

The History behind the Mausoleum of
Vernon Carleton Brown
at The Woodlawn Cemetery



Figure 1 South Elevation taken by Rob Kesack

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VERNON CARLETON BROWN
PRES. EASTERN INSURANCE CO.; MANHATTAN FIRE ALARM CO.
EX-PRES. MARITIME EXCHANGE. WATSON & BROWN, BANKERS

Figure 2 Image taken from Moses King's Most Notable New Yorkers

Vernon Carleton Brown was born December 11, 1859, in Boston, Massachusetts.¹ His father was Vernon H. Brown, whose firm, Vernon H. Brown & Co. of New York, acted as the American agents for the passenger cruise line Cunard.² Vernon Carleton Brown served alongside his father, as a partner, in that firm. Eventually, he started his own stock brokerage firm, with his brother Stephen H. Brown in 1895. The young Mr. Brown held various other positions of stature and distinction throughout his life, Ruptured and Crippled, President of the New York Maritime Exchange, President of Eastern Insurance Company, as well as a Banker and Partner at Watson & Brown.³^[4]

His wife was Katherine F. Brundige.⁵ Together, they had two children, both having died in their infancy, likely at birth.⁶ On March 23, 1925, Vernon and his wife purchased lot 15895 in the plot of Spring Lake within Woodlawn Cemetery, in the Bronx, for \$10,913.⁷ Designs for the construction of a mausoleum and plans for landscaping around that structure were conceived as early as April 1926.⁸ Vernon's wife, Katherine, passed away from pneumonia in January of 1927⁹, before completion of the mausoleum. Plans for the Brown Mausoleum were finalized a few months after, in May. Vernon Carleton Brown, himself, passed away in 1944, on December 30th, from a long-suffered illness.¹⁰

¹ National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington D.C.; NARA Series: *Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925*; Roll #: 2518; Volume #: *Roll 2518 - Certificates: 416350-416849, 15 May 1924-16 May 1924.*

² "Vernon Carleton Brown, Head of Brokerage Firm." *New York Herald Tribune*, 01 January 1945.

³ "Vernon H. Brown Dies." *New York Times*, 01 January 1945.

⁴ Moses King. *Notable New Yorkers of 1896-1899: a companion volume to King's handbook of New York City.* (New York: New York: Bartlett & Company - The ORR Press, 1899, 233

⁵ "Vernon H. Brown Dies." *New York Times*, 01 January 1945.

⁶ Woodlawn Cemetery Record of Interments.

⁷ Woodlawn Cemetery Memorandum of Lot Sale: Deed No. 26114, 23 March 1925.

⁸ Woodlawn Cemetery records, 1863-1999, Monument File for Vernon Carlton Brown Mausoleum.

⁹ "The Rev. George W. Labaw.", *New York Herald Tribune*, 10 January 1927.

¹⁰ "Vernon Carleton Brown, Head of Brokerage Firm." *New York Herald Tribune*, 01 January 1945.

The Browns architectural firm of Mayers, Murray & Phillip to draft their mausoleum plans.¹¹ Mayers, Murray & Phillip was a successor architectural firm to an earlier company established by the well-known architect Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue.¹² Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue was considered a pioneer of a new modern neo-Gothic architecture seen across the churches and cathedrals of America. He is known for designing some monumental cathedrals and public buildings. St. Thomas Church in New York City and the Los Angeles Public Library are among just a small few of his deep portfolio of influential projects.

Francis L.S. Mayers, Oscar Harold Murray, and Hardie Phillip were three principal assistants to Goodhue before his passing. Mayers was a student of architecture and came to New York via Canada to work initially as Bertram Goodhue's office manager. Murray was from England and best known for his work on ecclesiastical buildings like Christ Church in Michigan. Phillip can be attributed to many works out west, including buildings on the campus of California Institute of Technology. As a firm, one of Mayers, Murray, and Phillip's most noteworthy projects was the Church of the Heavenly Rest, a large neo-Gothic church on Fifth Avenue and East Ninetieth Street in New York City.¹³ Noteworthy is the fact that Vernon Carleton Brown was head of the finance committee at this church and that it was designed in the identical neo-Gothic architectural style as his mausoleum.¹⁴ Perhaps, somewhere during his tenure as head of the finance committee, he made a connection with one or multiple members of the Mayers, Murray & Phillip firm.

