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Woodlawn Cemetery: Ehret Mausoleum

The Ehret Mausoleum was built in 1900 by architects Schickel & Ditmars and was constructed by Robert Caterson for the notable and prosperous immigrant brewer, George Ehret, and his family. There are 56 crypts in the mausoleum and it contains 31 members of the family, the last of whom died in 1995. Considered to be one of the most costly private mausoleums in the country at that time, according to a 1915 issue of *Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening*, it measured approximately 37 by 37 feet and cost \$100,000.¹

George Ehret was born in Hofweier, Germany in 1835 and came to America in 1856, following his father, who had also been a brewer in Germany, and had come to America a few years prior. In 1864, he married Anna Hasslocher. He found employment at Anton Hupfel's brewery in Manhattan, George worked his way up in the company. Over the years he saved his earnings, and by 1866 he was able to start his own brewery, supported by a loan from Hupfel. He named it Hell Gate Brewery because of its location near what was referred to as "Hell's Gate" on the East River. Ehret introduced lager brewing to Manhattan and the success of Hell Gate peaked when it produced over 600,000 barrels by 1900 and, as a result, Ehret became one of the richest men in New York. Hell Gate was considered to be the country's largest brewer for a majority of the late 19th century, but along with his brewery business, Ehret accumulated further wealth from his considerable real estate holdings. He was part of many German

¹ "Our Costliest Private Mausoleums." 1915. *Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening (1900-1931)* 25(8): 244.

societies and made an annual pilgrimage to Germany, but in 1914, during one of these pilgrimages, World War I broke out and after trying to evacuate, the Berlin government would not allow him to leave because they considered him an “enemy alien” who might disclose German military information. As a result, his six-month pilgrimage to Germany turned into a four-year stay. Because of the timing and length of this stay in Germany, along with rumors about him, the U.S. government became very suspicious and seized his entire \$40 million estate, until he returned after the war ended in 1918.

“Ehret was an American citizen, but the federal government’s alien property custodian, A. Mitchell Palmer, said that the 82-year-old Ehret’s temporary residence in Germany was enough to trigger the action.”²

In 1919, the Prohibition Era began, halting production at the Hell Gate Brewery. Not long after, in 1927, George Ehret died, leaving an estate of \$40 million.

“Prohibition brought an end to his heirs’ fortunes however. The brewery moved to Brooklyn, then to Union City, where it lasted until 1948. Like many tombs here, his mausoleum is all that remains of his empire.”³

Between 1865 and 1883, George and his wife, Anna, had ten children: Frank Anselm Ehret, born in 1865, Anna M. Ehret, born in 1867, Josephine Frances Ehret, born in 1869, Frances Julia Ehret, born in 1871, George Louis Ehret, born in 1874 and died later that year, Julia A. Ehret, born in 1873, George Ehret Jr., born in 1875, Madeleine Ehret, born in 1879, Louis John Ehret,

² “A Park Ave. Mansion Built With Beer.” Gray, Christopher. *New York Times*. July 17, 2005.

³ “Donald Trump Can’t Build Just Any Old Gravesite.” Tenner, Edward. *The Atlantic*. January 31, 2012. Accessed 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/01/donald-trump-cant-build-just-any-old-gravesite/252232/>.

born in 1881 and Louise M. Hoffmann Ehret, born in 1883. All of their children are buried in the mausoleum, along with the family's later generations and other individuals who married into the family.

The architects who designed the mausoleum were Schickel & Ditmars. One of them, Johann William Schickel, known professionally as "William Schickel," was also a fellow German immigrant. Born in Wiesbaden, Hochbein, Germany in 1850, his German training was reflected in the Gothic and Romanesque details of his work. His career began in the offices of the famous architect Richard Morris Hunt. In 1873, prior to his partnership with Ditmars, he established his architecture firm and became well-known for his work in New York City. In 1887, he partnered with Hugo Kafka and Isaac E. Ditmars to expand the company, which was then known as William Schickel & Co. The structure of the firm changed between the late 1880s and the early 1890s, allocating further responsibility to Ditmars. "Schickel & Ditmars continued the earlier firm's commercial, ecclesiastical, and residential work, with Ditmar responsible for the business operations of the firm, while Schickel remained the principal designer."⁴ with the firm's name significant portion of their clients were of German or German-American decent. Primarily, they designed Roman Catholic churches and institutional buildings, but also some residences and hospitals. Some notable projects they completed around the same time as the Ehret Mausoleum were St. Vincent's Hospital, completed in 1900, Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity on Central Park West, completed in 1902, and William and Clara Baumgarten House on Riverside Drive, completed in 1901.

⁴ Landmarks Preservation Commission, *R.H. Macy & Co. Store Designation Report*, Designation List 450 (LP-2474) (December 2011), prepared by Jay Shockley.

