

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, PLANNING & PRESERVATION

## Nickel Mausoleum

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"Nickel" mausoleum, set at the lower end of a slope on Lakeview plot in Woodlawn Cemetery, Brooklyn, belongs to the Nickel family. It was originally built by Adam Nickel in 1907.

### About Adam Nickel

Founded in 1874 by three friends, Wessel, Nickel & Gross (WNG) became the dominant maker of piano actions in America from 1900 through the 20s, and the fine quality of its parts earned it an enviable reputation. It was awarded a gold medal at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. Unfortunately, its successful story came to a tragic end during the Depression when it was taken over by the Aeolian Piano Corporation and the quality of its products suffered. WNG ran under a different name from 1953 until 2005 when it was renamed by the new owners, the Burgett brothers, who seemingly have pledged to bring back the golden years for WNG.<sup>1</sup>

Adam Nickel, one of the founders of WNG and the owner of the mausoleum, was born in Germany, 1846. He immigrated to the United States in 1864, most likely like many others, for a better shot at life in the New World. He worked at the Steinway & Sons Company till 1874, when he founded WNG with two of his colleagues. He married in 1885 and had five children. Henry, his only son, succeeded him to take his position at WNG after he died.<sup>2</sup> The success of his company made him quite a wealthy person. This is being inferred because he had the mausoleum built in 1907 whereas he died in 1912 and there was no recorded death in his family that year. The general reasoning in this situation would be that Adam Nickel wanted to make a statement (understandably of social status) by acquiring land and eventually building a mausoleum for his family, an act that could generally be afforded by affluent members of the society.

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<sup>1</sup> "The story of Wessel, Nickel & Gross." About Us, History.

<http://consumer.wesselnickelandgross.com/about-us/>

<sup>2</sup> "Adam Nickel." New-York Tribune, 1911-1922. May 22, 1912. ProQuest. p.7.

### The Architect

The mausoleum is credited to have been designed by the firm *Thom & Wilson, Architects*, well-known for their brick and brownstone row houses throughout New York City as well as the Harlem Courthouse and the New Criminal Courts building (demolished in 1939).<sup>3</sup> New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission's designation report calls Thom & Wilson 'the most prolific architectural firm represented in the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District.'<sup>4</sup> Their work has been described as 'highly inventive in design and generally executed in the Neo-Grec and Renaissance Revival styles incorporating elements from a number of historic sources.'<sup>5</sup> Thom & Wilson has also been praised for designing 'a suave, elegant series of brick and brownstone houses, with particularly graceful carving in brownstone around the windows.'<sup>6</sup>

### Nickel Mausoleum

The mausoleum sits on a very high plinth on the lower portion of a sloped part of Lakeview Plot, in Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, New York. Approaching from Observatory Avenue, one is greeted by a sight of trees that have grown in a linear arrangement, imitating the arrangement of the mausoleums in front of which they have grown. Nickel Mausoleum in particular is hidden quite well from one's line of sight. It is comparatively smaller than the adjacent mausoleums (Meyer and Kearney in the South-east and North-west respectively). That might be the reason why it seems to have been pushed forward in plan (down the slope), breaking the linearity of the plots. This has helped to increase its prominence within the

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<sup>3</sup> "The new Court House; a plan by J.W. Wilson unanimously chosen." *The New York Times*, 27 July 1889.

<sup>4</sup> "Endangered Buildings Initiative." The New York Landmarks Conservancy. [nylandmarks.org](http://nylandmarks.org).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Gray, Christopher. *Streetscapes/70<sup>th</sup> Street between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue; A block full of late-19<sup>th</sup>-Century Row Houses*. *The New York Times*. February 16, 2003.

plot. It also does not have any mausoleums immediately in front or at the back; there are only gravestones, with an obelisk.

