

# **The Berkey Mausoleum**

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Located at section 128 on Filbert plot, an intersection between the Park and Fern Avenue at Woodlawn Cemetery, the Berkey Mausoleum was erected at the corner, surrounded by plants from three sides on sloped and grassy terrain. Compared with other surrounding mausoleums, the external appearance of Berkey Mausoleum is displayed in modernism and simplicity without vestibule, columns, and elaborated ornamentations.

From the exterior, it can be observed that the mausoleum was mainly constructed of honed granite, with a concrete foundation beneath the ground.<sup>1</sup> At the front facade, facing the south, three steps lead to the entrance of the mausoleum, where there is a door made of bronze with an exquisite pattern of plants and birds, showing greenish color from oxidation. Above the door, a diagraph text of “BERKEY” is centered on the facade. In place of mortar, there is sealant in the joints between the stone units at the front facade and other elevations. Additionally, there are three highly decorated stained-glass windows on the east and west elevations, which will be mentioned later. Furthermore, the exterior walls are thinner at the top than at the bottom. At the rear elevation, a slightly different form than the front facade can be noticed, where the top of the elevation has a convex structure higher than other parts, and it runs through the entire rooftop.

When entering the mausoleum, people can easily be attracted by the decorative features and scenes demonstrated by the heterogeneity among different materials and the homogeneity within the same material, as shown in figure 13. Ondagata marble panels, an Italian marble, were applied to the walls and ceiling, which account for the majority part of the interior. These beige panels with foliated crystallization are

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<sup>1</sup> Examination Sheet Order No. 1521

believed to give a more elegant ambiance. However, the original plan proposed a veneer on the floor with the same marble but was rejected by an engineer from Woodlawn Cemetery because the Ondagata marble might not be durable enough to withstand abrasion or other forces that might be encountered.<sup>2</sup> Polished granite was used as the material for the interior floor. As said by the engineer, the use of polished granite displays material soundness. In addition to the homogeneity demonstrated by Ondagata marble and polished granite, nine stained-glass windows give more color variations to the interior, not only on the window but also through the light penetration into the room. With careful examination, it can be observed that different stories are depicted by shapes and colors.

The mausoleum was constructed for Mr. Benjamin Berkey and Mrs. Frances Berkey by Presbrey-Leland Inc around the 1970s, which is now Presbrey-Leland Monument Company. In 1932, the Presbrey-Leland Inc published *The Book of Presbrey-Leland Memorials* for a threefold purpose, which was to present the reader with a well-elaborated procedure for selecting a memorial; to give the company's information about its facilities, experience, and reputation; and to assemble a directory of more than 30,000 Memorials erected by the company in the United States.<sup>3</sup> A potential service for consumers to select a memorial is provided, which adapts to their requirements and constraints, following an eleven-step guide on selecting a memorial.

Born in Ukraine in 1911, Mr. Benjamin Berkey came to the United States with his parents in 1921. Later, he graduated from the City College of New York in 1932. During the Great Depression, it was nearly impossible for a young man who did not have connections to get a permanent job. After working as a shoe salesman, a worker

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from George C. Williams to Newell Presbrey on November 3, 1972

<sup>3</sup> Presbrey-Leland Studios, "*The book of Presbrey-Leland memorials (1932)*", 7

at a New York farm, and a bookkeeper, he decided to start his own business.<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Berkey started his business with a three-hundred-dollar loan from his mother, and the money was spent on buying a 50% partnership in a photographic studio. Before his business started, he had accumulated experience working at photo-finishing shops back in high school and college. In order to economize on the process of washing prints, the wall of an adjacent laundry was broken by him so that he could wash the prints at night in the laundry's tubs through a hole on the wall.<sup>5</sup> In 1936, he joined in a partnership with another young man, and they established the first Peerless camera store, which became the biggest camera retail operation in the United States.<sup>6</sup> After WWII, he accumulated enough wealth to travel abroad; during the trips, he began buying cameras for resale by Peerless. In 1961, Berkey Photo went public. By the mid-1960s, the Berkey company's sales volume had reached \$60 million a year. In 1973, the Berkey company began an antitrust lawsuit charging Eastman Kodak and resulted in settlement of \$6.7 million in 1981<sup>7</sup>, and it became one of the largest and most significant private antitrust suits in history. Even now, some law schools regard it as a classic case study discussed in class.

