

The Samler Mausoleum

At Woodlawn Cemetery, the planning concept of a “landscape lawn” was implemented to welcome idle visitors, mourners and potential clients alike.¹ Meandering roads, an absence of fences, and tastefully manicured trees lead you down ever-changing paths. It is not easy to get lost on the grid of New York City, nor is it a familiar feeling to wander aimlessly on purpose. This is, however, the effect at Woodlawn; you might not know where you are going and you might, surprisingly, find it enjoyable. This romantic, organic setting is only brought into focus by man-made structures peppering the landscape at varying intervals: the mausoleums. Designed by memorialist companies, minor and sometimes major architects, they express a range of fads - neoclassical, Greek Revival, Egyptian - and one unifying characteristic, the display of wealth. As a non-denominational cemetery, Woodlawn’s doors were, and continue to be, open to everyone. In 1925, a self-made Jewish businessman such as Louis Samler would have wanted a dignified and grand resting place for his beloved wife, one that reflected not only his success in life, but the ascendance of his family from humble beginnings in Bavaria all the way to Fifth Avenue in Manhattan.

Louis Samler was born in Philadelphia to Bavarian Jewish immigrants in 1870. From birth, he was on a direct route to a career as a garment manufacturer, his father Isaac having been a clothing merchant, and the surrounding community being so steeped in that industry. In the Philadelphia census records of the late nineteenth century, it is clear that many of the Samlers’ neighbors were also of German descent and worked in the garment industry as dry goods merchants or clothiers.²

As a young man, Louis married Sophie, née Grumbacher, who also came from dry goods stock. Her father, Samuel Grumbacher, was the proprietor of Grumbacher Brothers in Trenton, New Jersey, where he sold dry goods along with his brother, Jacob. By 1896, their venture was thriving and expanding; Jacob's name is bold and quite large in the city directory, and they have added "& Sons" to their title.³ Sophie's father could boast not only a downtown storefront on State Street, but possibly a factory or warehouse farther inland on Broad Street, presumably where workers could receive and send shipments by rail. On the map, the Grumbacher industrial space was located in an area still known today as Mill Hill; one can certainly guess the origins of the nomenclature, and the area's connection to garment manufacturing, among the many other industries that were so prominent in Trenton at the end of the nineteenth century. As the saying goes, "Trenton makes. The world takes." In this way, we can clearly see that to talk of the history of the Samler and Grumbacher families is to explore the deep ties of Jewish immigrants to the garment industry along the eastern seaboard in the late nineteenth century.

In the fall of 1896, Louis and Sophie wed and moved to Lebanon, Pennsylvania to begin their new life together. At 26, Louis was a promising young merchant with one store to his name: The Bon Ton, a small shop on Cumberland Street with eight employees that provided "rich pickings for you at the smallest prices."⁴ Literally French for "good tone," the name "Bon Ton" was a reference to elite, high society, and evoked what Samler thought of as the height of fashion. By 1898, he had gone into business with Sophie's father and brothers, expanding the store with the Grumbachers' connections to increase their buying power, and open new locations in York, Lancaster, Carlisle, and Altoona.⁵

By 1916, The Bon Ton had grown to be a department store to a scale with which we are familiar today - a place with a massive footprint and stunning architectural interiors, with over

thirty departments and two hundred active employees, many of whom remained loyal to the company for decades.⁶ In 1922, Louis acquired the Hahn department stores throughout Pennsylvania, creating the Allied Stores Corporation, the largest department store corporation in America at the time. Louis' business acumen can be boiled down to what *The Lebanon Daily News* identified when they printed that his "Honest dealings, honest merchandise, and honest value, have brought The Bon Ton to the prominent position in which it finds itself today."⁷ He clearly was a shrewd businessman who valued his employees and a pleasant company atmosphere. According to interview testimony by his great-grandson, Mr. James Marmon, Louis was also somewhat of a character.⁸ The Bon Ton held annual Santa Claus appearances from 1900 to 1970, and Mr. Samler was fond of giving year-end bonuses.

Having emerged from humble beginnings, Mr. Samler most likely evolved into an appreciator of the finer things. His stores' interiors were magnificent, reimagining a modern shopping fantasy for men and women of taste and means. In a 1920 act of architectural appreciation, he purchased the Nutting Building, a turret-capped, Pennsylvania Dutch/Baroque tower down the street from the Bon Ton flagship, designed by Henry Albert Roby. Samler immediately removed the name Nutting from the side of the building, and had his own added in bronze. The Samler Building, as it has been known for one hundred years, is a notable fixture in the downtown Lebanon skyline, and even figures onto the official city logo.⁹

The Bon Ton's home at 834 Cumberland Street was owned and operated by various members of the Samler and Grumbacher families until 1963, when it underwent a million dollar renovation, and continued operating under the name Pomeroy's. Pomeroy's saw incredible success and marketed itself as an "everything store," offering the gamut from haircuts to shoes to appliances.¹⁰ There is a fondness in our collective American memory for places like this. The

remodeled Pomeroy's was demolished in 2003 after various periods of abandonment and ownership changes throughout the 1980s and 90s. Today, the corner of Cumberland and Eighth Streets in downtown Lebanon is home to a municipal parking lot.