Alongside Schickel & Ditmars, Robert Caterson fabricated the Ehret mausoleum's structure. He was the head of a Texas and New York Granite Company and specialized in monument and vault construction. His company's trade catalogue describes his talents and experience, alongside examples of his work, many of which stood in Woodlawn Cemetery with the Ehret Mausoleum.

"Complete understanding of mortuary architecture gained through more than a half-century of experience enables him to offer suggestions and advice of most tangible worth. In all America, no more varied monument building experience can be found than that offered by Mr. Caterson."⁵

In his 1905 trade catalogue, Caterson lists the Ehret Mausoleum as one of his most noteworthy works.⁶ His office was located at 233rd Street and Verio Avenue, at the main entrance of Woodlawn Cemetery, and its adjacent locale most likely contributed to his countless works within the cemetery.

The Ehret mausoleum (*Figure 1*) was built in the Beaux-Arts style, indicated by the concave shape of its entrance surround, symmetrical form and classical details, such as its low dome and festoons. The entryway's two bronze doors lay behind two granite lions (*Figure 2*), which were sculpted by J. Massey Rhind and installed at the mausoleum in 1913. Rhind was a notable Scottish-American sculptor who's most famous works included the John Jacob Astor III bronze doors at Trinity Church and the Grand Army of the Republic Memorial in Washington, D.C. The structure's decorated cornice possesses a unique roofline below a tiered stone roof, which is

⁵ *The Monumental Work of Robert Caterson*. Caterson, Robert. New York, 1922.

⁶ *General Monumental Work; Mausoleums, Vaults, Monuments, Woodlawn, New York City*. Caterson, Robert. New York, 1905.

topped with a round finial. On the wall opposite of the entrance, there is a Tiffany stained-glass window set above a large marble cross (*Figure 3*). The window depicts an angel holding a scroll. The marble cross is surrounded by a bronze ivy edge. The interior ceiling of the dome consists of arched Guastavino tile (*Figure 4*), which represented a milestone technique introduced shortly before the mausoleum's construction that involved interlocking clay tiles to form self-supporting arches.

The landscaping for the site was designed by Woodlawn Cemetery in 1910 and originally included a lot more small shrubbery along the perimeter of the structure, appearing to be right up against the building. Since then, the varying shrubbery or small trees that had been along the structure's perimeter have been removed and instead there remain two small and uniform-looking identical sets of flowering shrubs along the edge of the two granite lions and a few larger trees close to the edge of the plot.

The structure's site comprises a large portion of "Pine Plot," located within the cemetery between Central Avenue and Pine Avenue. Known as area 135, the site occupies lots 9129-9161 (*Figure 5*). The site's design is a circular parcel with a path along the perimeter and the structure located directly in the center. A linear path from Central Avenue connects to the circular path that surrounds the parcel and is harmoniously in line with the entrance to the structure, yet does not extend beyond the circular path to the steps of the structure. This indicates that the structure was intended to be seen from a distance, possibly to emphasize its grand scale and interesting shape. This is further demonstrated by the fact that, originally, Ehret also owned the parcels on each side of this linear path, lots 9647-9648, which bordered Central Avenue and were later sold to John W. Gates and F.W. Woolworth. Since Central

Avenue connects to the main entrance of the cemetery and Pine Plot is one of the first ones along it, this suggests Ehret originally not only wanted his mausoleum to be visible from this main road, but he also wanted everyone who entered the cemetery to see it.

Over the years, there have not been many alterations made to the mausoleum, perhaps because the owners maintained consistent upkeep, therefore, alterations were not as necessary. In 1911, a temporary roof was needed for the mausoleum, for reasons that were not listed in the structure's correspondence records. In 1913, cleaning and minor interior and exterior repairs were completed by Palmer A. Hart Company. This specifically consisted of the Guastavino dome being cleaned and repointed and inscriptions on the tablets being re-gilded. In 1951, the structure's roof joints were repointed. Then, in 1956, the gravel path surrounding the plot was resurfaced, along with many of the other gravel paths in the cemetery. Finally, in 1960, joints in the dome of the structure were waterproofed and copper was removed from its base.

The Ehret mausoleum's impressive plan, desirable location within the cemetery and use of valuable materials, such as granite, marble, copper, Guastavino tile and Tiffany glass, illustrates its grand opulence reflecting the family's substantial wealth. "The family's imposing mausoleum stands as an enduring symbol of a time when breweries afforded great riches."⁷ Although the family's business and fortune no longer exist, their extraordinary legacy lingers in their tomb.

⁷ "Gardens of Stone." Mosca, Alexandra Kathryn. The Brewery Baron. January 1, 1970. Accessed 2017. <http://www.gardens-of-stone.com/2011/08/brewery-baron.html>.