Modest, a family man, old-fashioned idealist, these are general labels created by the outside world for Benjamin Berkey.<sup>8</sup> In a conversation between the author and Mr. Harvey Berkey, the son of Benjamin Berkey with his first wife, who became later president of Berkey Photo Inc, a richer character of Benjamin Berkey is revealed.

*“My father was a brilliant businessman who was very charismatic.  
He had tremendous self-confidence and was unafraid to reach out*

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<sup>4</sup> Bedingfield, “*Personality*.”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Marks, “*Who Made It Big*.”

<sup>7</sup> Ennis, “*Benjamin*.”

<sup>8</sup> See note 6 above

*and expand his horizons. Unsophisticated financially in Wall Street terms, he nonetheless understood and was extremely facile with numbers. His greatest personal shortcoming was raising a second family with Frances while married to my mother, although he was not a neglectful father to us by any means.”*

Also, Harvey Berkey gave his explanation of the mausoleum’s style.

*“Frances was flamboyant and liked splashy, gaudy and glamorous things and I think that is what led up to the construction of the mausoleum.”*

In addition, Benjamin Berkey, according to Harvey Berkey, was involved in charity, primarily supporting Jewish causes. He donated toward the initial construction of the Lincoln Park Jewish Center in New York, a hospital clinic in Israel, and the United Jewish Appeal every year. It may have something to do with his early experience. During the Revolution of 1917, revolutionists went upon his village in Ukraine and set fire to the homes of Jews. Together with his sister, brother, and mother, they escaped and spent four years in Europe. With the financial assistance of the Hebrew Immigrants Aid Society, they managed to secure passage to the United States.<sup>9</sup>

One of the stained-glass windows contains famous attractions worldwide, including the Taj Mahal, Eiffel Tower, Sultan Ahmed Mosque, and other places. Harvey Berkey stated that his father traveled extensively and was one of the first businessmen to travel to Germany and Japan after the Second World War to pursue photographic products from those countries. Subsequently, he learned and developed his interest in skiing in Europe, which echoes another window with two skiing figures.

The overall building remains in good condition after decades. Still, some

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

noticeable deterioration/decay can be observed. One condition is biological growth that appears on the surface of exterior walls. As mentioned in the previous part, the surrounding plants made a shelter for not only the mausoleum but also biology, inducing the biological growth that might impair the visual impressions of the building. Attention can be drawn by the vents. There is less biological growth visible under the top vents. One possible explanation of the phenomenon is that the moist air coming out from the vents carries enough from the copper component of the bronze that when that moist air travels down the stone, it kills or inhibits the growth. In addition to that, two material condition issues are noticed. Though there is a gap between the Ondagata marble ceiling inside the mausoleum, as shown in figure 9, it is believed no severe structural problem is detected. The other is a crack of joint at the rear elevation, as shown in figure 8, which may be caused by the moisture when it cannot move through the granite and the sealant at the face of the joint is not vapor permeable, the stress may result in the sealant tearing and cracking. In general, it is believed that no urgent conservation intervention is needed at this stage as the mausoleum is in good condition.

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Figure 1: South Elevation. Source: Author