The success of the Bon Ton, its family legacy and multi-generational ownership can largely be attributed to the support, work and style of Louis' wife, for whom he commissioned his family mausoleum at Woodlawn. Sophie was the first family member interred there in 1925. For her final resting place, Louis worked with Adler's Monument & Granite Works, a prolific memorialist company with a showroom at 148 E. 57th Street and branch offices opposite various cemeteries throughout Queens.¹¹ Adler's ordered the finest "Greenslanding granite" from Deer Isle, Maine; due to the success of its quarry industry, the harbor settlement of Green's Landing in Deer Isle had been incorporated as Stonington by 1870.¹² Stonington granite has a beautiful, distinct sheen when polished, with both blue and pink-hued feldspar speckling; stone from quarries in this region was used at St. John the Divine, the steps of Columbia University, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the United Nations building logo (designed by Adler Granite), among countless other important structures and monuments.¹³

Memorialist companies had a unique structural problem - that of ventilation and water leakage prevention. Adler Granite Works devised modern techniques of bronze venting for air flow, and a hemp base mixed with Atlas Portland cement for the mortar on the exteriors.¹⁴ The three roof stones of the Samler mausoleum run in one length from the front pediment stone to the rear of the building, with rockfaced edges exposed, and bronze anchors used where necessary. Adler also devised a system of double sheet bronze doors, whose ornamental pattern functions as an open grille, on the back of which hangs a plate glass shutter set in a bronze panel. The purpose of this "shutter" system is to allow for permanent ventilation, sliding pivot hinges and a

self draining saddle.¹⁵ It was a very sound structure that has minimal evidence of water damage on the interior after almost one hundred years.

According to a map of the Myosotis plot circa 1930, there was originally a large footpath intersecting the plot on the north-south axis running parallel to Myosotis Avenue.¹⁷ This explains the Samler mausoleum's peculiar siting (it faces away from the main road); it once abutted a walking path, facing the Frew monument, which did likewise. The biological growth at the base and water damage near the roof on the east elevation may be explained by this siting - the front facade rarely gets direct sunlight, and is shaded by an enormous sycamore tree, increasing moisture and stress from freeze-thaw cycles. The landscaping on the Samler plot may have been installed by Adler's at the behest of the client; in addition to the sycamores, there are silver carpet lamb's ear plants and a perennial boxwood tastefully adorning one side of the granite urns. The mausoleum is designed with a recessed entry, which draws you in beneath a classical pediment brandishing the name "Samler" in raised, polished granite.

The interior is entirely imported Italian marble, varying between 1" to 2" thick, cladding the tombs, framing the stained glass, and installed as wainscoting on the rear wall.¹⁶ The interior is in good condition, with very little sign of hysteresis or water damage, save at the corners of the ceiling, where rust from the bronze suspension hinges has leaked through at the seams. The only other area that requires immediate attention is the stained glass, which has shattered in the bottom left-hand corner. The lead piping encasing the glass has warped or perhaps expanded due to heat.

The building's eastward siting allows the afternoon sun to penetrate the leaded opalescent art glass on the rear facade. Upon entering the mausoleum, the viewer is immediately struck by the powerful, almost neon, glow of the stained glass. This art was created by an unknown glass

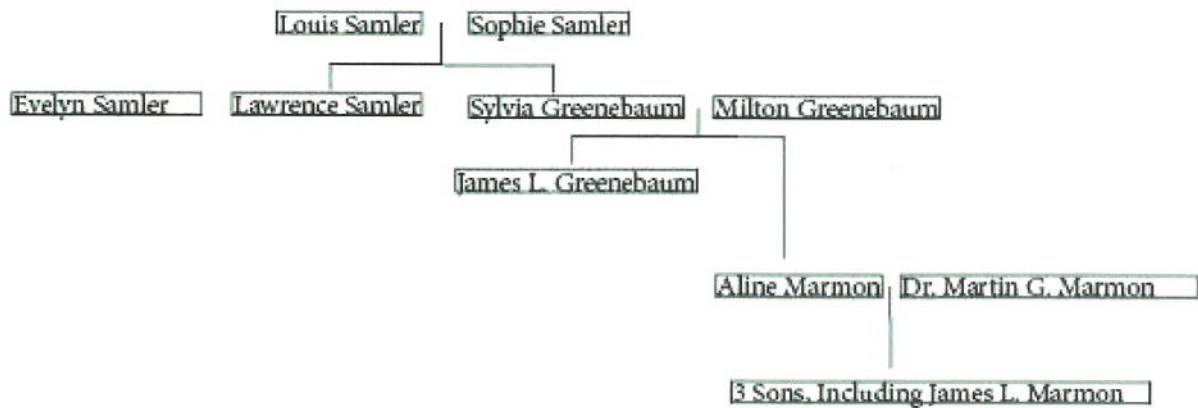
vendor, whose work was also used in the Picker and Schlesinger mausoleums (by Adler), and other Woodlawn monuments designed by another memorialist firm, Stone, Gould, and Farrington.¹⁸ Perhaps the Samler's stained-glass design - that of a river landscape and changing tones of leaves in the trees from green to brown - represents the continuity and cyclical nature of life and death; the four lotus flowers in the bottom right-hand corner may represent the Samlers and their two children, Lawrence and Sylvia.

