

John T. Nagle M.D. Mausoleum

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The Nagle mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery is a striking symbol of a family's legacy, from their Irish roots to their prominence in New York City. Designed by Daniel S. Goldner, the mausoleum serves as the final resting place for Dr. John T. Nagle, a noted public health official, and his family. Its polished granite facade—a rare choice in mausoleum design—alongside classical elements, reflects the family's status and enduring values. This research examines the mausoleum's design and its significance in the context of the Nagle family's contributions to New York's history.

The mausoleum itself tells a story through detailed inscriptions. Dr. John T. Nagle's headstone commemorates his service in the Civil War and his work in public health. His wife, Fannie J. Nagle, who died in 1917, is also buried here. Her mother, Hannah Shaurman, also rests in this mausoleum. John's brother, Garrett Nagle, is remembered for his service as a lieutenant colonel in the AmeriCorps. He died in 1915 at the age of 76. The mausoleum also includes John's parents, Ellen Croker Nagle and Garrett Nagle. Also, his sister Eliza Nagle, who died in 1896.<sup>1</sup>

The Nagle family originally hailed from Ballynamona, County Cork, Ireland. Garrett Nagle, the family's patriarch, played a significant role in managing the estate of Admiral Sir Edmund Nagle in Barbados, illustrating the Nagles' involvement in colonial activities of the time. Admiral Sir Edmund Nagle was a distinguished British naval officer, known for his service in the Royal Navy during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. A close confidant of King George IV, Nagle was celebrated for his bravery in several key naval battles, including those against French forces

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<sup>1</sup> John T. Nagle M.D. Mausoleum, Woodlawn

during the Napoleonic Wars. His service earned him knighthood and the favor of the British Crown, ultimately leading to significant land holdings in Barbados.<sup>2</sup>



*Figure 1. Dr. John T. Nagle*

Dr. John T. Nagle (1842-1919) was a key figure in New York City's public health sector. (*Figure 1*) His life and achievements are commemorated on his tombstone, which mentions his service as an acting assistant surgeon during the Civil War with the 192nd Regiment of the New York Volunteer Infantry. This period of service laid the foundation for his future work in public health.

John T. Nagle's journey to becoming a public health advocate began with a strong educational foundation. After moving to New York as a child, he attended public schools and later the New York Free Academy, now known as the College of the City of New York. His education continued at Cooper Union, where he took night courses—a unique opportunity Cooper Union offered to working-class individuals. Founded by industrialist and philanthropist Peter Cooper in 1859, Cooper Union provided accessible education in science, engineering, and the arts, and welcomed a diverse student body, including women and people from various backgrounds. Nagle's comprehensive education at these institutions gave him the essential knowledge and

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<sup>2</sup> *Legacies of British Slavery Database*, "Garrett Nagle," University College London, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/4911>.

skills that supported his service in the Civil War and his later work in public health, where he would become a leading advocate.<sup>3</sup>

During the Civil War, he served as an acting assistant surgeon in the U.S. Army, attached to the 192nd Regiment of the New York Volunteer Infantry. And later as a chief medical officer to a cavalry brigade. He was commended for bravery in action. This military service not only marked a significant chapter in his life but also gave him hands-on experience with health crises, preparing him for his later role in the New York City Health Department.

After the Civil War, John T. Nagle continued his education at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, now Columbia University, graduating in 1868. This formal medical training prepared him for a career dedicated to public health, which he pursued for over three decades with the New York City Health Department.<sup>4</sup> In the 1870s, during a period when cholera and yellow fever posed severe public health threats, Nagle contributed to efforts to curb these epidemics. Nagle's approach was data-driven; he emphasized the need for detailed vital statistics to understand and manage public health issues. One of his notable contributions was a comprehensive report on suicides in New York City, which highlighted social and health trends linked to mental health and mortality. Additionally, his 1894 study, "Table showing the total number of stillbirths and deaths (with an enumeration of some of the most prominent causes) which occurred in the city of New York during the ninety-one years ending Dec. 31, 1894," documented death rates and causes of death over nearly a century.<sup>5</sup> This research provided valuable insights into public

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<sup>3</sup> "Dr. John Nagle Dies; Former Health Official Authority on Contagious Diseases and Served in the Civil War," *New York Tribune*, June 16, 1919, 8.

