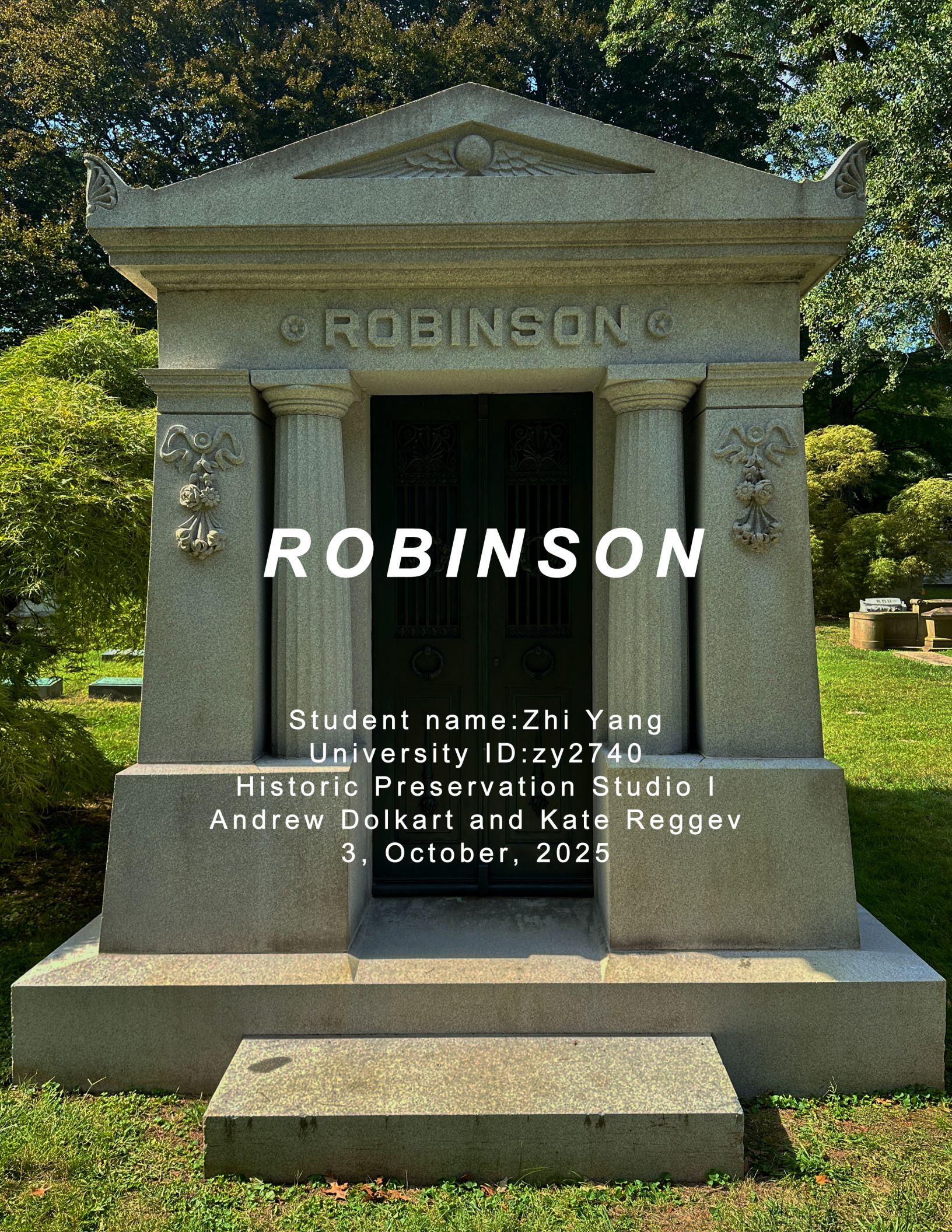




ROBINSON

ROBINSON

Student name: Zhi Yang

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Historic Preservation Studio I