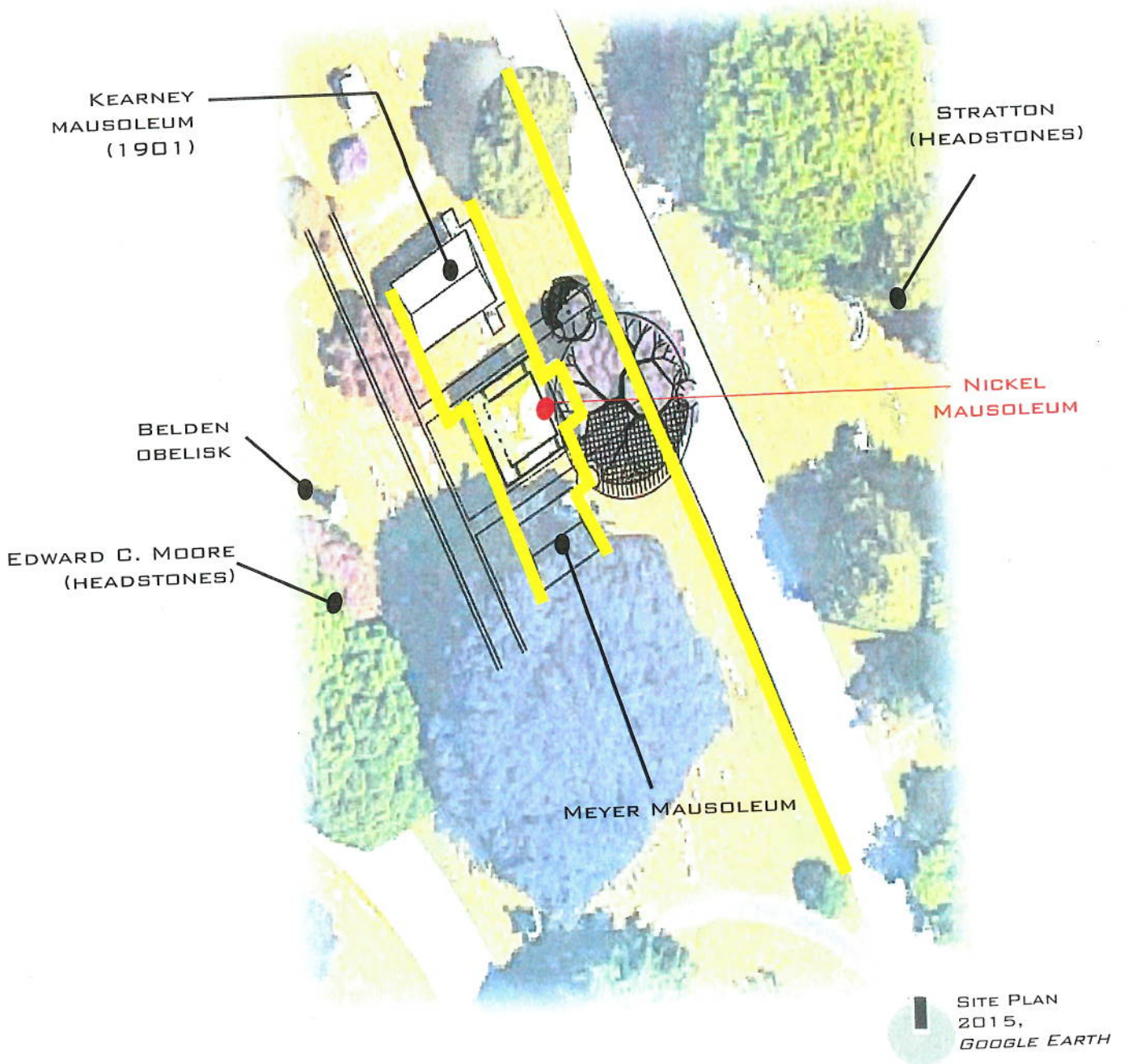
The primary material used for construction is Barre, Vermont Granite (specified to be light in color and even grained) placed with cement mortar. Granite is used for the exterior walls, roof and floor. The interior walls are Carrara Marble with a 10.5" high black marble base. Although used, brick and slate cannot be seen by the viewer as they are hidden deep within the structure. The only metal used in the mausoleum is U.S. bronze (a particular type of bronze) for the doors, name plates, small rosettes and the window grill. The materials are very much in accord with the time period in which the mausoleum was built.

The inner chamber is a small rectangular space with a seat at the very end just below the window. The window has stained glass decorations, adding some color and brightness to the place. There are eight catacombs built in the mausoleum, four on each side along the longitudinal section. Interestingly, there are nine bodies as the topmost catacomb holds the bodies of three-month old twins; *Adam and Selma Nickel*.

