## Human Elements of the McNulty Mausoleum

In 1880, the prospects of the McNulty family appeared dire. Together with their five children, soon to be six, Irish immigrants Margaret and Thomas McNulty lived in the tight quarters of an apartment on 48 Cowden Street in Providence, Rhode Island. Margaret made her wages as a "peddler." Meanwhile, her husband Thomas, listed as a "laborer," had been out of work nearly a year, likely on account of his disability, a missing foot. <sup>2</sup>

In only forty years, however, their daughter Agnes (Fig. 1) purchased a mausoleum plot in Woodlawn Cemetery, the once working-class McNulty's now immortalized alongside New York's blue-blooded royalty. Such a turn of fortune is rarely more than the subject of American mythmaking, the rags to riches folktale for which immigrant families like the McNulty's strove—a promise of American social mobility that, all too often, proved hollow for these aspirants. What, then, propelled the McNulty family up the social ladder?

To answer this question, we must first return to Rhode Island, where Bridget-Agnes McNulty was born in February of 1882 in the town of Lincoln, her birth not officially registered with the county until April of 1883.<sup>3</sup> The youngest of six, she remained in Rhode Island into her early adulthood. She lived with two of her older sisters, Mary and Helen, and her mother in 1900. All four women worked—Agnes and Mary sold hats as milliners while Helen and Margaret were both recorded in the census simply as "saleslady." Agnes' father had passed away some time before the turn of the century and her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> United States Census Bureau, *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880,* National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 29, Roll 1214, 367b, accessed via <a href="https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryuicontent/view/16589071:6742">https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryuicontent/view/16589071:6742</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Rhode Island Department of State, *Rhode Island, Birth Registrations, 1846-1922*, accessed via <a href="https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/147030%3A62824">https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/147030%3A62824</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> United States Census Bureau, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900,* National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 29, Roll 1511, 12, accessed via <a href="https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/69428559:7602">https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/69428559:7602</a>

eldest sister, Nora, had been married for five years to Frederick W. Billington, a native of Pawtucket and manufacturer of cigars. Although a mother to her three-year-old daughter, Emma Billington, Nora, like her sisters, also worked as a milliner.<sup>5</sup>

By this point in 1900, the McNulty's still presented as working-class—all the women worked and they lived together in one house, save for Nora. Sometime within the next ten years, however, Agnes, her sister Helen, and her mother experienced a dramatic upward shift. By 1910, the three McNulty women lived together in an apartment in New York City at 102 West 75<sup>th</sup> Street. This Romanesque Revival apartment in the heart of the Upper West Side was far grander than anything the McNulty's had known in Rhode Island. Constructed in 1891, this relatively new 7-story apartment was spacious—tenfoot ceilings with only five units to a floor. Now, none worked. All were notably unmarried, implying a level of financial independence often reserved for upper class women. Their mother likely passed away sometime during the next five years as she does not appear in the 1915 New York State Census, instead replaced by Agnes' older brother Owen, occupation listed as "salesman." Importantly, Agnes McNulty, not her older brother or older sister, is cited as head of household. This seems to place Agnes as the conduit for her family's new found social and financial status.

A clearer picture of this emerges when tracing her relationship with a newly minted titan of industry: William H. Todd. Born in Wilmington, Delaware in 1857, Todd exemplified the idealism of 20<sup>th</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> United States Census Bureau, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900,* National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 29, Roll 1511, 6, accessed via <a href="https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/69422066%3A7602">https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/69422066%3A7602</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> United States Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910,* National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 29, Roll T624\_1045, 14b, accessed via <a href="https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/108361793%3A7884">https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/108361793%3A7884</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Robert Cabrera, "About: 102 West 75<sup>th</sup> Street," *Street* Easy, https://streeteasy.com/building/102-west-75-street-new\_york

