken, worthless vagabonds that nobody else will help. If you meet with such cases call upon me.18

During the Mexican War, Longworth offered to sponsor an entire regiment, provided that he be permitted to select the men. The government promptly rejected this bizarre offer.19 After the Mormons had been driven from Illinois, a committee of the sect visited Cincinnati to solicit funds. They approached one gentleman who refused to donate. Instead, he directed them to Longworth because, as he explained to "Old Nick," they had a "claim on him, they not being Christians." Longworth provided the Mormons with a sizable contribution.20 Finally, there is Longworth's well-known system for dispensing funds to his grandchildren. Not wishing to be pestered by constant demands, he placed a liberal sum of coins in an open drawer in his desk each day and informed the young mendicants: "Let every one take what he wants or what he needs, and don't bother me."21

There is a facet of Longworth's philanthropy which is virtually

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17Ibid.
18Cist, Cincinnati in 1851, 338.
19Mansfield, Personal Memoires, 146.
20Cist, Cincinnati in 1851, 338.
21DeChambrun, Making of Longworth, 47.
unknown, and yet it constitutes one of the most significant factors in the cultural explosion that occurred in pre-Civil War Cincinnati. He was a friend to artists, a supporter of all worthy cultural causes, a veritable one-man Foundation for the Fine Arts, the Maecenas of the Queen City. Before developing this characterization, it must be noted that Cincinnati experienced a remarkable cultural flowering in the three decades preceding the Civil War — these also were the years of Longworth's rise to riches. During this period, the Ohio city seized the mantle of cultural leadership from Lexington, Kentucky. The economic "Queen of the West" also became the cultural "Athens of the West;" it was a veritable Periclean Age. 22

Many Cincinnatians helped to promote this cultural boom but two in particular spearheaded the movement. One was Daniel Drake, 23 the "Franklin of the West," the quintessence of a frontier disciple of the Enlightenment. Drake's deeds have been chronicled at length — and if he is an obscure figure today in the Queen City, the fault rests with an apathetic citizenry.

Longworth was the second prime architect of the Athens of the West. When this story is chronicled in its full dimension by a future biographer, Longworth may well gain entry into the pantheon of distinguished American cultural leaders of the nineteenth century. The evidence I have assembled is fragmentary and represents merely a point of departure for other researchers.

Longworth's contributions were twofold in nature. Initially, he promoted and supported the spate of cultural institutions which sprang up in Cincinnati in the 1830-1860 period. Whether it was an historical society, astronomical society, or an academy of natural science, Longworth joined the cause and, more importantly, provided generous contributions for the promotion of programs. His name appears in virtually every subscription list of a cultural agency. 24

It is interesting to note that he never served as an officer of these

24The Cincinnati Historical Society has a number of these lists in its manuscript holdings, and Longworth's name is conspicuously evident in them.
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organizations;\(^{25}\) he preferred to remain out of the limelight and function merely as a rank-and-file member. And because he scorned sycophantic praise of his “good works,” many of his liberal benefactions were never acknowledged publicly.

The most conspicuous example of his generosity to local cultural agencies was his magnanimous act of donating a four-acre plot of ground on the crown of Mt. Adams for an astronomical observatory. This piece of property was, without question, one of the most valuable sites in the entire Cincinnati area. A somewhat obscure account of the gift was made by Ormsby MacKnight Mitchel, the founder of the observatory:

On making known to Mr. Longworth the prospects and wants of the Astronomical Society, the writer was directed by him to select four-acres on the hill-top, out of a tract of some twenty-five acres, and to proceed at once to enclose it, as it would give him great pleasure to present it to the association. On compliance with the conditions of the titlebond, a deed has since been received, placing the society in full possession of this elegant position.\(^{26}\)

A few years later, after completion of the observatory, one of Longworth’s detractors — and he had some — charged in the public press that “Old Nick” had been motivated by personal gain when he made this donation, that he was desirous of raising the value of his land which was contiguous to the observatory site. Longworth was infuriated by the accusation. He replied through the press that if the critic would deed a similar piece of property, he would underwrite the cost of another observatory, which would equal the original building, and convert his former gift into a “promenade grounds” for the citizens of the city. There was no reply to the offer.\(^{27}\)

\(^{25}\)Nor did he covet public office. As a young lawyer, he did hold one elective office: “Fence Viewer.” He shared this duty with another Cincinnatian, John Kilgour, who also achieved great wealth and prestige in later years. It was the duty of a fence viewer to check fences containing livestock, etc., to protect the public interest. A humorous scribbler of the day wrote:

For Kilgour, straight and slim and tall,
Could gaze severely o’er each wall,
While Nicholas, rather short and small,
Spied through the holes where pigs might crawl.

Quoted in De Chambrun, Making of Longworth, 28–29.


\(^{27}\)Cist, Cincinnati in 1851, 336.
Longworth made a second, and perhaps more notable, contribution to the cultural advance of the Queen City through his patronage of young painters and sculptors and, to a lesser degree, writers. The available evidence would suggest that he assisted practically every young indigent Cincinnati painter and sculptor of promise; and again, this assistance was provided without attendant fanfare. Knowing of his proclivity for this type of philanthropy, fellow Cincinnatians directed poor, aspiring painters and sculptors to him; and there is not one shred of evidence to suggest that Longworth ever refused to honor such a request. “It may be said with entire truth,” wrote one knowledgeable contemporary, “that there was never a young artist of talent who appeared in Cincinnati and was poor and needed help, that Mr. Longworth, if asked, did not willingly assist him.”