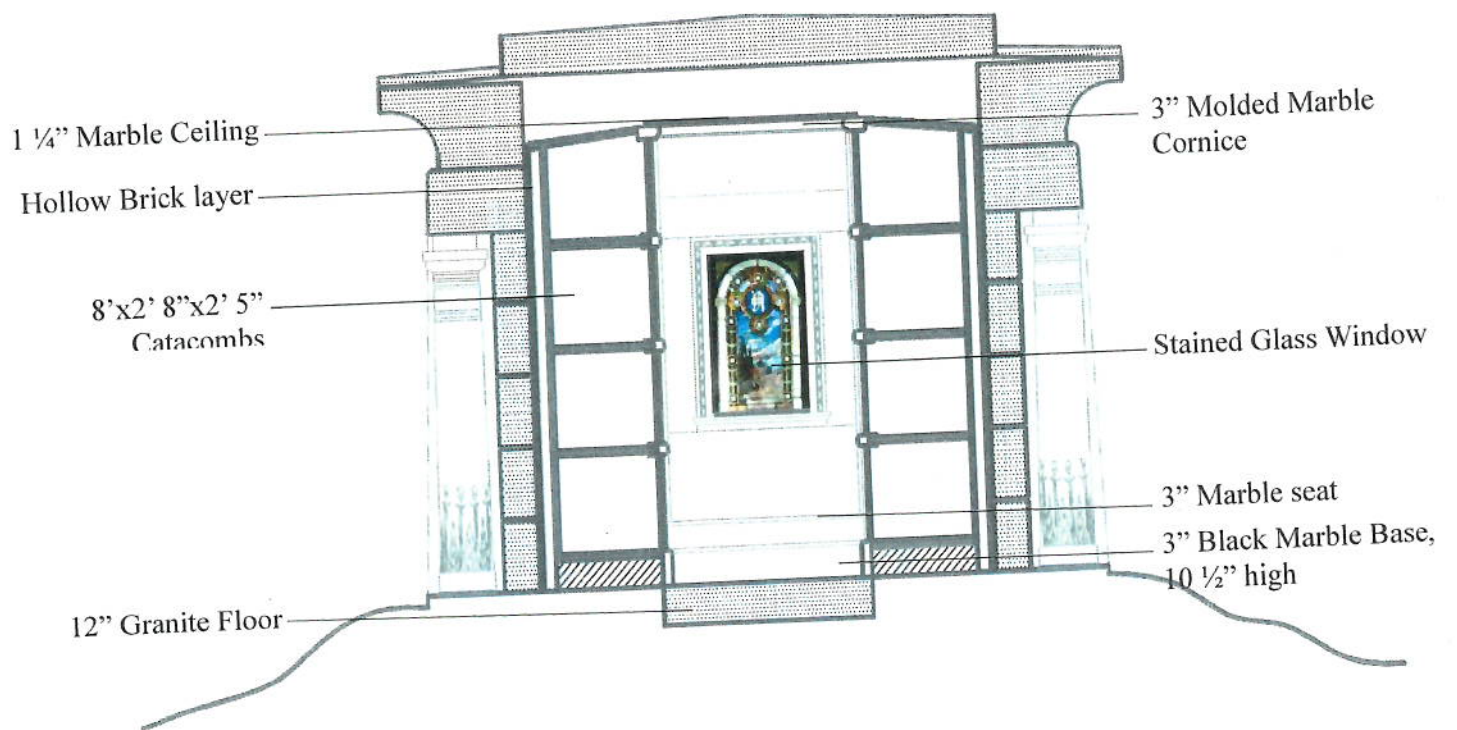
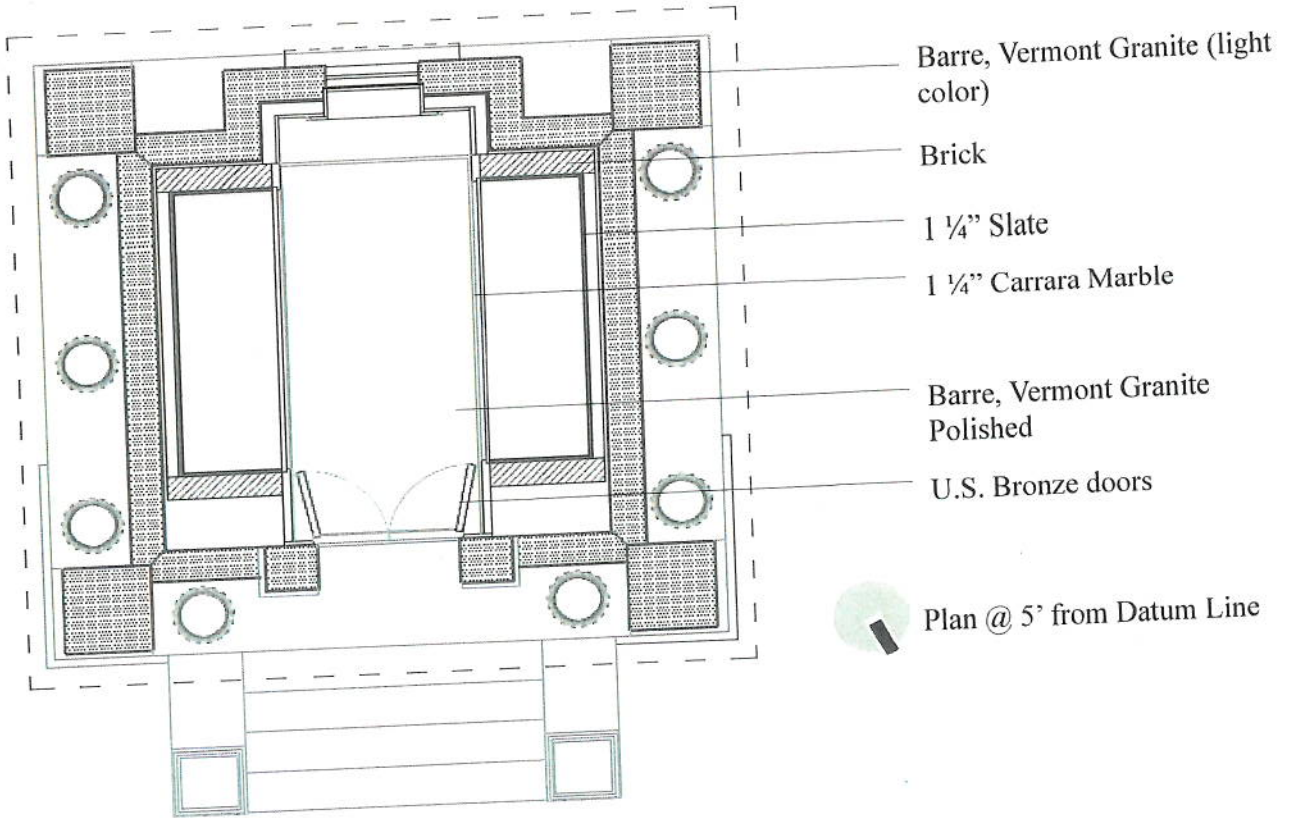
Nickel mausoleum has an Egyptian Revival design with minimal ornamentations. Decorations can only be seen subtly engraved on the door (bottom), at the lower part of column shafts and near the base of the planters (which seem to have been added during the time of the actual construction). The mausoleum exhibits most of the recognizable Egyptian temple features.