Andrew Dolkart and Kate Reggev

3, October, 2025

Every soul shall eventually depart this world, sooner or later,¹ yet they shall leave behind traces of their existence for those who follow to trace, whether descendants, those connected to them, or even strangers. In Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, half the city has been transformed into gravestones and memorials (Figure 1). These stand alongside the living, forever preserving the memory of departed souls for those who remain. Through encountering such 'heritage,' people can engage more directly with history. This 'miracle' also manifests in New York, a bustling city where every inch of land is precious. Woodlawn Cemetery has stood here since 1863, chronicling the past of over 310,000 departed souls.²

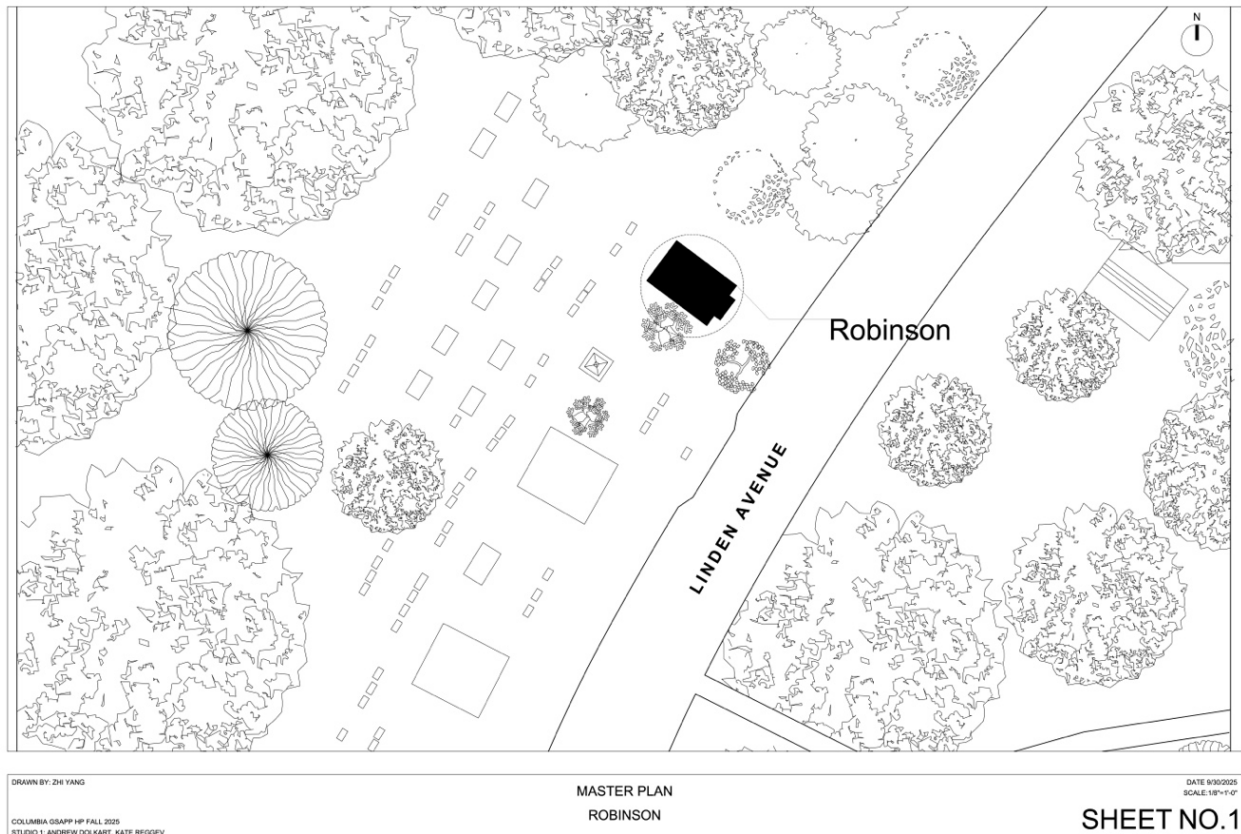


(Figure.1 Sarajevo, 2025, photo by author)

¹Jackson, Eddie B. *The Life Of The Dead: Everyone Included*. AuthorHouse, 2011.

