

James Harper Poor Mausoleum

John Mead Howells, architect · 1918-1919

On June 12, 1915 the wedding of Mildred Harper Poor and Alexander Yelverton Garnett took place in the Baker House, a 1648 mansion that the bride's father had bought in East Hampton sixteen years before. Being a Shakespearean devotee, Mr. Poor named the house "As You Like It" and in 1911 he hired Joseph Greenleaf Thorp (a prominent architect with ties to the English Arts and Crafts Movement) to conduct a major renovation of the property. In the society column reporting the wedding that was published in the *New York Times* the next day, the house was praised significantly: "The Estate is much like an English country house, with its lawns bordered with tall hedges and inside rows of purple and yellow iris, honeysuckle, and flame-colored poppies (...). There is also a small sunken garden (...), and in one cloistered spot an old sun dial calls the frivolous to consider that *Each hour shortens life.*"¹ This last sentence was premonitory for the bride's only sibling, Evelyn Poor, who died on June 10, 1915, less than one month later.



James Harper Poor Mausoleum, 2014

The death of Evelyn Poor (1886-1915) led her father to buy a plot in Woodlawn Cemetery and to hire architect John Mead Howells (1868-1959) to build a mausoleum for his family. Although the date of the commission is not precisely known, letters about the mausoleum can be found at the Woodlawn Archive (Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library) dating from at least July 1918. For instance, in 1918 John Mead Howells wrote to Frederick R. Diering, superintendent of Woodlawn Cemetery: "Relative to the above mausoleum of which I talked with you the other day; in beginning the design I am trying to reduce the horizontal dimensions to the very smallest possible size, and yet follow out fully the Woodlawn regulations."

¹ *Miss Mildred Poor marries Dr. A.Y.P. Garnett at her parents' estate*, The New York Times, June 13, 1915, Section II, page 15.

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As my plan is an octagon it is the right angle rear corners of the catacombs which determine the position of my exterior walls.”²

The reasons why Mr. Poor decided to hire John Mead Howells are not clear. Howells founded the architectural firm Howells & Stokes in partnership with Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes in 1897. However, the partnership ended in 1913 so at the moment of Mr. Poor’s commission Howells was working on his own. Whatever the reasons that led Mr. Poor to hire him, thanks to the information at the Woodlawn Archives, it is possible to know about the involvement of Mr. Poor in the design of the mausoleum. In a letter to Mr. Storm, engineer at Woodlawn Cemetery, Howells said that he had “just completed by Mr. Poor’s instructions a scale model in plaster of the Mausoleum and of the entire lot.”³

This interest of Mr. Poor in the design of the mausoleum and in architecture in general is coherent with his purchase of the Baker House in East Hampton and also with his idea of renovating the house to give it a grand and gracious form. James Harper Poor (1862-1919) was “for many years one of the most prominent men in the dry goods commission business in the city [of New York], and well known in social circles”⁴ and also someone noted for “his urbanity”, “regarded in the trade as an example of success through a keen sense of business ethics.”⁵ The design of the mausoleum is actually coherent itself with this success-without-excess idea. It is obviously a statement of power and status, but its tactful and serene forms are also a claim for subtlety and delicacy.

The Poor mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery is located at the intersection between Spruce Street and Golden Rod Avenue. Although the plot is not among the biggest in the cemetery and it is not even a free-standing plot, the intersection of these two streets could be seen from the former main avenue of the

² Letter from July 17th, 1918, *Poor Mausoleum (Folder 2)*, Woodlawn Archives, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

³ Letter from February 10th, 1919, *Poor Mausoleum (Folder 2)*, Woodlawn Archives, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

⁴ *James Harper Poor Dies: Prominent New York Merchant Succumbs at His Summer House*, The New York Times, Aug 24 1919, page 22.

⁵ *James Harper Poor*, Grant Wilson, J. and Fiske, J. (editors), *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American biography*, Volume 8, (New York: The Press Association Compilers Inc., 1918), page 141.

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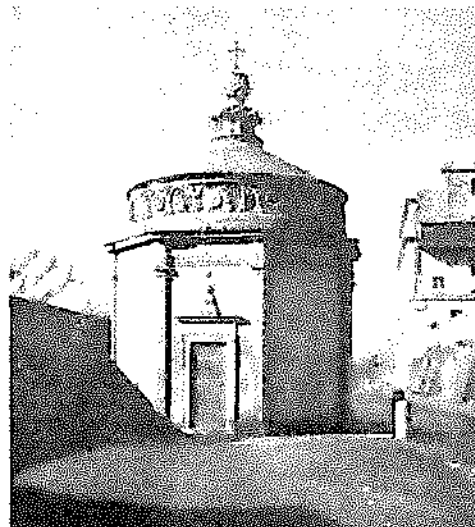
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cemetery and the plot itself was very close to the former entrance to the complex. As it can be inferred from the original drawings at the Woodlawn Archive, in his design for the mausoleum John Mead Howells consciously took advantage of this location, placing the octagonal building in such a way that the main elevation of the mausoleum is facing the intersection between the streets.

The octagonal geometry of the plan was actually a recurring topic in the correspondence between John Mead Howells and the Woodlawn Staff. In July 1918, Richard Storm sent a letter to the architect talking about the plan of the Poor mausoleum in which he recommended to take the William Charles Stewart Mausoleum as a model; "In the Stewart mausoleum the diagonal sides were made a little shorter than the other sides which gave some extra room in the corners."⁶ The Stewart mausoleum, built in 1914 by John Russell Pope, was inspired by a masterpiece of ancient Greek architecture, the Tower of Andronicus Cyrrhestes (also known as the Tower of the Winds, Athens, 2nd century BCE) and it served as a model for several other mausoleums at Woodlawn Cemetery. However, although the form of the Poor mausoleum is the same of the Tower of the Winds (an extruded octagon placed in an octagonal platform), the building that Howells took as a model was not Greek, but Roman: The Poor mausoleum is a limestone replica of the oratory of San Giovanni in Oleo in Rome, an extremely small church attributed to Bramante and Antonio da Sangallo the Younger (later restored by Borromini).

Although Howells did introduce some modifications in the original design of San Giovanni in Oleo's façade (he deftly eliminated the pilasters in the corners, keeping the capitals), the exterior appearance of the Poor mausoleum is obviously and undoubtedly a replica of this small church. However, the Poor mausoleum have two differences with this beautiful Roman building. Firstly, Howells designed an incredible roof for the mausoleum, topped by a single-piece-of-limestone dome with a span of over fourteen feet. Secondly, the interior space of the mausoleum is



San Giovanni in Oleo, Rome, circa 1930.

⁶ Letter from July 22nd, 1918, *Poor Mausoleum (Folder 2)*, Woodlawn Archives, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

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completely different from the space in San Giovanni in Oleo, being not only rectangular instead of octagonal but also relatively small in comparison with the exterior appearance of the building. Actually, while the height of the mausoleum is over 20 feet, the height of the marble-walled room inside of it is only around 8 ½ feet, existing a hidden space between the dome and the ceiling of the room. This marble-walled room is rectangular in shape, having the door of the mausoleum and a Roman arch window placed in the short sides of the rectangle while three catacombs are located in each of the long sides of the rectangle.

Although the mausoleum includes six catacombs, only three people are buried in it: James Harper Poor (who died the same year that the mausoleum was finished), his daughter Evelyn and his wife Evelyn Bolton Poor, whose name was sadly never carved in her catacomb.