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>State Population Census Schedules, 1915, New York State Archives, 26, accessed via <a href="https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/6142576:2703">https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/6142576:2703</a>

century America. The son of a working-class boilermaker, he worked his way from riveting ships along the Atlantic coast to owning the very same shipyard he had once worked at in Red Hook, Brooklyn. His self-named Todd Shipyards Corporation quickly grew into the "largest shipyard corporation in the country" according to the *New York Times*, with docks and ship repair facilities as far west as Seattle and as far east as London. Through his shipbuilding empire, Todd had amassed a fortune of around \$6.5 million by 1919. Todd endeavored to use his new found wealth to give back, fashioning himself into a millionaire-philanthropist à la his contemporary Andrew Carnegie. 11

It is fitting then that the McNulty's class ascension in 1910 coincides with the beginning of Agnes' affiliation with the fabulously wealthy Todd. In a passport application from September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1920, Todd served as identifying witness for McNulty, attesting that he had known her "personally for 10 years." The pair are only first mentioned together in national newspapers, however, in 1921 when Agnes and her sister Nora accompanied Todd on a sightseeing tour around California to reunite with his old friend Joseph Tynan. Tynan likewise came from a working-class background, immigrating from Ireland to New York around 1890 at the age of 17 and found similar fortune as Todd, rising to the station of vice president of the highly profitable Bethlehem Shipbuilding Corporation in San Francisco. The article references Agnes and Nora as "his nieces" following a sentence concerning Todd's voyage. Given their brief relationship of only ten years by the time of publication, this familial connection seems dubious and genealogical research has not revealed any such ties between the McNultys and Todd.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> "Todd Triangle," New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, accessed via https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/todd-triangle/history

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> "Estate of W.H. Todd Willed to Family," *The New York Times*, June 11, 1932, 18, accessed via <a href="https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1932/06/11/issue.html">https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1932/06/11/issue.html</a>

<sup>11 &</sup>quot;Todd Triangle."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925, National Archives and Records Administration, Roll 1372, accessed via <a href="https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/600982645:1174">https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/600982645:1174</a>

<sup>13 &</sup>quot;'Joe' Tynan Greets His Pal 'Bill' Todd," The San Francisco Examiner, March 28, 1921, 4, accessed via <a href="https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/457752925/?match=1&terms=%22tynan%22%20AND%20%22agnes%20mcnulty%22&pqsid=R keYo2qsRPU61jbKx65Ww%3A24976%3A650691854">https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/457752925/?match=1&terms=%22tynan%22%20AND%20%22agnes%20mcnulty%22&pqsid=R keYo2qsRPU61jbKx65Ww%3A24976%3A650691854</a>
14 Ibid.

Regardless the nature of their connection, Agnes begins to appear frequently alongside Todd in society pages throughout the 1920s, often accompanying the shipbuilder to ceremonial ship launchings and events hosted on his yacht (Fig. 2). <sup>15</sup> With little available in the historical record, we can only speculate to the nature of their companionship, be it familial, professional, or even romantic. But, clearly, this affiliation with Todd had a direct financial and social impact in McNulty's life. And with her newly lavish lifestyle came a commensurate change in address. In 1922, Agnes took up a brief residence in room 1407 at the Plaza Hotel before settling in a newly built apartment building at 333 East 57<sup>th</sup> St. in 1934, a far cry from the Rhode Island tenement in which she grew up. <sup>16</sup>

Agnes' good fortune, however, had been tempered by tragedy only one year earlier. Helen McNulty, with whom Agnes had lived for her entire life, passed away on July 12, 1920. Within less than six months, Agnes had plans drafted and approved to inter her sister in a custom-built mausoleum in Woodlawn Cemetery, most likely paid for through funds received from her association with Todd. <sup>17</sup> In 1929, three years before his death, Todd prepared a securities trust for Agnes with a total value of \$364,000 (or \$6.7 million in 2024). Although she received the trust much later than her plot purchase, one might speculate that Agnes could have had access to such money as early as 1920, especially given her then lifestyle.

