

Formal Analysis of Davis Mausoleum : Woodlawn Cemetery

Nestled into the historic landscape of Woodlawn Cemetery on Walnut Avenue, the once proud mausoleum of Edmund Walstein Davis endures, a physical manifestation to the testament of Times cruelties' to which even the most resilient and steadfast of souls fall prey. Time coupled with neglect has taken its toll on the material and structural elements of the mausoleum, yet the effect of this stagnant decay amplifies the sense of historicity and sacredness of the space, transporting visitors to ancient time. The Davis plot is bordered by two plots nearly doubly its size, S.M. Milliken to the West and Guye to the East. Notwithstanding, the elegant and appropriate massing of the Davis mausoleum and integration of carefully planted landscape counters any shortcomings that could be derived from the modest size of the site .

The approach is pimpled with overbearing, excessively ornamented mausoleums that are diminutives of the mcmansions that plague the architectural world of today. The Association of American Superintendents put it best when they said, "There is a general tendency to overdue the matter, and to place upon a small lot a monument altogether out of proportion to its size..."¹ Fortunately, the Davis monument insofar as that failing is concerned, is free of fault. It is scaled to a pleasing proportion that balances the idea of perpetual life ever after with the environment in which it is situated. Tucked away into a grove of whitewood and dogwood trees the mausoleum creates an intimate and sacred space anachronous to the bustling city from which Woodlawn sprang (Appendix I). The Davis Mausoleum is a superior example of a "...good architectural proportions, surrounded by sufficient ground for ornamentations [that has] a pleasing effect."²

The structure was commission by Mrs. Maria Hunter Stewart Davis in honor of her late husband Mr. Edmund Walstein Davis in 1909. Mr. Davis was fifty-five years old when, "A gunshot was fired on the morning of June 19, 1908. The sound must have been the tranquil stillness of a morning on the Cascapedia River. Within moments, the lifeless body of Edmund W. Davis lay slumped in a large oak rocking chair on the front porch of Red Camp."³ The tale surrounding Mr. Davis's death on that summer day in 1908 is ripe with intrigue and mystery. Speculation as to how the patriarch of the Davis family met his untimely end is woven deep into the local fabric of Red Camp; the hunting lodge that Davis leased on the Cascapedia. Camp lore insinuates that Mr. Davis was murdered by his vengeful son, intoxicated by greed. Yet, other tales suggest it was Mrs. Davis, a women scorned by years of subservience to an overbearing husband? To this day, no one knows.

¹ Association of American Cemetery Superintendents. *Modern Cemeteries : Vaults, Monuments, Graver Markers*. 1898 (page 85)

² Ibid

³ Robertson, Mary. *The Mysterious Death of a Fisherman on the Grand Cascapedia River*. Cascapedia River Museum. www.gaspesie.quebecheritageweb.com (accessed September 26, 2011).

What we do know is that Mr. Davis was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1853⁴ and that he was the grandson of Perry Davis, the inventor of Perry's All-Natural Vegetable Elixir, the first known painkiller to exist in the United States. The "painkiller," a concoction consisting of mostly opiates and alcohol enabled the Davis family to amass a great fortune; and permitted Edmund to lead a privileged life. He attended Harvard University for two years but dropped out and become loosely involved in the family business. At twenty-seven, Mr. Davis inherited a share of his family's fortune which made it easier for him to enjoy his real interests, hunting woodcock and fishing for salmon.⁵ (Appendix II) In 1880, Mr. Davis married Maria Hunter Stewart, a young women from a prominent Virginia family and together they had two sons, Horace who died in infancy and Edmund Stewart, who grew up to share his father's interest in hunting and fishing.⁶

I believe it was a combination of Mr. Davis's social and academic connections that, in 1909, brought the recently widowed Mrs. Davis to Francis Burrall Hoffman, Jr. Mrs. Davis worked closely with Hoffman, an American born architect best known for his work on Villa Vizcaya in Miami Florida, to design and construct the mausoleum that was to hold the remains of her deceased husband.⁷ Correspondences between Mrs. Davis and Hoffman convey an acute attention and mindfulness to scale, material selection, and floor plan on the part of both Architect and widow. ⁸ (Appendix III)

After attending Harvard, Hoffman continued his architectural studies at the Ecole des beaux-Arts in Paris graduating with honors. The young architect returned to the states and received his first commission, the Davis Mausoleum. ⁹ Once again, the Davis Mausoleum finds itself ranked high among the exemplary mausoleums in Woodlawn. "...Several cases have come to my notice where monuments of considerable value have been specially designed for lots which the designer had never seen...grading is important..."¹⁰ Hoffman was consciousness of the site and context and used both to their best advantage, creating a distinct mausoleum that reverently catches your attention from a far enticing you to experience the whispered echoes of a sanctified place.