Accessed October 2,2025,<https://books.google.com>

² "Our History | Woodlawn Cemetery • Crematory • Conservancy" Accessed October 2,2025, <https://www.woodlawn.org/about/history/>



(Figure 2. Master plan of Robinson)

Description of Appearance:

Though not the largest among Woodlawn's many tombs, the Robinson Mausoleum possesses an undeniable charm, both solemn and elegant. Situated along the roadside of Linden Avenue, it is surrounded by several tombs of comparable scale and an Egyptian-style obelisk (Figure 2). Four sturdy trapezoidal stone pillars form the main structural support, while two Doric (Parthenon-style) columns flank the main entrance (Figure 3), lending the structure remarkable stability and resilience against external forces. At the center of the Robinson Mausoleum's pediment sits a small circular sun with wings extending to either side. This relief carving, known as a sun disk or winged

disk, originates from ancient Egyptian motifs. The sun disk symbolises the sun god Atum, or Amun-Re. Serving as a conduit between deities and humanity in ancient Egypt, it embodies concepts of divinity and creation.³ More intricate carvings are found beneath, where decorative motifs on the trapezoidal stone columns feature floral swags adorned with bows. These flowers, specifically employed in funerary contexts, symbolize remembrance and commemoration, harmonizing with the bow at the apex to complement the tomb's theme. Additionally, five carefully selected granite blocks were placed centrally on either side of the stone structure, with only one block positioned at the rear. These stones were left unpolished, deliberately retaining some of their natural protruding textures, lending the entire tomb chamber a more textured appearance (Figure 3).

Between the massive trapezoidal stone pillars and the Greek-style columns lies the entrance to the burial chamber, a door entirely fashioned from bronze and adorned with various intriguing carved ornaments. Foremost among these is an ornament derived from a palm leaf at the very top called palmettes, while the bronze-carved garlands in the centre seemed perpetually intent on conveying that this was a tomb dedicated to commemorating the departed (Figure 4). Certainly, the practice of commemorating the deceased with flowers dates back to the earliest periods of human history. Today, it has

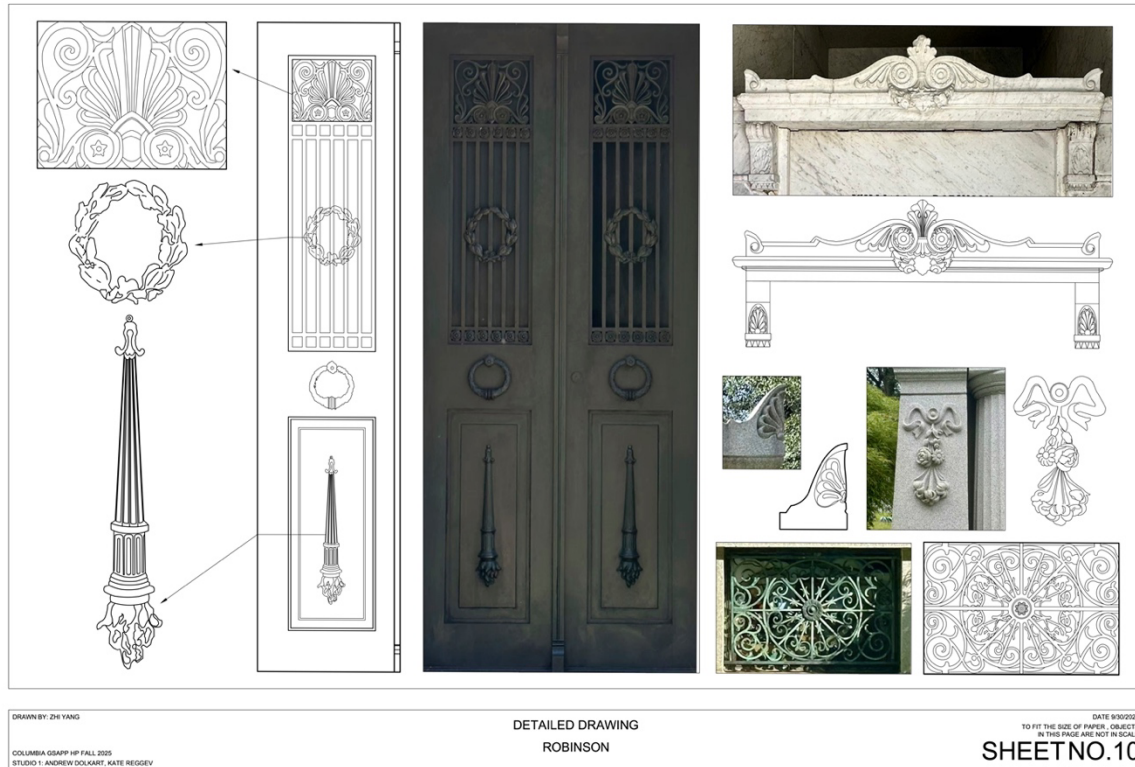
³ Redford, Donald B. 'The sun-disc in Akhenaten's programme: its worship and antecedents, I.' *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 13 (1976): 47-61. accessed October 2, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40001118>