Agnes, contracted with the memorialist firm Farrington, Gould, and Hoagland, purchased a plot in the Whitewood section of Woodlawn Cemetery. <sup>18</sup> Octagonal in form, the mausoleum sits on a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> "Two Yachts Bring Many Guest to Warner-Smith Wedding," *The Knickerbocker Press,* June 5, 1926, accessed via <a href="https://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html">https://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html</a>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Agnes McNulty, "McNulty to Superintendent Woodlawn Cemetery," May 25, 1922, Columbia University, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library Drawing and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery: Lot Owner Correspondence, Box 93, Folder McNulty 685

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> "Woodlawn Cemetery to Farrington, Gould, and Hoagland," December 4, 1920, Columbia University, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library Drawing and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery: Major Monuments File, Box 12, Folder 35

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Ibid.

foundation of bedrock and cement, the exterior built entirely of Victoria White granite (Fig. 3).

Measuring from the top of the second stair, the structure stands at approximately 11'9" tall. A base with a curved molding supports four courses of ashlar masonry topped by a roof stepped in three tiers. The four beveled corners of the roof's middle tier are decorated with rectangular granite blocks that taper on their upwards-facing bed to a shallow triangular point. The structure is held together by a mortar of Portland cement and airflow is permitted through three bronze vents on each side elevation. Two bowl-shaped planters set atop rectangular podiums flank the mausoleum's entrance. These podiums connect to the front façade's beveled edges. Shallow steps lead to a recessed doorway, the exterior's only notable site of ornamentation: a pair of double bronze doors decorated with sculptural lions-head knockers and bronze frames intricately wrought into heart-shapes that cover a pair of doorlights above which decorative brackets support an overhanging cornice and frame the doorway's lintel, where is written in raised stone: "McNulty." (Fig. 4).

Upon entering, one is greeted on the far wall by a painted glass artwork ensconced within a bronze frame that depicts the biblical scene of the Annunciation. The pigment thins around the central Madonna figure, illuminating Mary and her characteristic halo with a transcendently soft glow (Fig. 5). Looking to either side, three crypts rise from floor to ceiling leaving only a narrow corridor from the entrance to a shallow shelf that sits below the iconographic glasswork. A rug covers the floor, hiding a once polished slab of Victoria White Granite that's finish has worn thin (Fig. 6). Like the exterior, decorative elements remain minimal, each crypt adorned by a pair of florally formed decorative bronze handles matched by a larger bronze vent in the shape of a floret in the center of the ceiling. All interior surfaces are clad in a dressing of honed Light American Marble.

One might conflate the structure's apparent austerity with the McNulty sisters' class trappings—a humble facade that mirrors a humble upbringing. Yet, as we look at the mausoleum's once lush and manicured landscape, this argument all but dissolves. McNulty contracted the landscape architects J.H.

Small & Sons in July of 1921 to plant an elaborate assortment of evergreens around the plot (Fig. 7). These Washington D.C. based landscapers primarily practiced in the nation's capital and were of high pedigree, contemporary works including creating wreaths for President Woodrow Wilson's tomb. <sup>19</sup> Their plantings for McNulty included rhododendrons, Pfitzer junipers, Japanese cedar, and other varietals. <sup>20</sup> Starting from a point behind the rear facade, plantings wrapped around either side of the building and culminated near the entrance's circular planters to form a heart shape. For these planters, McNulty wrote specific instructions to the cemetery for a rotation of seasonal plants and flowers, dictating that they plant "two vases with pansies for the Spring, ferns for the Summer, and evergreens for the Winter." <sup>21</sup> As the mausoleum sits atop a slope, these plantings would have been highly visible from Whitewood Road. Placed back within its original context, the mausoleum's sterile exterior gives way to an emerald grove that literally holds the structure in a loving embrace.

Over the next thirty years, McNulty engaged in exhaustive correspondence with Woodlawn staff to provision for her mausoleum's continued protection. The sheer volume of her first-hand observations of the mausoleum's condition imply that McNulty was a frequent visitor to her sister's resting place. And in these letters, McNulty displays a palpable force of personality, vocally discontented with Woodlawn's stewardship of her plot. In a February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1945 letter to the cemetery characteristic of her tone, Agnes remarked that although she found their costs for care "exorbitant and entirely too much," she would

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Cary T. Grayson, "Cary T. Grayson to J.H. Small & Sons," November 7, 1935, Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library & Museum, Staunton, Virginia, Cary T. Grayson Papers, accessed via: https://presidentwilson.org/items/show/21788

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> "Plan of Proposed Planting on the Plot Surrounding Mausoleum of Miss McNulty," July 26, 1921, Columbia University, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library Drawing and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery: Lot Owner Correspondence, Box 93, Folder McNulty 685.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup>John C. Plumb, "John C. Plumb to Mr. Henry Klein," June 3, 1942, Columbia University, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library Drawing and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery: Lot Owner Correspondence, Box 93, Folder McNulty 685.