The physical location and the context of the site for the mausoleum is interesting. It is located in the oldest part of Woodlawn, yet it manages to rest on a large swath of land. A parcel of land which is

¹¹ Woodlawn Cemetery records, 1863-1999, Monument File for Vernon Carlton Brown Mausoleum.

¹² Research Dept. *Expanded Carnegie Hill Historic District Designation Report*. Landmarks Designation Report, New York: New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, 1993, 44.

¹³ *Ibid*, 75-76.

¹⁴ "Vernon H. Brown Dies." *New York Times*, 01 January 1945.

comprised of three separate lots. Lot 15895 (the original lot), on which the mausoleum stands, was purchased first, and then three years later, in 1928, after the death of Katherine Brundige Brown, a second adjoining lot was purchased by Vernon himself. The last lot was purchased, by him, a year later, in 1929.

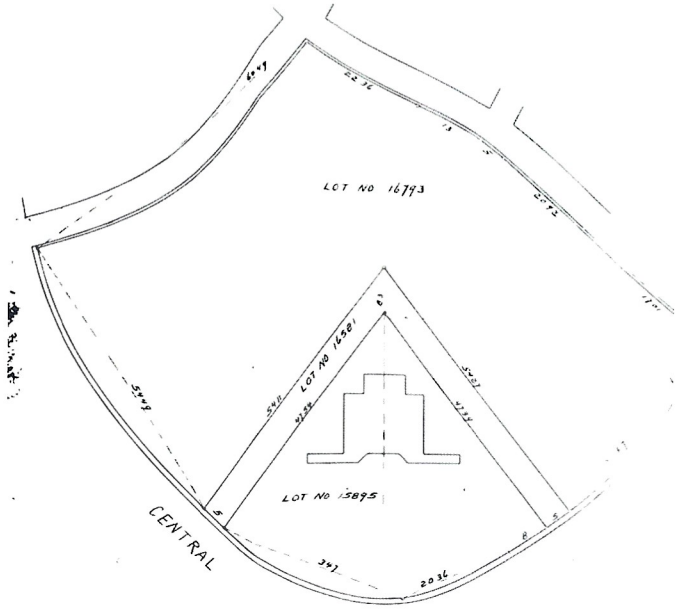


Figure 3 Drawing of lots courtesy of Susan Olsen at Woodlawn Cemetery

The entire mausoleum site has a curious and noticeable amount of space surrounding it, in what is an otherwise congested and heavily built part of the cemetery. When looking at a map from 1875, it is clear that once a fountain of some considerable scale sat right at the northern point of the original triangular lot (15895).¹⁵ This might give some insight as to why , for so long, the Brown Mausoleum lot and those immediately surrounding it went undeveloped.

¹⁵ Map of The Woodlawn Cemetery, 1875.

