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Historical Research Methods

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Luning Vault, Woodlawn Cemetery

The Luning Vault in Woodlawn Cemetery is the burial site for John N. Luning, his first wife Nettie, and his second wife Marion. Built in 1903 by Robert Caterson and assisted by Dimiceli & Sons, the vault was one of the first cycle of monuments and memorials to be built in Woodlawn Cemetery. This vault is an open-air mausoleum that, despite the scandalous history of the deceased and the time and weather it has had to withstand, presents itself as a remarkable product of Roman mortuary architecture.

Upon seeing older photographs of the Luning vault, it is evident that it was meant to be seen from a distance. The contrast between the bright granite structure and the green landscape surrounding it make the Luning vault an easy destination for visitors. Because it was one of the earlier monuments to be built at Woodlawn and because of the prominence of the Luning family, the vault



Woodlawn Cemetery Records, Avery Drawings & Archives

sits close to the Woodlawn subway station and thus close to the border and entrance of the cemetery. Its dome and the circle of columns below it make the monument even more distinguishable within the Woodlawn landscape and sea of monuments and memorials.



Woodlawn Cemetery map, own annotation

The Luning vault is relatively easy to access, a five-minute walk from the Jerome Avenue entrance: upon entering the cemetery from Jerome Avenue, visitors would turn left onto West Chestnut Avenue, turn right onto Hill Avenue, and halfway around the Joseph Paterno mausoleum would find themselves in front of the John N. Luning open-air mausoleum. Although there is a direct and easily-accessible path, there is a footpath that has been created over decades of visitors making shortcuts to discover the cemetery and access other mausoleums, monuments, and graves. Like many of the other monuments on circle plots, the Luning monument sits in the center of its circle plot on a very slight hill. The engraving, “John N. Luning,” on the frieze of the cornice, however, faces not towards the direct approach from Hill Avenue, but rather faces the mausoleum on the circle plot to the west of the Luning monument: the Herren mausoleum.



Own photograph

Robert Caterson was a prominent architect-builder in the late 19th century and early 20th century who specialized in mausoleum architecture, having many built examples in Woodlawn Cemetery. Upon seeing other examples of his work in Woodlawn, it comes as no surprise that the Luning vault be in a Roman style. Although the Hobart and Wills mausoleums clearly take inspiration from traditional rectilinear mortuary temples from Ancient Rome, the Coster mausoleum takes on a more circular plan — a precursor to the circular plan of the Luning mausoleum. Taking cues from these historical



Hobart Mausoleum, *The Monumental Work of Robert Caterson*, 1903

precedents, the Luning mausoleum sits in the center of its circular plot to exaggerate the approach from the bottom of the stairs that wrap the mausoleum, to the top of the podium

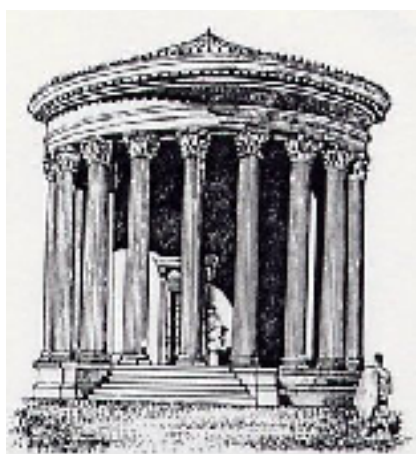


Coster Mausoleum, *The Monumental Work of Robert Caterson*, 1903

that contains the two sarcophagi. Despite the direct approach to the mausoleum, coming from Hill Avenue, the stairs that lead up and surround the podium and the lack of any walls — just columns — suggest an openness to view the surrounding mausoleums on Chestnut Hill and the field of graves on the southeastern portion of the hill, as well as the option to discover the rest of the cemetery.

Specific pieces of Roman architecture that served as models for Caterson include Bramante's Tempietto and its precursor, the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli. Like the Tempietto and Temple of Vesta, the Luning monument follows a circular plan, has a classical order, and

contains similar Roman motifs allowing for a strong attribution to classical Roman mortuary architecture. The vault contains twelve columns on the perimeter of the podium and two sarcophagi carved in granite containing the bodies of John N. Luning and his first wife, Nettie. Their names are engraved clearly, with Nettie's sarcophagi containing the remains of a turquoise-green medallion — possibly a rosette — that must have been stolen due to its considerable value. The columns



Temple of Vesta, <https://ancient-roman-structures.wikispaces.com/Temple+of+Vesta>

have full Corinthian capitals in granite to support the cornice, baldacchino, and domed roof. The

domed roof is decorated with a crown-like apex, most likely modeled after the apex of the Temple of Vesta, in which a vent at the apex allowed for the release of smoke for this mortuary temple. The domed ceiling contains well-preserved mosaics whose manufacturer cannot be identified but can be said to be in the style of traditional Roman mosaics. As stated in the *New York Tribune* on December 27, 1903, Caterson had a system of using



Own photograph

as little joints as possible in his monumental work to prevent frost and dampness from entering the vault. The minimal use of joints and the heavy granite stone used throughout the vault thus allowed for the structure to withstand as much damage over time and under different weather conditions. The sturdiness and impermeability — as much as it can be considering the building technology of the time for an open-air mausoleum — is visible in the quality of the engravings and a somewhat well-kept floor.

According to original documents and sketches of the monument, an underground crypt



Woodlawn Cemetery Records,
Avery Drawings & Archives

containing four catacombs would be entered by excavating three feet below grade through a three-foot square brick wall on the east elevation of the mausoleum. The crypt has already been accessed to place the body of John N.

Luning's second wife, Marion. As stated in the lot card and in a correspondence with Woodlawn Cemetery, Dimiceli &

Sons was the funeral home that most likely provided the service to enter the crypt and bring in

the casket of Marion Luning. With these poor instructions, it seems that this portion of the design of the mausoleum was not completely thought out.

John N. Luning, to whom the vault is dedicated, was born on September 12, 1859 in San Francisco to Nicholas Luning a millionaire banker who amassed a fortune from loaning money to gamblers for a large interest rate. Despite his father's wealth

John received no money from his father, and worked as an elevator

boy in Chicago and New York. He was said to have lived a "wild

life" in New York, borrowing money on notes to be paid after his

father's death. And thus Luning accumulated a large amount of

debt. Nonetheless, he managed to get hold of this father's yacht,



San Francisco Chronicle, May 28, 1893

"The Alert," and sailed with his friends to the south of France. During this trip he was said to

have gone "insane" by many prominent newspapers including the New York Times, New York

MR. LUNING'S MISFORTUNE.

**INSANITY SHOWED ITSELF WHILE THE
PARTY WAS CROSSING THE OCEAN.**

New York Times, January 23, 1893

Tribune, Chicago Tribune, San

Francisco Chronicle and LA Times;

however, it was finally concluded that

this "madness" had just been the result of a fever he had picked up off the coast of Africa on the

way to France. The final piece of information is John's marriage to an American heiress living in

Paris, Marian, while also being married to Nettie — and the suit that followed John selling the

yacht to Marian. And thus the mausoleum that was built as a result of Nettie's death, contained

not just John's body but also that of Marian in the crypt below.

Considering the age of this monument and the not-so-forgiving New York weather it has had to endure over the years, the Luning vault appears to be in excellent condition. While it was

designed during a time when the cemetery was not extremely populated, standing out from the landscape and built with the money from the father's estate, the Luning vault remains one of the best preserved pieces of monument architecture in Woodlawn cemetery.



Own photograph