transcended regional customs to become a universal consensus. As Dafni et al. note (quoted in Vickery R 1984):“ Flowers symbolise human mortality and rebirth, much like the cyclical seasons and the return of spring.”⁴ At the very base lies the ‘torch,’ likewise carved from bronze. These inverted torches are typically used as symbols of death within tombs.



(Figure 3. exterior of the Robinson's Mausoleum)

⁴ Amots Dafni et al., “Ritual Plants of Muslim Graveyards in Northern Israel,” *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*2, no. 1 (September 10, 2006), accessed October 2, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1746-4269-2-38>.



(Figure 4. Details of Robinson mausoleum)

Interior :

The interior of the tomb chamber stands in stark contrast to its exterior. Due to the thick walls and overall layout, the internal space feels rather cramped. Dominating the interior is a massive sarcophagus occupying more than half the chamber. Its intricately carved decorations resemble a pair of wings extending outward on the ornaments of either side. The patterns on the stone sarcophagus echo the winged motifs at the center of the gable and the Greek-style detailing on both sides of the exterior facade, suggesting the designer may have intentionally maintained overall harmony among these elements (Fig. 4). The lower central section of the tomb is inscribed with the names of the interred: William A. Robinson and his wife Josephine Hobson Robinson, along with their

dates of birth and death (figure 5). Particularly intriguing is the fact that both were born in the same year (1842) and passed away just one year apart.⁵



(Figure 5. Tomb of Robinson)

Furthermore, at the very rear center of the mausoleum is a square stained-glass window adorned with rich medieval Christian motifs: it depicts an angel clad in a yellow robe with green veils draped over it, displaying a pair of white wings on its back. Angels serve as messengers of God and bridges between humanity and the divine (Crok 2024). Thus, this likely depicts Archangel Michael, the leader of angels. The designer placed his image here to symbolize the communication of human souls to God for liberation. This stained-glass window is non-operational, serving purely decorative purposes, its design emulating stained-glass windows commonly found in cathedrals. As the afternoon sun nears its western descent, light streams through the stained-glass

⁵ "William Augustus Robinson (1842-1922) - Find a Grave," Find a Grave, accessed September 26, 2025, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/210429078/william-augustus-robinson>.

"Sarah Josepha Hobson Robinson (1842-1923) - Find A...," Findagrave.com, accessed September 26, 2025, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/210429095/sarah_josepha-robinson.

panel held by the angel, illuminating the inscription “The soul is risen” etched upon it. The beam cast delicate, colorful halos within the tomb chamber, lending a touch of vitality to the gloomy interior of the mausoleum.



(Figure 6. General conditions)

Regrettably, due to years of neglect and disrepair, the interior has sustained multiple irreversible damages. Firstly, the carvings on the sarcophagus exhibit numerous fractures and cracks, with sections having completely detached in places. Secondly, the entire decorative marble slab in the interior above the door has fallen off. This slab remains untouched within the tomb chamber, now thick with cobwebs. Even the sacred stained-glass window at the rear has not been spared, displaying numerous long, narrow cracks that are clearly visible. This deterioration follows a discernible pattern and is not attributable to negligence on the part of Woodlawn staff (Figure 6). On the contrary, this stems from historical asset allocation issues within the Robinson family. Below is a detailed analysis of the Robinson family's history and how William A Robinson managed his inheritance.