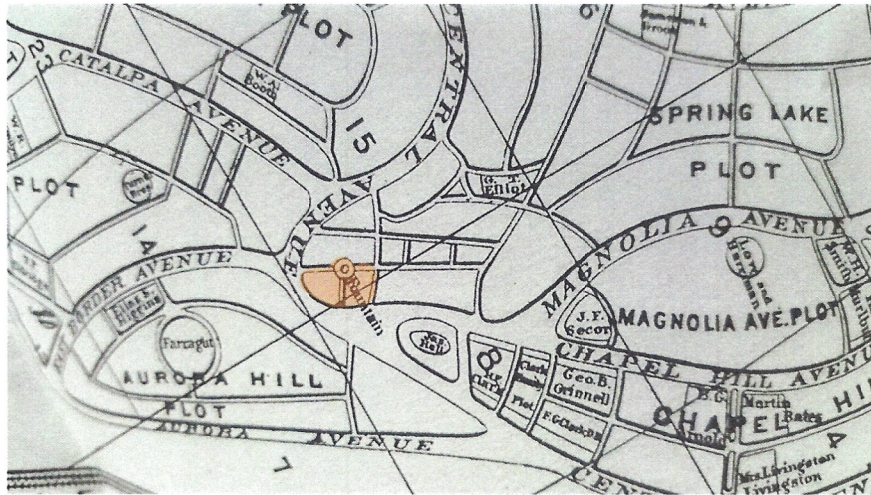


Figure 4 1875 map showing position of fountain from Woodlawn Cemetery Files

The three lots are situated in a way so as to insulate the main structure and allow for a private buffer with an area for an intimate landscape. Somewhat modest in size and content, a still intricate and most deliberate landscape was planned and drafted for the mausoleum by Charles Downing Lay. Lay was a student at the architecture program at Columbia University around the turn of the century, having then transferred to the Landscape Architecture program at Harvard University, from which he ultimately graduated. He is best known for his emphasis on the importance of open public space and planning to consider the variable needs of a growing and changing population. He developed the landscape plans for the 1939 World's Fair and has also designed many parks in New York City including Battery Park, as well as many others throughout Northeast.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Guide to Charles Downing Lay Papers, 1898-1956, 1992.*