"try it for another year" but "had informed...Mr. Plum at the cemetery office" of her dissatisfactions. <sup>22</sup> She follows with a diatribe describing her plot's care for the previous year as "terrible—just about the worst possible." <sup>23</sup> To Agnes, the mausoleum was clearly an object of special importance. So important that, as alluded to in her letter, Agnes paid a "Special Care Fund" to maintain the mausoleum.

Woodlawn staff presented Agnes with an estimation of these charges in 1942 that amounted to \$7,150 dollars, equivalent to around \$145,000 in 2024. <sup>24</sup>

It is likely due to Agnes' watchful care and future planning that the mausoleum remains today in nearly pristine condition. Save for minor spalling due to natural salt efflorescence around small portions of the façade and intended patina on the buildings exposed bronze work, little appears damaged. Yet the character of the plot has unquestionably changed. After Agnes' death on August 25, 1950, her beloved plants lasted only for another year, the prohibitive expense required to maintain such a garden resulting in its removal in 1951. But even in death, Agnes continues to preserve her mausoleum. She bequeathed an endowment of \$5,000 (\$65,000 in 2024) to Woodlawn for its perpetual care (Fig. 8). The endowment paid for the repointing and cleaning of the exterior evident at the time of this writing.

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A Woodlawn mausoleum is a symbolic monument. The cemetery's temples immortalize industry, wealth, and power, projecting the triumphs of the dead into the world of the living. The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Agnes McNulty, "McNulty to Woodlawn Cemetery," February 5, 1945, Columbia University, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library Drawing and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery: Lot Owner Correspondence, Box 93, Folder McNulty 685.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Plumb, "John C. Plumb to Mr. Henry Klein."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> John C. Plumb, "John C. Plumb to Nora Billington," October 1, 1951, Columbia University, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library Drawing and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery: Lot Owner Correspondence, Box 93, Folder McNulty 685.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Sophie Drake Baldus, "Sophie Drake Baldus to John C. Plumb," April 2, 1951, Columbia University, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library Drawing and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery: Lot Owner Correspondence, Box 93, Folder McNulty 685.

McNulty mausoleum, meanwhile, is compelling for a different reason. Its form is simple, its use routine, but it was an important if not deeply cherished object to Agnes McNulty. Agnes had spent her entire life until 1920 with her sister Helen. While we can only speculate as to her grief, the mere fact she chose to memorialize her sister's life in a place like Woodlawn keys in to an understanding of the importance of their relationship. We will never share the personal connection that Agnes had to her mausoleum, but her toil in preserving her sister's resting place gives the McNulty plot an enduring humanity—her love, grief, and labor are a part of the building's material fabric.

## **Figures**



Fig. 1: Passport photograph of Agnes McNulty in 1920<sup>27</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925, National Archives and Records Administration, Roll 1372, accessed via <a href="https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/600982645:1174">https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/600982645:1174</a>



<u>Fig. 2</u>: **TOP**—William H. Todd's yacht, *Saelmo*, in 1926; **BOTTOM**—*Saelmo*'s passengers photographed at the wedding of John Adams Warner and Emily Josephine Smith, daughter of then New York Governor, Al Smith; Left to right: (Sitting) Josephine O'Brian, Mrs. J. F. Gilchrist, Helen Daniels, Agnes McNulty, Mrs. Frank Hague, and Mrs. Joseph F. Moran; (Standing) John F. Gilchrist, Frank Hague, William Todd, Governor George E. Silzer of New Jersey, and Joseph T. Moras.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> "Two Yachts Bring Many Guest to Warner-Smith Wedding," *The Knickerbocker Press,* June 5, 1926, accessed via <a href="https://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html">https://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html</a>