<sup>4</sup> "No salary for a pensioner: A bill introduced covering the case of Dr. John T. Nagle," *New York Times*, February 12, 1898, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Nagle John T Suicide in New York City 1804 1880 Public Health Papers and Reports 1883 <http://books.google.com/books?id=da8EAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA247&lpg=PA247&dq=%22john+t+nagle%22+%22New+York&source=bl&ots=SCisRDIK9G&sig=eZ->

health patterns and the underlying health conditions exacerbated by overcrowded and unsanitary urban living conditions.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Nagle wasn't just a health official; he was also actively involved in New York's social scene. E.J. Phillips, a friend of the family, often mentioned Dr. Nagle and his wife, Fannie, in her letters. The Nagles were known to attend social gatherings, concerts, and holiday dinners, showing they were well-connected and engaged in the city's social life.<sup>7</sup>

A particularly notable collaboration was with the social reformer Jacob Riis. Dr. Nagle played a key role in helping Riis document the poor living conditions in New York's tenement districts. As an amateur photographer, Dr. Nagle joined Riis on nighttime expeditions, using the new technique of flashlight photography to capture the reality of tenement life. This work was groundbreaking at the time and contributed to housing reforms in the city.<sup>8</sup> It also showed Dr. Nagle's commitment to improving public health, not just through statistics, but by advocating for real change in living conditions.

Dr. Nagle's impact also extended into the Irish American community. When he passed away in 1919, he left \$60,000 and his residence at 132 East 16th Street to the American Irish Historical Society.<sup>9</sup> This generous bequest underscores his pride in his Irish heritage and his desire to

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<sup>6</sup> "Dr. John Nagle Dies; Former Health Official Authority on Contagious Diseases and Served in the Civil War," *New York Tribune*, June 16, 1919, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Glen Chitty, "Nagle Family," <https://www.maryglenchitty.com/nagle.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> "The Making of an American how", Jacob A. Rills

<sup>9</sup> "Will of Dr. J.T. Nagle: \$60,000 for Irish Society; Also Gives Residence," *New York Times*, July 3, 1919, <https://www.nytimes.com/1919/07/03/archives/60000-for-irish-society-will-of-dr-jt-nagle-also-gives-residence.html>.

support the preservation of Irish American history. The mausoleum, therefore, isn't just a family crypt; it's a symbol of the Nagle family's journey, achievements, and impact on the city.



*Figure 2. John T. Nagle M.D. Mausoleum*

The Nagle mausoleum, designed by Daniel S. Goldner. (Figure 2) Although specific records about Goldner are limited, the mausoleum's design speaks to the period's architectural preferences and the skilled craftsmanship associated with such memorial structures. It exhibits the characteristics typical of early 20th-century mausoleums, with influences of Classical architectural styles. The front of the mausoleum features four sturdy columns supporting a triangular pediment, echoing the architectural elements of classical Greek temples. This choice of design communicates strength, permanence, and respect for tradition. Engraved across the pediment is "JOHN T. NAGLE, M.D." a direct statement of the mausoleum's owner and a reminder of his legacy as a medical professional and public health advocate.

The structure appears to be built with polished granite, known for its durability and association with endurance. The choice of material aligns with the family's intent to create a lasting memorial, one that can withstand the test of time. The stonework is well crafted, with smooth surfaces and clean lines that showcase the skills of the masons involved in its construction.