Figure 2: East Elevation. Source: Author





Figure 3: North Elevation. Source: Author



Figure 4: West Elevation. Source: Author



Figure 5: Site context. Source: Author



Figure 6: Site context. Source: Author

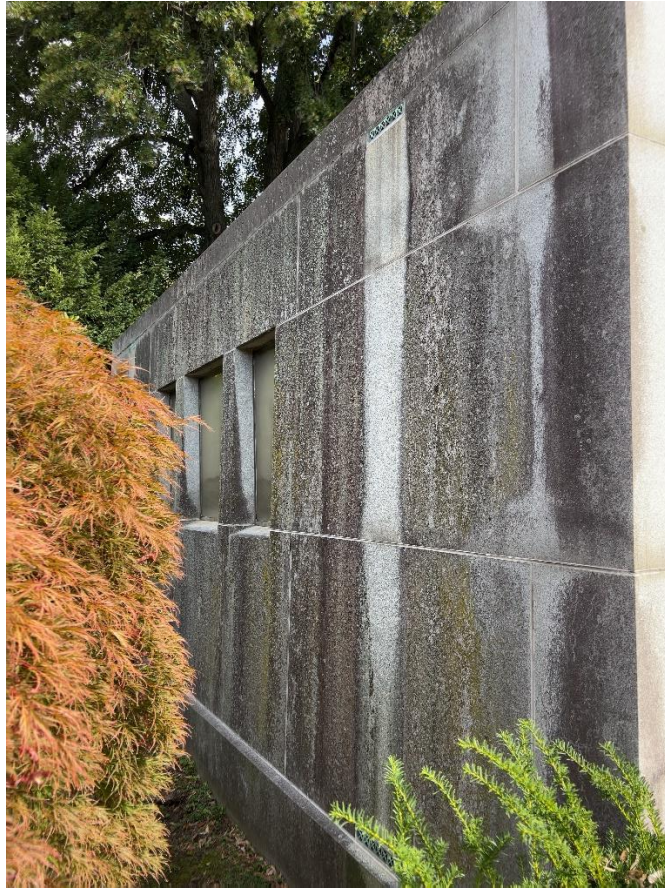


Figure 7: Comparison of the degree of biological growth on different parts of the wall. Source: Author