In plan, the mausoleum is a series of concentric circles (Appendix IV) with its epicenter positioned over the entrance to the most sacred space, the catacombs. The domed structure rests on a circular, three-stepped platform commanding a strong presence from all vantage points. The gentle circular

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ William Wickham Hoffman. *Eleven Generations of Hoffmans in New York : Decedents of Martin Hoffman, 1657-1957*. New York, 1957 (page 25).

⁸ Columbia University. *Avery Drawing and Archives. Woodlawn Cemetery. Mausoleum files. Davis Mausoleum. Specification for Mausoleum of Mrs. E.W. Davis. 14 October 2011.*

⁹ Brendan, Gill. *F. Burrall Hoffman, Jr.: A Gentleman Architect in the Beaux-Arts Tradition*, "Architectural Digest 50. July 1993, pages 32-42.

¹⁰ Association of American Cemetery Superintendents. *Modern Cemeteries : Vaults, Monuments, Graver Markers. 1898 (page 92)*

steps are inviting and pique curiosity, drawing the visitor onto the marble landing. Following the endless curve of the battered white marble walls (Appendix V) fosters a deep appreciation for the consideration of form and the restrained yet appropriate detail that ornaments the mausoleum.

Through field documentation, site evaluation, many hours of research, and the process of formal analysis, the architectural strength of the Davis Mausoleum lies not in the carved details but in the context of its site and the proportion of its massing. There is a simple yet elegant antiquity to the design of the mausoleum reminiscent of ancient Rome that is evident in the circular plan and domed ceiling. Unfortunately, images and feelings evoked by the Davis Mausoleum of the crumbling buildings of roman antiquity is quickly becoming a reality. (Appendix VI) Distant decedents of the Davis family have reneged any responsibility for the mausoleum and as a result, the vessel that holds the remains of Edmund W. Davis and his wife, Maria is falling into disrepair, a circumstance not uncommon at Woodlawn and other cemeteries as well. "Families often disappear by death or removal, and these structures are left to become unsightly objects..."¹¹ (Appendix VII) but be that as it may, because the Davis Mausoleum is neither lavishly adorned nor dependent on appearance of expensive material, its deterioration is a kind of beautiful decay. With each year, as the marble weathers and the building sinks back to whence it came the sense of hallowedness grows.

"...you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." - Genesis 3 : 19

¹¹ Association of American Cemetery Superintendents. *Modern Cemeteries : Vaults, Monuments, Graver Markers.* 1898 (page 101)

Appendices

Appendix I : Davis Mausoleum in current condition.

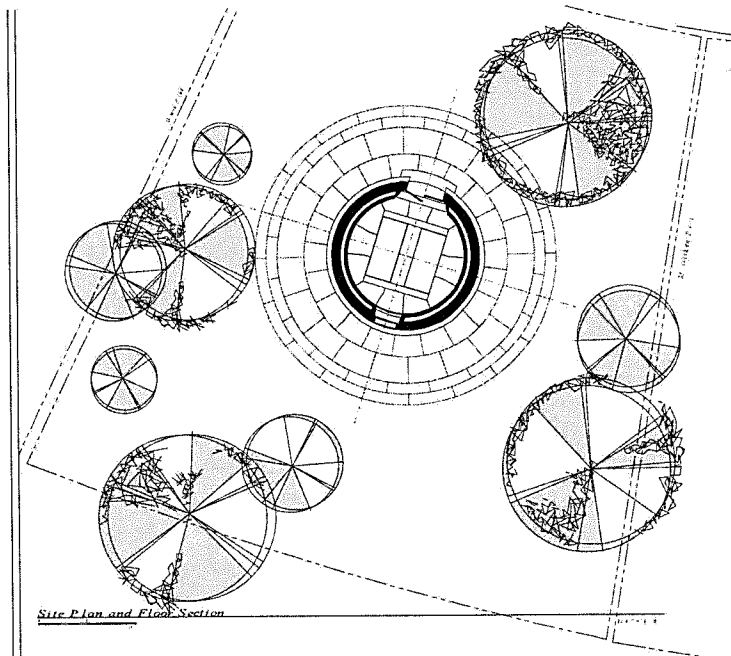


Appendix II : Mr. and Mrs. Edmund Davis Fishing on the Cascapedia.



Appendix III : Study of proportion and massing.

Appendix IV : Site plan and Floor Section.



Appendix V : Curved, Battered Walls.



Appendix VI : Overall deterioration of marble crypt covering.



Appendix VIII : Detail of marble crypt covering and stage of deterioration.