1. Battered (slanting from the sides and tapering towards the top) exterior walls.
2. Pylons present on a smaller scale, flanking the doors, put emphasis on the entrance.
3. The Egyptian gorge i.e. cavetto cornice for the roof, as well as for the door and window lintels (only exterior).
4. Winged solar disk with Uraeus over the entrance to the inner sanctuary.
5. *Open Papyrus* decorations- motifs where all the papyrus petals are shown to be open.

Image 1: Site map showing how the Nickel mausoleum has been pushed forward in plan.



Drawings 1 & 2: Floor Plan & Transverse Section, showing the different materials used in the Nickel mausoleum.



There are many examples of Egyptian Revival mausoleums within Woodlawn cemetery (Woolworth, Bache, Frederick Gerken, Mullarkey, Ivie, Schaefer, to name a few) as well as other cemeteries in NY and elsewhere e.g. Tate mausoleum at Bellefontaine Cemetery, St. Louis, Missouri. Nonetheless, the Nickel mausoleum stands out. The decision to place columns on the sides was a very rare practice, seen only on the Tate Mausoleum built in the same year, and to use a rather simple column capital that cannot be categorized under any of the many ancient Egyptian column types (*palmiform, closed papyform, lotiform, composite, tent pole, Proto-Doric fluted, Hathor column and Osiris pillar*) is rather unprecedented. It seems, to me, that the capital is a simplification of the Egyptian closed papyrus-bud (non-fluted) and the Proto-Doric column capital. This again, I believe, is a transition towards modernism; a romantic combination of the ancient and minimalistic modern.

The most extraordinary characteristic of the mausoleum is the varied treatments that have been practiced on a single material (granite). All the different finishes can be seen on every façade. On the front façade one sees the rough rock-faced surface for the battered pylons that stand out and the plinth. The inner stone wall (made of five granite blocks) has a finer cut, though not smooth but less rough. While the small gateway, floor, roof and the stairs with their side walls have a honed finish, where the fine texture of grains can be felt when touched. And eventually there are the highly polished column shafts. Similar mausoleums and structures can be found (within Woodlawn itself) that have rusticated exteriors, however, none could compare to the supremacy with which the technique had been used at Nickel. Creating visual frames on the façade is an integral feature in Egyptian temple architecture, which is easily recognized in almost all of the Egyptian Revival mausoleums. However, the use of the dramatic surfaces on the different elements of the façade and the sharp projecting edge running along the pylons' length and along the mortar joints helps in achieving extremely defined frames that can be clearly observed from afar.



