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Historic Preservation Studio: Reading Buildings Problem 3

10/17/2011

Ahern Mausoleum

John Jacob Ahern was born to Irish immigrants in New York City around 1880. His wife Charlotte was born to New York City residents five years later. Not much is known about the couple; they rarely appeared in the news and were not socialites. John is mentioned once in the New York Times in 1917 as an employee of the stock exchange, with the transfer of a stock exchange seat to his name for the price of \$75,000.¹ The penultimate time Ahern is in the news is his obituary on May 13, 1944.² Even though the obituary was paid for by the family, the New York Times misspelled their name to Ahearn. Following that, on July 21, 1944, a notice was made about the transfer of his Stock Exchange seat to another broker.³ Charlotte was in the news less, she even lacks an obituary. There are two advertisements from Plaza Auction Galleries for auctions in which she is mentioned as the person providing the antiques. These both date from spring of 1957.⁴

In 1936, John Jacob Ahern and his wife Charlotte paid \$3700 for a small plot in Woodlawn Cemetery. The plot is an odd shape: its north and south boundaries measure 17.32 feet and 23.93 feet respectively, while the east and west are 25.38 and 26.13 feet. This irregular quadrilateral shape created an awkward space for a building that historically required symmetry and proportion. To build their mausoleum, the Aherns used Presbrey-Leland, a popular

¹ "Four Transfers on Stock Exchange." The New York Times. 17 Nov 1916. Page 15.

² "Deaths." The New York Times. 13 May 1944.

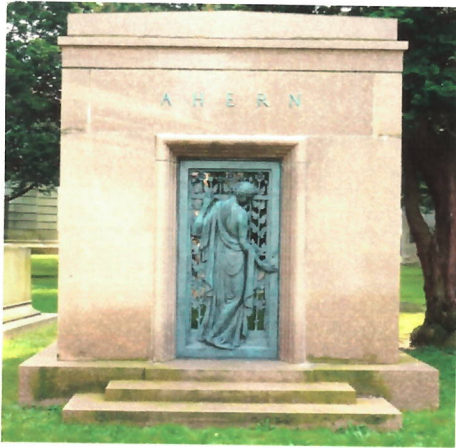
³ "Stock Exchange Notes." The New York Times. 21 July 1944.

⁴ "Classified Ad 881." The New York Times. 24 March 1957.

"Classified Ad 623." The New York Times. 31 March 1957.

monument company. While perusing their 1932 catalogue of monuments and mausoleums, the style the Aherns decided on was referred to as “Mausoleums in the Modern Style.”⁵ This catalogue suggests that “the better styles of Modern architecture retain the refinement and chaste simplicity of the Classical styles.”⁶ This idea could not have been upheld more than in the Ahern finished product.

The Mausoleum’s façade is a perfect square offset below by three steps from the ground to the door, and above by an Egyptian inspired and simply curved cornice topped with a



Classical triangle shaped tympanum. The décor on the façade is minimal: the Art Deco curved door surrounds that are “stepped” back into the recessed doorway, the beveled edge between the top of the square and the cornice, and a cast bronze door are its only ornamentations. The door is the focal point of the façade, and is opulent in its classical and art nouveau design. The elevations of the east and west sides are without bronze, except for the four small vents spaced at the top and bottom, and the rear is punctuated in the center by a flowery cast metal window protecting its stained glass.



⁵ Presbrey-Leland Studios, “Comemoration: The Book of Presbrey-Leland Memorials.” Self Published, 1932. 40.

⁶ Presbrey-Leland Studios 39.

This mausoleum was not intended to be a grand showpiece to be viewed by everyone.

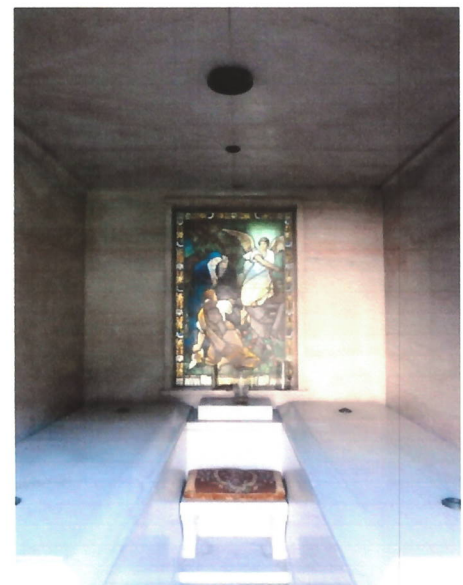
The plot is set back from the main street in between two other mausoleums. There are trees that



surround it, and it is flanked on two sides by the gravestones of other plots. The mausoleum faces north, setting it apart from the other

mausoleums which typically face east or west. There is a small overgrown path that leads from the west side main road. This creates a rather atypical encounter with the building, for as one walks up the path towards the façade, the west side greets the viewer. The façade does not become completely visible until one is directly in front of the mausoleum.

Another indication of the desire for intimacy in the design is the way in which the entrance is constructed. Three steps lead up to a recessed entrance, and though this pulls the viewer's eye into the building, it places a distance between the viewer and the entrance. The viewer's ease of access is decreased by the removal of the entrance from the ground by the steps and by the shadow made from the recession. The difficulty of entry is emphasized by the ornamentation on the door, which depicts a woman with her



back turned towards the viewer, creating a signal of unbidden entry. The intimacy is continued inside, where the pink Tennessee Marble reflects the serene glow emitted by the stained glass window. The interior was intended for prayer and reflection. There is a bench between the two tombs with a cushion and personal items such as crosses and icons adorn the window sill.

Also significant to the mausoleum is the material chosen to build it and the size of the granite blocks used. The Jonesboro Granite, from Maine, is a complex array of rose pink, charcoal and cream flecks. It holds a high polish well, and this mausoleum is one of very few pink polished granite structures in the cemetery. Also, massive slabs of granite were used to erect the exterior. Each side of the building has no more than three or five sections of stone, and the entire structure has been fit together very simply, much like children's building blocks. The slabs present a sense of permanence and monumentality, which is important for such a small building.

The simple style of the Ahern Mausoleum, as well as the polished Jonesboro granite sets this tomb apart from the other neighboring structures. The design successfully combines Art Deco, Art Nouveau and Classical influences, yet remains balanced and without ostentation. The aspect of serenity and privacy is emphasized by its location on the plot and how it is set back into the distance from the main road, as well as the fact that the façade faces north instead of east or west. The mausoleum is subtle in its significance, but once time is spent investigating the details, a great appreciation can emerge for its quiet beauty.