Fig. 3: Front façade of mausoleum



Fig. 4: Ornamental bronze frame, right door; see heart-shaped curves at top and bottom



Fig. 5: Painted glass depicting "The Annunciation"



Fig. 6: Damage to finish on interior floors

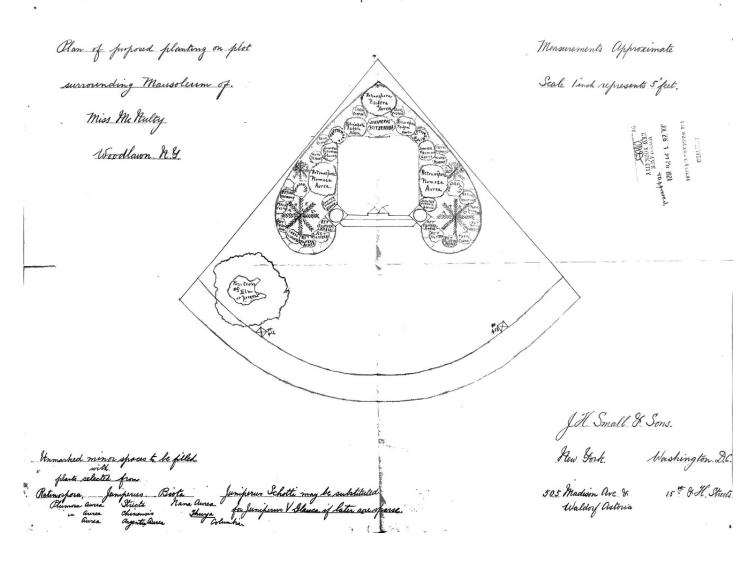


Fig. 7: 1921 Landscape Plan by J.H. Small and Sons<sup>29</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> "Plan of Proposed Planting on the Plot Surrounding Mausoleum of Miss McNulty," July 26, 1921, Columbia University, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library Drawing and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery: Lot Owner Correspondence, Box 93, Folder McNulty 685.

RECEIVED THE WOODLAWN CEMETERY THE WOODLAWN CEMETERY MEMORANDUM APR 3 9 27 AM '51" NEW YORK 66 Mr. John C. Plumb, Superintendent BY DATE April 2, 1951 FROM Sophie Drake Baldus SUBJECT Lot #14827 - Whitewood Plot Original Owner: Miss Agnes Mc Nulty (Estate of Agnes Mc Nulty, Deceased - Will File #3013) The following is an extract of the will of Agnes Mc Nulty, in connection with the endowment of the above captioned lot: "FOURTH: I am the owner of a lot on which is erected a mausoleum located in the Woodlawn Cemetery, in the County of Bronx, City of New York. Said lot is known as lot 14827, Whitewood Plot in said cemetery. It is my request and direction that my remains be interred therein. I also direct that any members of my family may be interred therein if they desire. I do hereby give and bequeath to "The Woodlawn Cemetery", a corporation organized and existing under the Laws of the State of New York, the sum of Five Thousand (\$5,000.00) dollars, upon trust, however, to apply the income arising therefrom, under the direction of the Directors, to the repair, preservation or renewal of any tomb, monument or other structure, and the planting and cultivating of trees, shrubs, flowers, and plants, in and around said lot NO. 14827, Whitewood Plot, in the said cemetery grounds of the said corporation, situated in the City of New York and County of Bronx; and to apply the surplus thereof, if any, to the improvement and embellishment of said lot.." Edward J. O'Connor, Esquire, 522 Fifth Avenue, New York 18, New York, is the attorney for this estate. Please send us an estimate. Sophie Drake Baldus Assistant Secretary

Fig. 8: Excerpt of Agnes McNulty's will endowing her mausoleum<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Sophie Drake Baldus, "Sophie Drake Baldus to John C. Plumb," April 2, 1951, Columbia University, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library Drawing and Archives, Woodlawn Cemetery: Lot Owner Correspondence, Box 93, Folder McNulty 685.

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