This is the view of the mausoleum from the North.  
Here, the different finishes of granite can be seen.

1. The Rock-face on the outer pylons.
2. Fine-cut on the exterior of the inner walls.
3. Honed finish on the floor & stairs.
4. The Polished finish on the column shafts.



Front Elevation. Two trees growing in front have almost blocked the front view of the mausoleum.



This is the rear view showing one of the sides of the mausoleum. There are two recesses on the back side one of which is completely filled with plants growing and moving up to the roof. The sole window (with its Egyptian styled grills and cavetto lintel and small pylon like framing) and the three columns on each side can also be seen.



Image 2: Drawing showing the various types of Egyptian column capitals. From here, it can be said that the column capital used in the Nickel mausoleum is quite different from Egyptian style columns.<sup>7</sup>

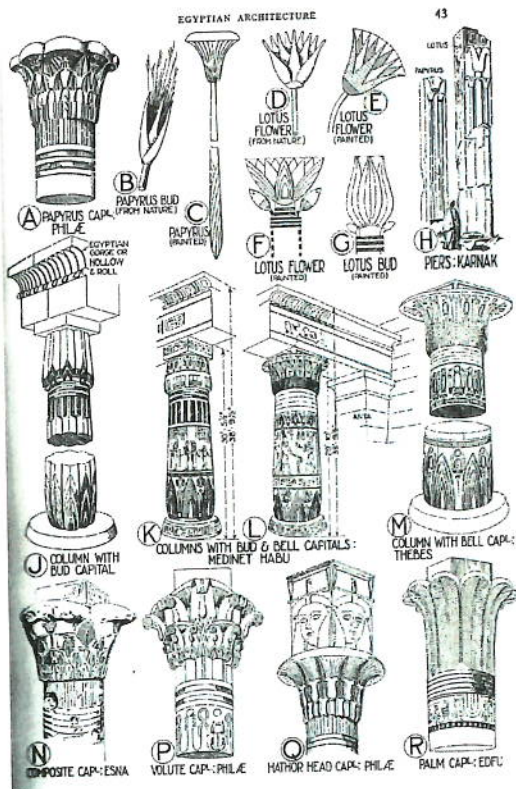
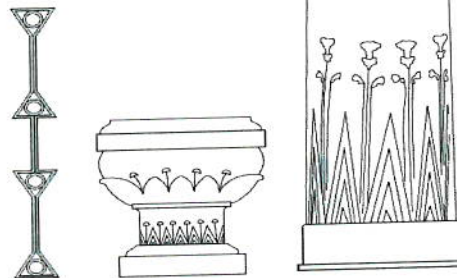


Image 3:  
Details: Column, planter & the window grill of the Nickel Mausoleum



Tate mausoleum in Bellefontaine Cemetery,  
St. Louis, Missouri.

It is one of the very few examples of Egyptian-revival style mausoleums that have columns on the sides, similar to the Nickel mausoleum.

<sup>7</sup> "A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method" by Sir Banister-Fletcher, New York, 1950, pp.

## Conclusion

Today the mausoleum is as stable and strong structurally as it was over a century ago. However, lack of maintenance has led nature to take over. Biological growth such as lichens and moss are seen in many places on the exterior, particularly in the engravings on the column shafts and planters. And not to mention the plants creeping up through one of the back recesses climbing up to the roof, almost covering the whole surface! Yellow and green soiling is seen on the window lintel and entrance gateway as well as the walls. On the interior, the finely polished granite floor is chipping off in layers. The metal door has developed the natural green patina which is in no imminent danger; however, lack of use has made it almost inoperable. Moreover, this natural weathering, I believe, has brought about a visual change in the overall appearance of the mausoleum. Polished granite tend to be darker than rough surfaces, unfortunately, with time, the colors on the façade have almost reversed their roles. So, instead of the dark polished columns standing against and within a rough background and surroundings, we now have darker rough surfaces making the structure look heavier than it originally was meant to be. Perhaps, the unwanted, plants not designed as part of the original landscape (which was rather sparse with only grass) could be cleared and the soiling be cleaned and Nickel mausoleum would gain back the strong visual contrasts it provided at the very beginning. All the same, on first glance Nickel mausoleum gives off an appearance of persistence, sheer strength and great durability.

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