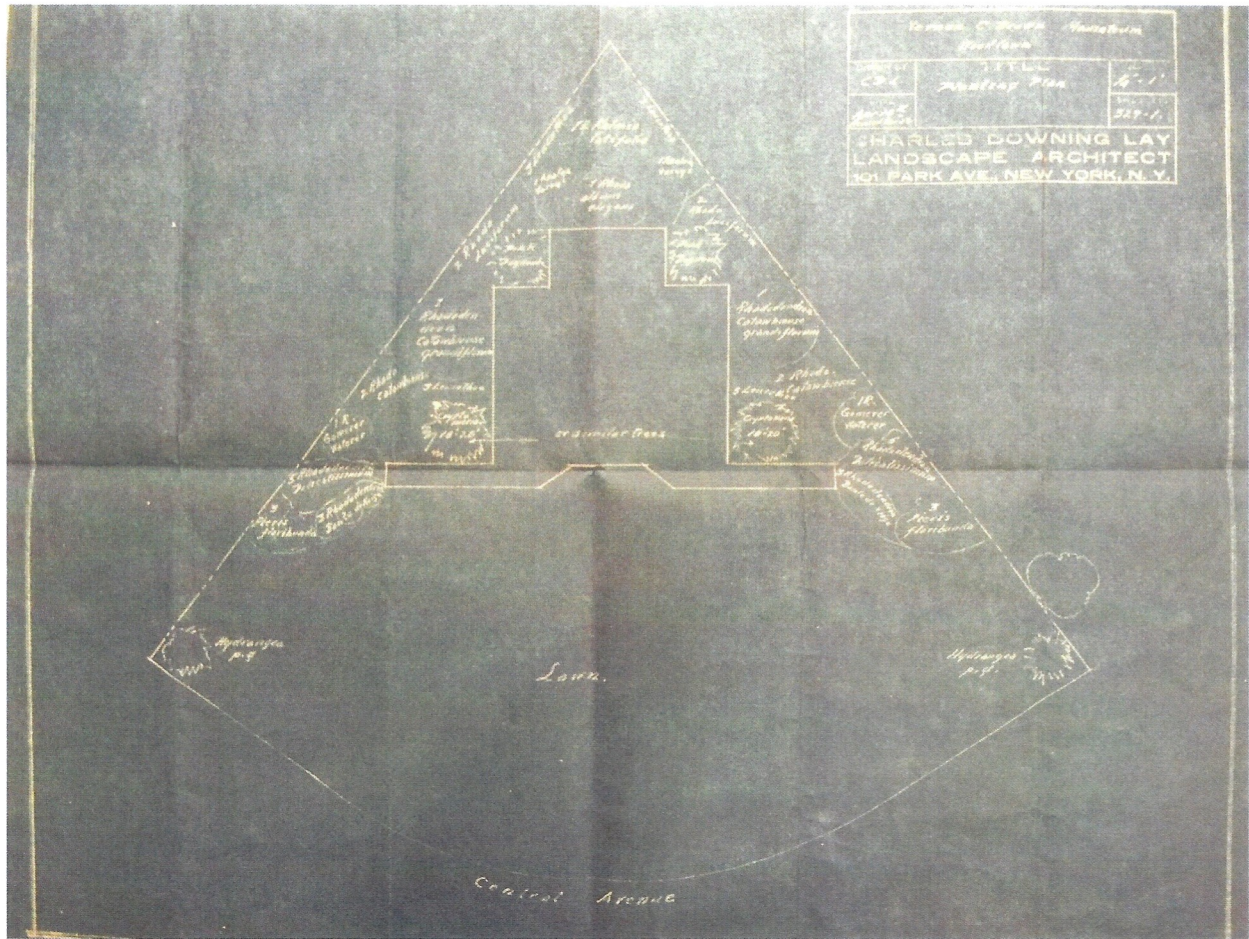


Figure 5 Landscape Plan by CDL courtesy Avery Drawing & Archives

The Brown mausoleum structure itself is neo-Gothic in style and has reminiscent of a church. It is relatively small compared to other mausoleums at Woodlawn; it measures in at just under 200ft². Although, the mausoleum stands out prominently among all of the other monuments and gravestones that surround it. It is easily one of the tallest monuments in the Spring Lake section. It's exterior is built entirely out of large hefty chunks of limestone, given a sense of severity and mass.