Historical Research:

The tombstone indicates William Augustus Robinson was born in 1842 and died in 1922, while his wife was born in 1842 and died in 1923. William Robinson was born in Falebour, Massachusetts, but later moved to New York. Both his father, David Brainard Robinson,⁶ and his mother, Elizabeth Janes Robinson, were born in Foxborough, Norfolk, Massachusetts.⁷ Research indicates that during his lifetime, William Augustus Robinson operated tobacco-related businesses on 122 Water Street in New York for over 18 years. It's worth mentioning that he was invited by F. H. Smith to inspect tobacco quality on behalf of the government. With remarkable precision, he identified the two finest varieties from hundreds of tobacco samples, while also overseeing the entire production process.⁸ His dedication and expertise were undoubtedly pivotal factors in his remarkable success as a tobacco trader during that era. Substantial financial rewards enabled him to secure such an elegant burial plot in New York, where land is notoriously expensive.

Similarly, his wife, Josepha Hobson Robinson, possessed a more detailed family history. Their family's history in the United States can be traced back three generations.

⁶ "Ancestry Library Edition," Ancestrylibrary.com, accessed September 26, 2025, https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/familytree/person/tree/1334064/person/162234742342/facts?_gl=1

⁷ Home - Ancestry Library Edition - libguides at ProQuest, accessed October 24, 2025, <https://proquest.libguides.com/ancestrylibraryedition>.

⁸ "Google Books," Google.com, September 26, 2025, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Report_of_the_Special_Commission_Appoint/cirJtltk4YC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22william+a+robinson%22+tobacco+nyc&pg=PA115&printsec=frontcover.

Her full name was actually Sarah Josepha Hobson Robinson. Her grandfather, Jonathan Hobson, and grandmother, Lydia Kelly Little Hobson, both hailed from New Hampshire, USA, where they resided until their passing. Likewise, her parents, Harrison Hobson and Eliza McQuesten Hobson, were both born and raised in New Hampshire. Consequently, apart from her own subsequent relocation to New York, the rest of her family remained in their ancestral home. Sarah Josephine Hobson Robinson married William Augustus Robinson in New York at the age of forty-three.⁹ For certain reasons, Robinson has long resided in hotels despite owning his own property. Through conversations with Professor Andrew, it became clear that some affluent individuals show little interest in owner-occupied residences, as these typically entail costly expenses for butlers and domestic staff. By staying in hotels, they can enjoy equivalent services at a lower cost.

After his death:

Robinson passed away on 22 March 1922 at his residence, the St. Andrew Hotel, and was laid to rest in a private funeral arranged by his family at the age of eighty. His will bequeathed portions of his estate to three Brooklyn residents: Leonard H. Smith, who received a residence valued at \$5,000 at 8430 Eleventh Avenue; Edward J. Smith, who

⁹ "Ancestry Library Edition," Ancestrylibrary.com, accessed September 26, 2025, <https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/search/collections/8054/records/19844311>.

was bequeathed a villa valued at \$10,000 at 6 Monroe Street; and Margaret P. Close, an elderly resident at the nursing home at 77 Albany Avenue, who was gifted \$5,000.¹⁰

Furthermore, the bulk of his remaining assets were bequeathed to his widow, Sarah Josepha Hobson Robinson, comprising \$100,000 and other bequests. Concurrently, he distributed his property among relatives in his hometown of Mansfield, Massachusetts, including his sister Mrs John Howe, who received \$30,000, along with her partner, who received \$15,000, and his niece, who received \$15,000. His nephew, Harry R. Howe, an officer serving in the United States Army at the time, was bequeathed \$25,000.¹¹ The total bequests amounted to several hundred thousand dollars, clearly indicating Robinson's affluent status within the local community during his lifetime. He was interred at Woodlawn Cemetery, having made inquiries regarding a burial plot as early as April 1910 – a full twelve years before his passing. However, as a cemetery in a place like New York City where land is at a premium, Woodlawn also requires substantial funds for ongoing maintenance. This includes repairs to the masonry inside the mausoleum, upkeep of the pediment outside, and daily upkeep – clearing the dense cobwebs inside, weeding outside, clearing snow, and so forth.