*Figure 3. Door from mausoleum*

The front doors (*Figure 3*) are an intricate wrought bronze design, featuring ornate patterns and floral motifs. Wrought bronze, unlike cast iron or steel, often has a warmer, slightly textured surface and exhibits fine detailing that is ideal for intricate designs like floral motifs. The doors' ornate patterns and the high level of craftsmanship suggest that they were crafted from a malleable material, as bronze is known to be, allowing for precise detailing. This detailed bronze work adds a touch of elegance to the structure, serving as both a protective barrier and a decorative element. The use of floral patterns could symbolize life, growth, and renewal. The dark color of the bronze, contrasting against the light granite, creates a visual emphasis on the entrance, guiding visitors' attention to the mausoleum's interior. The side and rear views of the

mausoleum are more austere, featuring solid stone walls with minimal decoration. A single window, framed by bronze bars, is placed at the rear.



*Figure 4. Art Glass window*

One of the most striking features of the mausoleum is the stained-glass window (*Figure 4*), showcasing an elaborate design of lilies set against a vibrant blue sky. Lilies are often associated with purity, rebirth, and the soul's return to a peaceful state, which could symbolize the Nagle family's hope for eternal peace. The stained-glass work adds a layer of color and light to the otherwise sober stone structure, creating a visual focal point. This artistic element softens the mausoleum's otherwise imposing presence and infuses it with a sense of beauty and hope.<sup>10</sup>

The Nagle mausoleum's use of polished granite is a distinctive feature that sets it apart from many traditional mausoleum designs of its time. Granite, while often used in cemeteries for headstones due to its durability, is not as commonly polished and used for the entirety of a mausoleum structure. This choice introduces both aesthetic and symbolic differences compared to other mausoleums made from materials like limestone, marble, or rough-hewn granite.

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<sup>10</sup> "A Window Explained," *Gravely Speaking*, <https://gravelyspeaking.com/2023/11/30/a-window-explained/>.



Many 19th and early 20th-century mausoleums in cemeteries like Woodlawn or Green-Wood used limestone or marble for their facades. These stones, prized for their smoothness and workability, lend themselves to detailed carvings and sculptures. However, they are more prone to weathering over time. Limestone can develop a weathered, almost antique patina, and marble may acquire a softer appearance as it ages, both giving the structures an air of historical gravity. When granite is used in mausoleum construction, it is more commonly left in a rough-cut or honed finish.<sup>11</sup>



*Figure 5. Mausoleum interior*

The Nagle mausoleum's polished granite offers a stark contrast. Polished granite's high gloss finish creates a striking, reflective surface that really draws the eye. A polished surface speaks to a dignified memorial, one that stands out with its contemporary, minimalist look. The polished granite not only enhances the mausoleum's durability but also signifies permanence, as the

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<sup>11</sup> "Early 1900s Mausoleum Boom Brought Riches to Granite Industry," *Times Argus*, [https://www.timesargus.com/news/early-1900s-mausoleum-boom-brought-riches-to-granite-industry/article\\_5f24833c-1c2c-59a6-aef4-057676341055.html#:~:text=The%20mausoleum%20is%20a%20harmonious,slate%20for%20the%20crypt%20backs%2C](https://www.timesargus.com/news/early-1900s-mausoleum-boom-brought-riches-to-granite-industry/article_5f24833c-1c2c-59a6-aef4-057676341055.html#:~:text=The%20mausoleum%20is%20a%20harmonious,slate%20for%20the%20crypt%20backs%2C).

material resists the elements more effectively than limestone or marble. Over time, traditional materials like limestone and marble can suffer from erosion, staining, and discoloration due to exposure to the elements. This aging process, while it adds character, can obscure inscriptions and sculptural details. Polished granite, however, is known for its exceptional durability and low maintenance. Its smooth surface resists moss, lichen, and other forms of biological growth that often affect rough-cut stones. The exterior of Nagle's mausoleum shows minimal signs of aging or biological growth, reflecting its well-preserved condition.

The Nagel Mausoleum, composed of polished granite and classical architecture, is a permanent memorial to a family that contributed much to New York society. Through its elaborate design and the notable lives of those interred, it chronicles the story of the family's perseverance and public service, especially that of Dr. John T. Nagle, and his dedication to leaving his mark on history. The mausoleum is a testament to the legacy the Nagel family has left in the city.

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