

### **Davis Mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery**

#### Visual Analysis

The Davis Mausoleum [Fig. 1], constructed by Architect Charles B. Meyers, is located on westernmost point of the Arbutus plot in the southern, more recently built section of Woodlawn Cemetery. More than 14 feet high, it is one of the tallest mausoleums in the area, and displays its prominence to the four roads that intersect in front of it. Although the 12'8"x13'1" footprint of the building occupies most of the lot, it leaves room for some plantings that were planned by the original owner around the perimeter, softening the massive side walls and emphasizing the front façade. Meyers, a prolific architect in New York City in the 1920's and 1930's, built a variety of building types in a wide range of styles, including the Byzantine Yeshiva University building (1928), the Neoclassical Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital (1930-33), and the Art-Deco sky-scraper Criminal Courts building (1938-41).

For the Davis Mausoleum, Meyers chose a simple design with pared-down allusions to Classicism, similar to his Art Deco Health Building (1932-35), a style popular just before and throughout the Great Depression. [Fig. 2] Like the Health Building, the Davis Mausoleum has strong symmetry, both east/west through the door and, on the inside, north/south through the windows. Also like the Health Building, the Davis Mausoleum displays a classical idea of a base, middle, and top, and low-relief details that simplify and flatten earlier classical or classical-inspired precedents. The front, west-facing façade of the mausoleum is the most decorated side, with shallow pilasters reminiscent of classical columns and set-backs around the door, which, along with the front steps, point the viewer to the door and the interior of the building. Other

mausoleums in the area have similar façade features; the Starr mausoleum [Fig. 3] most closely resembles the Davis mausoleum's pared-down classicism with columns on the far edges, a frieze-like layer with the owner's name, steps leading to the front door, and a pitched roof referencing a tympanum. The roof of the Davis mausoleum is made up of three large slabs of stone creating a flat triangle on either end, resembling a tympanum. However, the stones actually overlap each other, which is the condition on the rest of the Davis roof, using a technique more easily seen on the Starr roof. This overlapping is meant to keep out rain, but it seems the Davis mausoleum still had leaks, perhaps due to its unusual roof condition or the slope not being sufficiently steep.

The interior space is small (10'4"x6'5") but tall (13'), creating an intimate but reverent space. Upon entering the geometrically decorative 2"-thick bronze door, one faces the four catacombs, which were originally intended to have bronze lettering indicating information about the person inside. To one's left (north) is a bench and a painted glass window depicting a landscape. To one's right (south) is a mirror copy of the north section; however, because of the small space, the door takes up a large portion of the space when it is open. Interestingly, Meyers mentions in his specifications an interior handle on the door which is no longer there; the large bar handle on the outside is the only one on the door. In addition to the two painted glass windows, light enters the mausoleum through a small clear-glass window in the upper part of the door, decorated with the same bronze tracery as the solid bottom part of the door. There are holes through the lower portion of the door for ventilation. There are additional vents serving the catacomb portion of the building. The exterior is made of granite – fairly common for mausoleums in Woodlawn – and the interior is almost completely Tennessee Pink limestone with bronze hardware. Given the mausoleum's simplicity, the majority of the detail on both the

exterior and interior comes from the rhythm of the mortar joints, which are carefully placed to reflect the symmetries of the building.

### Biography

In 1929, Benjamin Brockman Davis commissioned architect Charles B. Meyers to construct a mausoleum in Woodlawn Cemetery. Ben immigrated to the US from Germany in 1882 at the age of 8, and was naturalized in New York in 1904. By 1929, Ben had been living for at least 10 years with Nettie A. Greene, an unmarried or “divorced” woman from Missouri. Although they never married, it seems likely that they were romantically involved, especially given Ben’s treatment of Nettie in death. After these years living together in their home near Columbia University’s campus, 610 West 115<sup>th</sup> Street, Nettie Greene died at the age of 42 in 1929. Ben clearly thought very highly of Nettie as he commissioned a well-known architect of his time to construct a large mausoleum in the most contemporary style in one of the most prestigious cemeteries in America and placed her in it as the first occupant. The mausoleum seemed very important to him; he was anxious to see it finished quickly and looked after it very closely, at least for the first ten years after Nettie died – the mausoleum had leakage problems and required frequent cleaning. At one point there was a rug in the mausoleum, though this was damaged from the leaking and missing glass in the door window. There is no indication, however, that Ben had specific requests for what ended up being a simple, though impressive mausoleum. Meyers’s first drawings date from February 1929. It seems that building began in April. By early October Ben had ordered exterior plantings as finishing touches, and construction was completed just before the crash of October 29.

By 1951, Ben Davis had married Regina Davis and was ill enough to hand over all of his affairs to her. In November 1956, Nathan B. Bernstein wrote on behalf of "the Davis family" to Woodlawn inquiring about the process required to remove Nettie Greene's remains from the mausoleum. By October 1958 – nearly two years later – Bernstein had finally gathered all the paperwork necessary to move Nettie Greene out of the Davis Mausoleum to the Gate of Heaven Cemetery in Hawthorne, NY. Included in this paperwork is a letter from Nettie Greene's nephew, Fred M. Switzer, son of "Leo," likely the brother Leonard that was listed as living with Nettie and Ben according to the 1925 NY state census. In the letter, Fred expresses his father's feeling that he was left out of Nettie's first resting place arrangements, having only been informed of Nettie's death three weeks after its occurrence. He also expressed confusion that Nettie's family should be consulted at this time, and that Nettie would be moved to a Catholic cemetery, though it seems her family was not Catholic. Unfortunately Leo himself died soon after this troubling news. In November 1958 just after Nettie's removal, Bernstein wrote to inquire about selling the mausoleum – certainly not what Ben intended when he first commissioned the structure. By the time of a December 21, 1960 letter mentioning the care of mausoleum in Ben Davis's will, Ben had passed away, but he was not laid to rest in the mausoleum he had gone to such lengths to build. All further correspondence is with Presbrey-Leland, a private mausoleum company, who was responsible for the care and renovation of the mausoleum. Eventually, Woodlawn Cemetery acquired it and commissioned Kreilick Conservation, LLC to do a thorough renovation, including replacing the stone that had covered Nettie Green's catacomb and removing the stones spelling "DAVIS" on the front façade. The mausoleum is now for sale from Woodlawn for approximately \$530,000.

Sources:

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Fig. 1: Davis Mausoleum, Woodlawn Cemetery



Fig. 2: Health Building, Meyers, 1932-35



Fig. 3: Starr Mausoleum, unknown builder/architect, 1942