Also interred with Louis and Sophie are their two children Lawrence and Sylvia; Lawrence's wife, Evelyn; Sylvia's husband, Milton Greenebaum; their children James and Aline; and Aline's husband, Dr. Martin G. Marmon. The Marmon and Greenebaum etched lettering on the exterior were added at later intervals - "Greenebaum" being added in 1942 with the death of Sylvia and Milton's 17-year-old son, James, who died of an illness while attending Yale.¹⁹ The "Marmon" engraving was added in 1984, with the interment of Dr. Martin G. Marmon, whose surviving son, James, clearly cares for the upkeep of the mausoleum and showed great interest in this project. During my brief interview with Mr. Marmon, it became clear that the mausoleum remains significant in the family, and that its longevity and maintenance are paramount, as evidenced by his attendance at a recent Woodlawn event. As a self-made Jewish man, Louis Samler created one of the most successful, family-owned East Coast department store chains of the twentieth century. His legacy, as well as his choice of Woodlawn for his family's resting place, further underscores his upward mobility in life, hammering home - more than the architectural uniqueness - the historic significance of this mausoleum.



Louis Samler, "Lebanon's Greatest Store Prepares to Celebrate 30th Anniversary," *The Lebanon Daily News*, 1926, 11.

THE SAMLER FAMILY TREE





First Floor of the Bon Ton store, 1910, (Lebanon County Historical Society).



Candy counter at The Bon Ton, c. 1910, (Lebanon County Historical Society).



The Samler Building, downtown Lebanon, Pennsylvania.



The 1999 symbol of the City of Lebanon, left, designed by Nick Batdorf. The City of Lebanon's current logo on the right hints at the Samler Building's tower on the end of the skyline, (City of Lebanon, PA).



Drew Citron, Photographer, *The Samler Mausoleum*, 2022, Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, NY.

Endnotes

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4. "The Month Will Be A Notable One at The Bon Ton," *Lebanon Daily News*, May 2, 1896, www.newspapers.com/image/13878025.
5. Samantha Sollenberger, "The Bon Ton: Remembering its 67 years as Lebanon's Greatest Store," *Lebtown.com*, March 1, 2021, <https://lebtown.com/2021/03/01/the-bon-ton-remembering-its-67-years-as-lebanons-greatest-store>.
6. "Lebanon's Greatest Store Prepares to Celebrate 30th Anniversary," *Lebanon Daily News*, May 5, 1926, 11, www.newspapers.com/image/515409776.
7. *Ibid.*, 11.
8. James L. Marmon, interview by Drew Citron, October 5, 2022, audio 30:25.
9. Joshua Groh, "A Salute to the Samler Building," *Lebtown.com*, November 7, 2019, <https://lebtown.com/2019/11/07/a-salute-to-the-samler-building-lebanons-downtown-icon>.
10. Sollenberger, 3.
11. Correspondence with Woodlawn Cemetery, Box 15, Folder 85, Louis Samler Major Monuments Folder, Woodlawn Cemetery Collection, Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.
12. Gregory B. Poitras, *The Granite Industry at Stonington*, (Maine: Deer Isle Granite Museum, 1997), 4.
13. *Ibid.*, 5.
14. Correspondence with Woodlawn Cemetery, Box 15, Folder 85, Louis Samler Major Monuments Folder, Woodlawn Cemetery Collection, Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.
15. Architectural Drawings, Box 15, Folder 85, Louis Samler Major Monuments Folder, Woodlawn Cemetery Collection, Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.
16. Architectural Drawings, Box 15, Folder 85, Louis Samler Major Monuments Folder, Woodlawn Cemetery Collection, Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.
17. Site Maps circa 1930, Woodlawn Cemetery Collection, Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.
18. Application for Mausoleum, Box 15, Folder 85, Louis Samler Major Monuments Folder, Woodlawn Cemetery Collection, Drawings and Archives, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University.
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