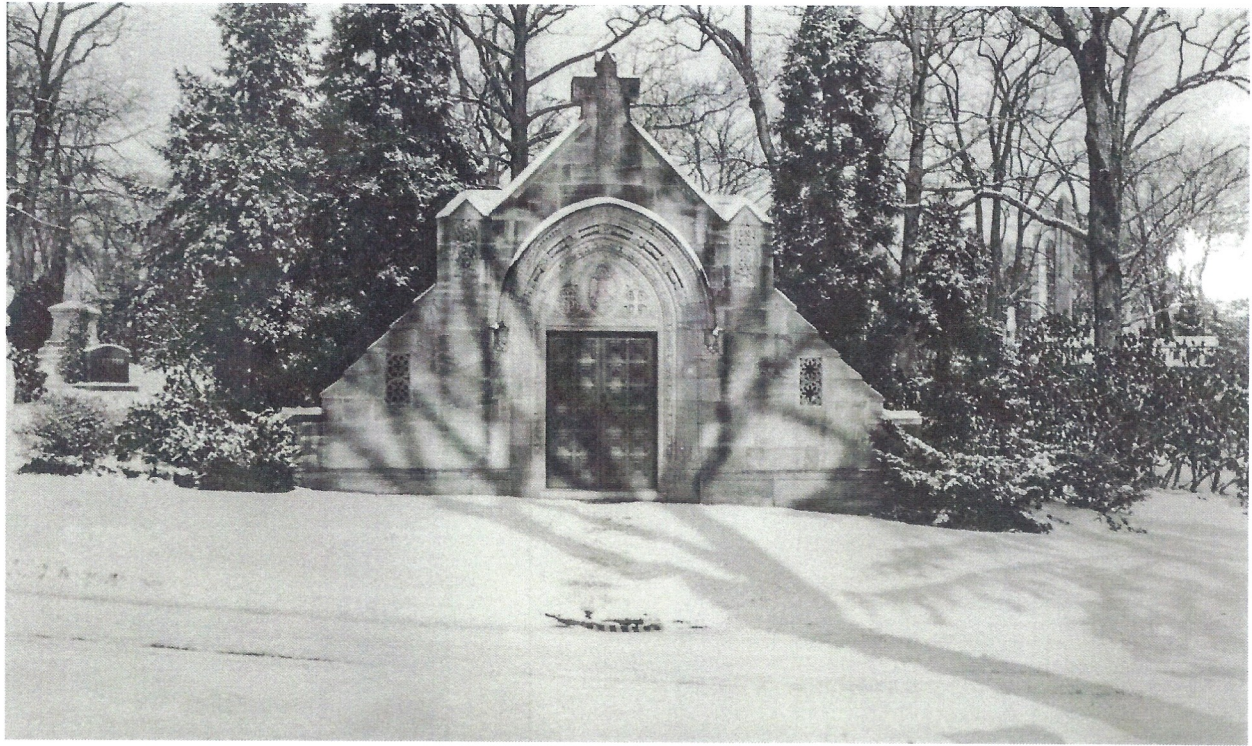


Figure 6 Image courtesy Avery Drawings and Archives

The portal is a work of art, in itself. It evokes a sensation of intimidation and awe. There are tall double doors with two leaves cast in bronze, with 12 square panels respectively. Each of the panels has the same repeated ornament, that of flowers, one in each corner, perhaps representing the four seasons, and in the middle there is a decoration which resembles a Tudor rose. Above the door, the antepagmentum which enriches and dresses the door jamb is ornately carved with foliated ornament of leaves and grapes, this same pattern is present and continues up the haunches of the arch around the tympanum.



Figure 7 Detail of tympanum taken by Rob Kesack

There are three distinct sculptured carvings within the tympanum: that of an eagle sitting perched in the center, a common symbol of banking and finance; then to the left of the eagle there is an anchor with the Latin inscription "spes" meaning hope; and to the right-hand side of the eagle, a cross inscribed with the word "fides", which means faith. Just centered beneath these carvings, and above the antepagmentum, is engraved the name of the owner, Vernon Carlton Brown. The outer most ribbed arch encasing the portal is supported, on either side, by ornate Deco-esque gothic angel busts with stylized wings.

At its sides, the entire building is supported by buttresses which seem to draw the eye up to the peak of the mausoleum where a large Gothicized Celtic cross is projecting up towards the sky. Other elements of detail include stone grilles with geometric tracery with foils.



Figure 8 Gothic Tracery in Buttress taken by Rob Kesack

Moving to the interior, the lack of a more ornamented design is unanticipated; there is a clear shift to a subtler, somber, and rather unpretentious decoration. White marble with very thin gray veining covers the catacombs, with small embellishments and accents of cast bronze medallions. Each vault is marked with the inscription of the person buried in that place with elaborate raised Gothic lettering, as depicted in the mausoleum plans.

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Figure 9 Interior of Crypt Lettering Detail taken by Rob Kesack

Goodhue and his associates, Mayers, Murray & Phillip routinely, and nearly exclusively worked with the same master sculptor, for nearly all of their projects. This sculptor was one of the most renowned of his time. His name was Lee Lawrie. Lawrie specialized in Gothic carving techniques and styles. It was often the case that Goodhue would insist on working with only Lawrie on his projects. This fact, in conjunction with the many subtle yet undeniable similarities between features, style, proportions, and other dynamics seen through the timeline of Lawrie's many sculptures, makes it is

¹⁷ Woodlawn Cemetery records, 1863-1999, Monument File for Vernon Carlton Brown Mausoleum.

highly plausible to believe that much of the sculpture work seen on Vernon Carleton Brown's mausoleum can be attributed to Lawrie. It is additionally possible that a man named Edward Ardolino and his team, who worked consistently and closely with Lawrie, were also involved in the work, and possibly most of the physical carving done on site. Some of Lawrie's best known work is that done on the cathedrals of Goodhue and his associates and in particular, the Nebraska State Capitol and the Statue of Atlas, at Rockefeller Center in New York City.¹⁸

¹⁸ Paul and Lawrie. *Lee Lawrie's Prairie Deco: History in Stone at the Nebraska State Capitol*. Austin: Gregory Paul Harm and Susanne Patricia Harm, 2008.

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