Figure 8: A crack of joint. Source: Author



Figure 9: A marble ceiling gap. Source: Author

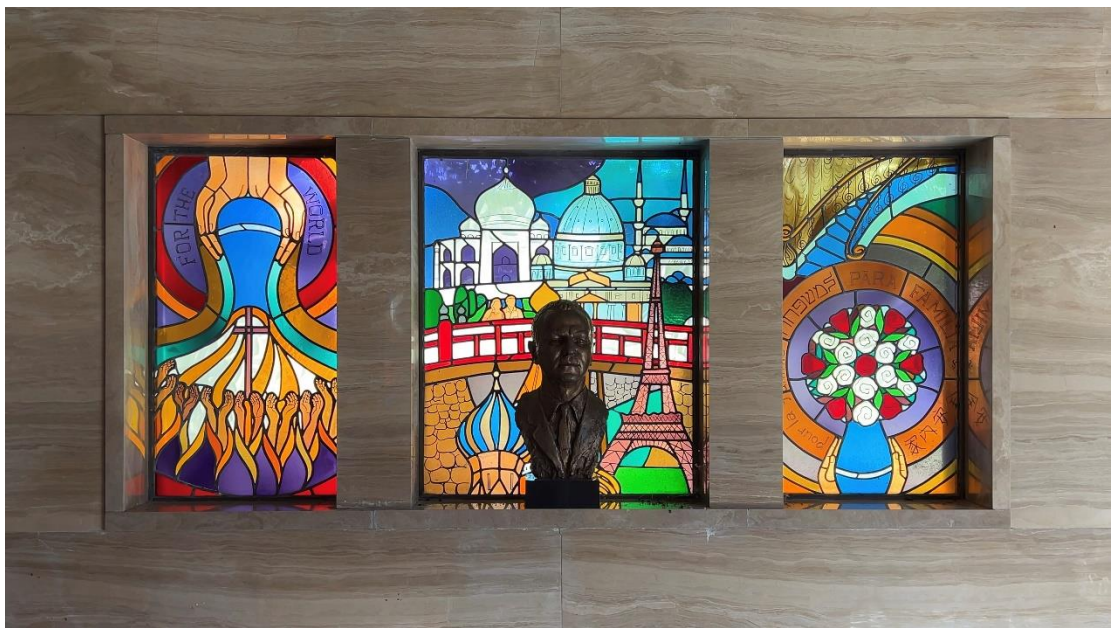


Figure 10: Window Patterns on the east wall. Source: Author

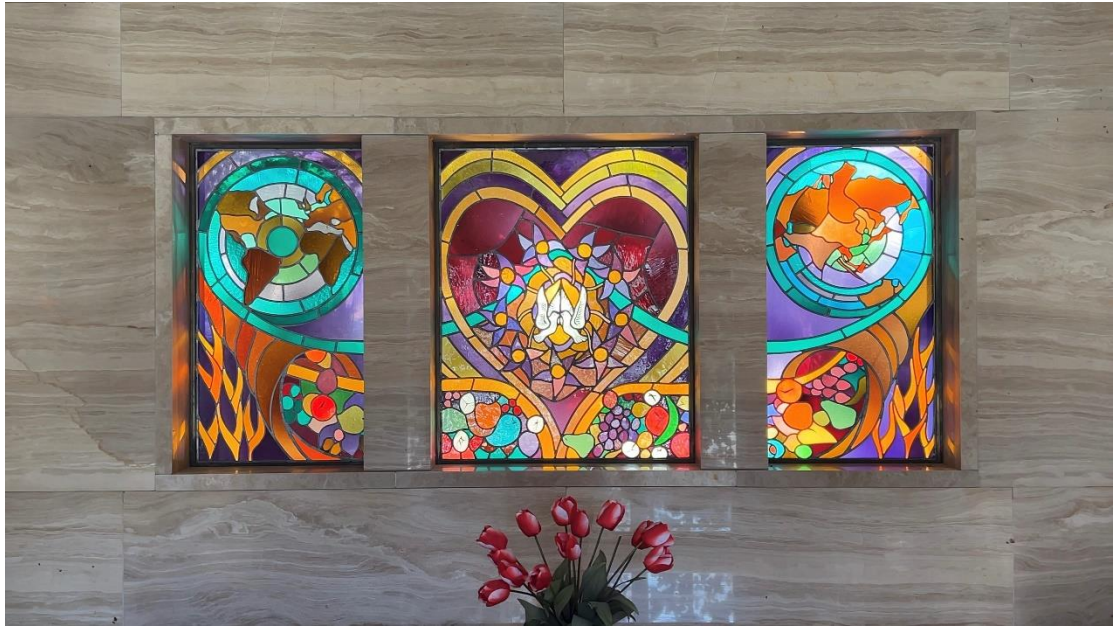


Figure 11: Window Patterns on the north wall. Source: Author

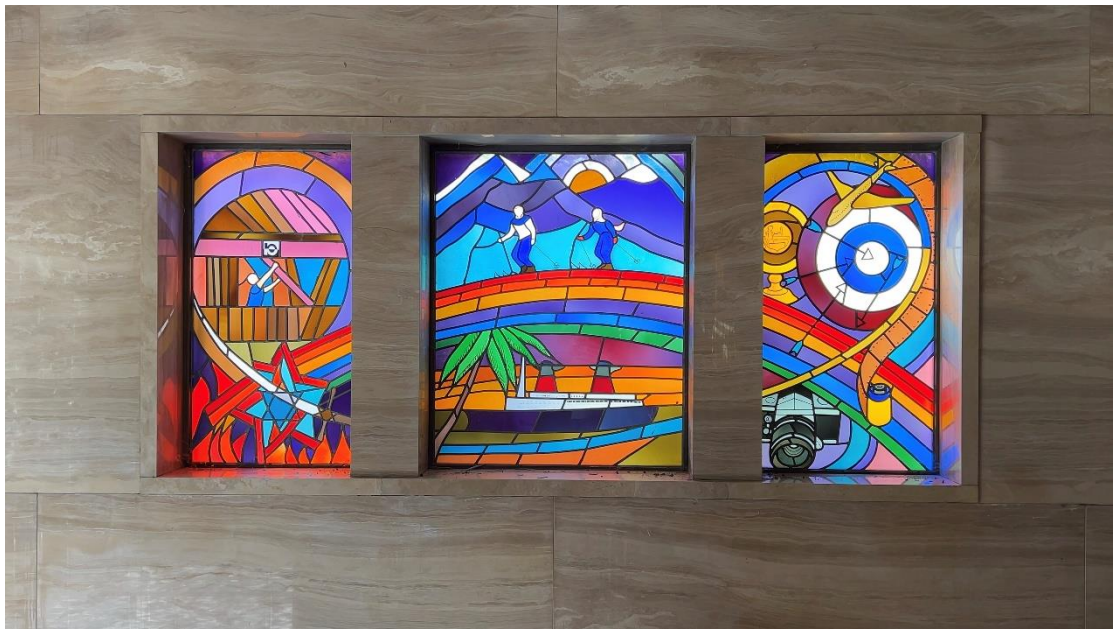


Figure 12: Window Patterns on the west wall. Source: Author



Figure 13: Interior. Source: Author