Figures 1-5



Figure 1. Doherty, Melissa. Front façade of the Ehret Mausoleum. 2017.



Figure 2. Doherty, Melissa. One of the two granite lions that sit in front of the entrance of the Ehret Mausoleum. 2017.



Figure 3: Doherty, Melissa. Wall opposite the entrance to the mausoleum, containing tiffany stained glass window above marble cross. 2017.



Figure 4: Doherty, Melissa. Light blue Guastavino tile domed-ceiling inside of the Ehret Mausoleum. 2017.

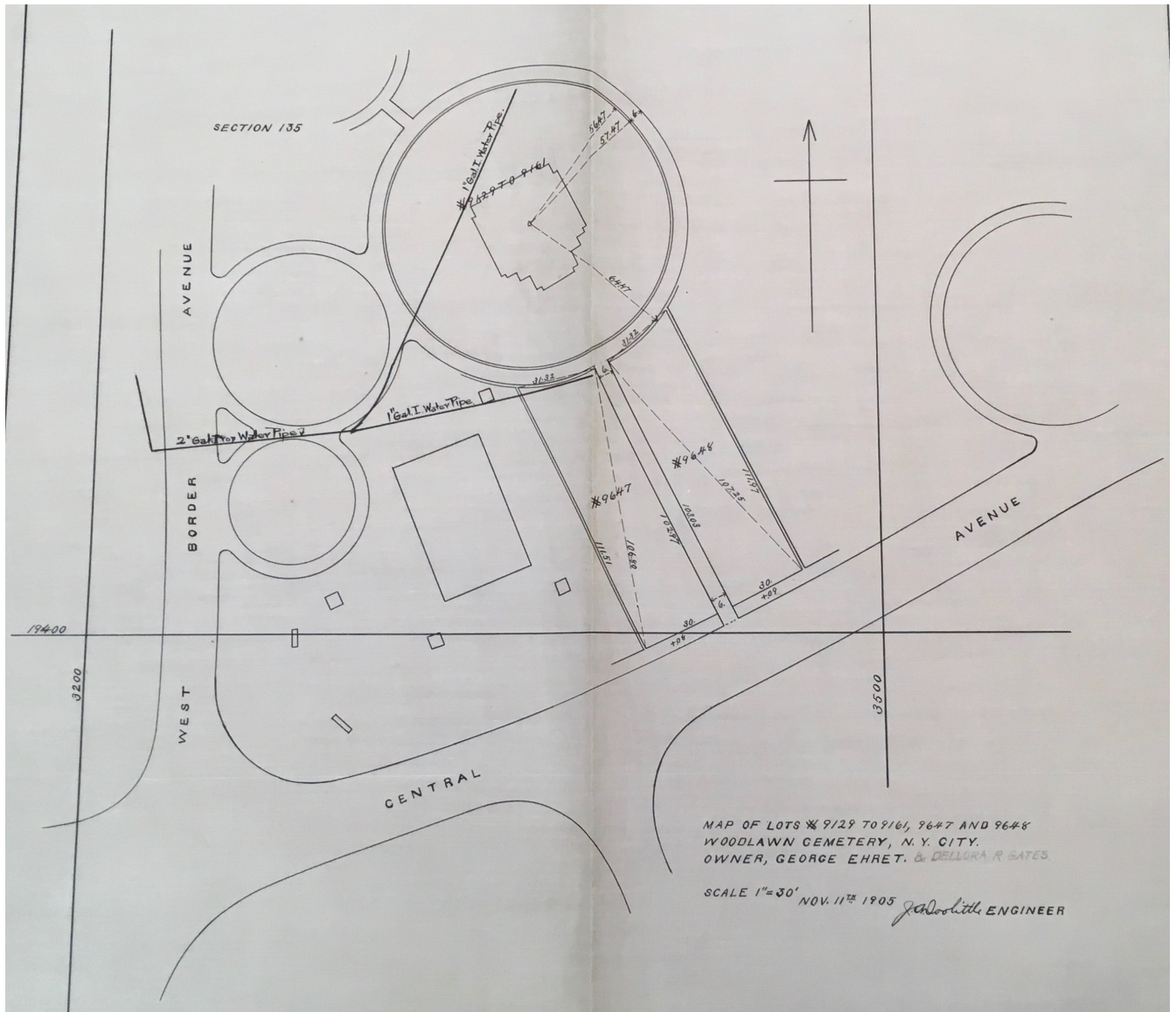


Figure 5: Woodlawn Cemetery (New York, N.Y.). "Map of Lots #9129 to 9161, 9647 and 9648, Woodlawn Cemetery, N.Y. City. Owner, George Ehret." Major Monuments: Ehret, George. Woodlawn Cemetery Records 1863-1999. Box 5: Folder 62. November 11, 1905.

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