Shobael Clevenger, Robert Duncanson, Hiram Powers, Thomas Buchanan Read — the careers of these and many more artists were instituted through the patronage of Longworth.

He assisted them in every conceivable way. He provided them with money and encouragement and served as their financial consultant and father-confessor. He purchased their completed works, commissioned additional items, and exhibited them proudly in his lavish home. He induced his friends among the gentry to do likewise. He subsidized the more promising artists through periods of residence in Boston, New York and Washington where the opportunities for study and more productive work were greater. He supplied these artists with introductions to prospective customers and potential patrons and provided for their families while they were away. He

partially underwrote the cost of a select few who continued their training in Rome and Florence — Hiram Powers, for example. "He was a friend of artists," wrote Edward Mansfield. It was a gross understatement.

An experience described by Worthington Whittredge provides insight into Longworth's generosity to artists. Whittredge, a young painter of considerable promise, was a member of a "little society" of aspiring artists. Wrote Whittredge:

I once asked him for some money to buy some casts for a little society I belonged to, the members of which met together every night to draw from casts. His first question was quite in his rough style on such occasions: "How much money do you expect me to give to a lot of boys studying art?" I told him if we could get fifty dollars, we could buy all the casts we want.

He gave me one hundred dollars! The extensive collection of Hiram Powers papers in The Cincinnati Historical Society fully documents the classic account of Longworth's activities as a patron of young artists. Longworth discovered the precocious artist while Powers was serving as a restorer of waxworks in the Western Museum. Longworth immediately took him in hand and began shaping his talents for a greater destiny. In

1835, he dispatched Powers to Washington, D.C., where he achieved some solid successes fashioning busts of Andrew Jackson, John Marshall, Martin Van Buren, and John Q. Adams, among others. Subsequently, Longworth "sent him abroad with money in his pocket" to Florence, Italy, where he became a world celebrity and achieved enduring fame as a sculptor. If other Longworth protegés did not approximate the phenomenal success of Powers, they nonetheless developed their talents far beyond normal expectations through his involvement in their careers.

There was one other way in which Longworth assisted his bevy of talented young protegés. He provided them with models of artistic excellence so that they could establish a proper frame of reference as they pursued their careers. While Cincinnati contained art galleries which were open to the general public, the best and largest collection of art work in the city was housed in Longworth's home. Among his collection of paintings were quality works by Benjamin West and artists of the Dutch School. These were always available to the young artists for inspection and study. Many must have shared the feelings of Worthington Whittredge who wrote: "These pictures were to me a wonderful inspiration." Young sculptors also were enabled to view models of excellence. Longworth possessed an impressive array of statuary, highlighted by the most accomplished works of Hiram Powers.

What motivated Longworth as a patron of culture is a question that is difficult to answer. Certainly, the element of provincial pride was a conspicuous factor. As a son of the New West, Longworth was imbued with a powerful sense of regional pride. Like his fellow cultural traveler, Daniel Drake, he was convinced that the West (now the Midwest) was destined to become the economic and cultural heart of the nation, that it would supplant the East as the fount of all national values.

A second prominent factor was Longworth's inherent love of cultural activities. He was a dilettante who dabbled in a variety of creative enterprises, from writing sonnets to fashioning plaster busts. He had a special passion for creating forms with his hands. "He had the whittling habit," Whittredge has written, "and we used to see him every day walking about the streets with his head down, a piece of soft pine and penknife in his hands, whittling his way along in the most unconcerned fashion." But talent failed to complement his interest. He remained a dilettante, producing not one notable work of art. As a creative artist, he was a total failure; as a patron of the arts, he was a resounding success.

In 1840, the editor of the New York Star posed a question that had puzzled many other perceptive visitors to the Queen City, both foreign and domestic:

Cincinnati! What is there in the atmosphere of Cincinnati, that has so thoroughly awakened the arts of sculpture and painting? It cannot surely be mere accident which gives birth to so many artists, all of distinguished merit, too; what must be quite gratifying to that city — all possessing high moral worth.34

What there was in the "atmosphere" of Cincinnati was a group of people who placed a high value on the life of the mind; who saw the necessity for cultural, as well as material, growth; who were willing to lavish hard cash to institute and maintain a cultural tradition. Nicholas Longworth was one of this group. Indeed, he was the leading member in terms of financial outlay. His was a major contribution to the cultural development of Cincinnati — and of the American West. In 1851, at the height of Longworth's career, Charles Cist, the civic booster supreme of Cincinnati, set forth this evaluation of the Maecenas of the West:

If the fact, that a community has been made the better or worse, by an individual having existed in it, be, as a standard writer considers it, an unerring test of the general character of that individual, there is no hazard in saying that Cincinnati is the better off for Nicholas Longworth having been an influential citizen of its community, and that putting him to this test, he has fulfilled his mission upon earth, not indeed, as fully as he might have done, but

perhaps as fully as one would have done, who might have stood in his shoes.\textsuperscript{35}

With his disdain for pretension, Longworth was assuredly pleased with Cist's restrained appraisal. Even the diffident millionaire himself would have been forced to concede that "Cincinnati is the better off for Nicholas Longworth having been an influential citizen of its community."

\textsuperscript{35}Cist, \textit{Cincinnati in 1851}, 336.