¹⁰ “Archive home,” newscomwc.newspaper.com, New York Herald, page 11, accessed September 26, 2025, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/558258002>

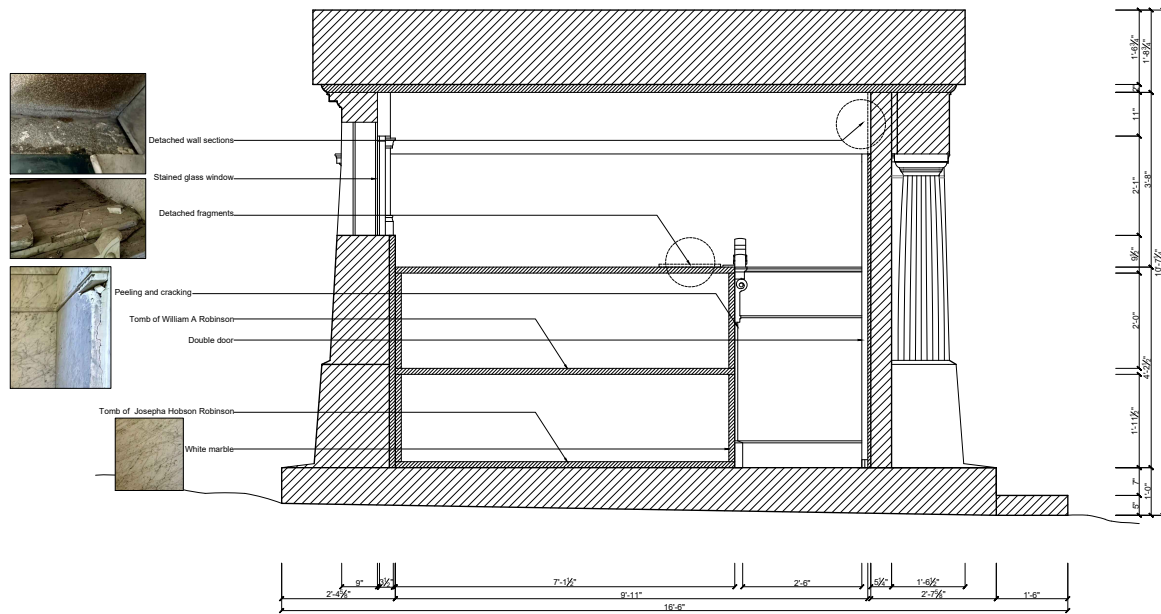
¹¹ “The Brooklyn Daily Times,” newsroowc.newspaper.com, accessed September 26, 2025, <https://newscomwc.newspapers.com/image/558258002/?match=1&terms=%22william%20a%20robinson%22&pqsid=ExiWQsctSt8Wb-uyZfka2Q%3A28693%3A275532276>.

Mr Robinson bequeathed considerable assets to family and friends, yet proved somewhat ill-equipped to fund the restoration and upkeep of his own tomb. As documented in the library archives I consulted, before his passing, Mr Robinson had stipulated in his will that \$1,000 be allocated for the maintenance of plot 10390-91 (his burial site) and the statue thereon. The Bankers Trust Company and Mr Edward J. Smith—executor of the late Mr William A. Robinson's will—discharged this sum to Woodlawn Cemetery. Yet faced with ongoing maintenance and later restoration work, weeding, and subsequent routine upkeep, these funds proved inadequate (Figure 7).

By 1925, the front of Mr. Robinson's gravestone had become badly stained (Figure 8). Woodlawn Cemetery staff requested that payment arrangements be made as soon as possible to enable effective restoration work to commence. Fortunately, supported by significant financial restructuring, cemetery personnel repaired damaged areas—such as joint defects and surface stains—exhausting the account's meagre balance (only \$51.20 remaining, Figure 9).

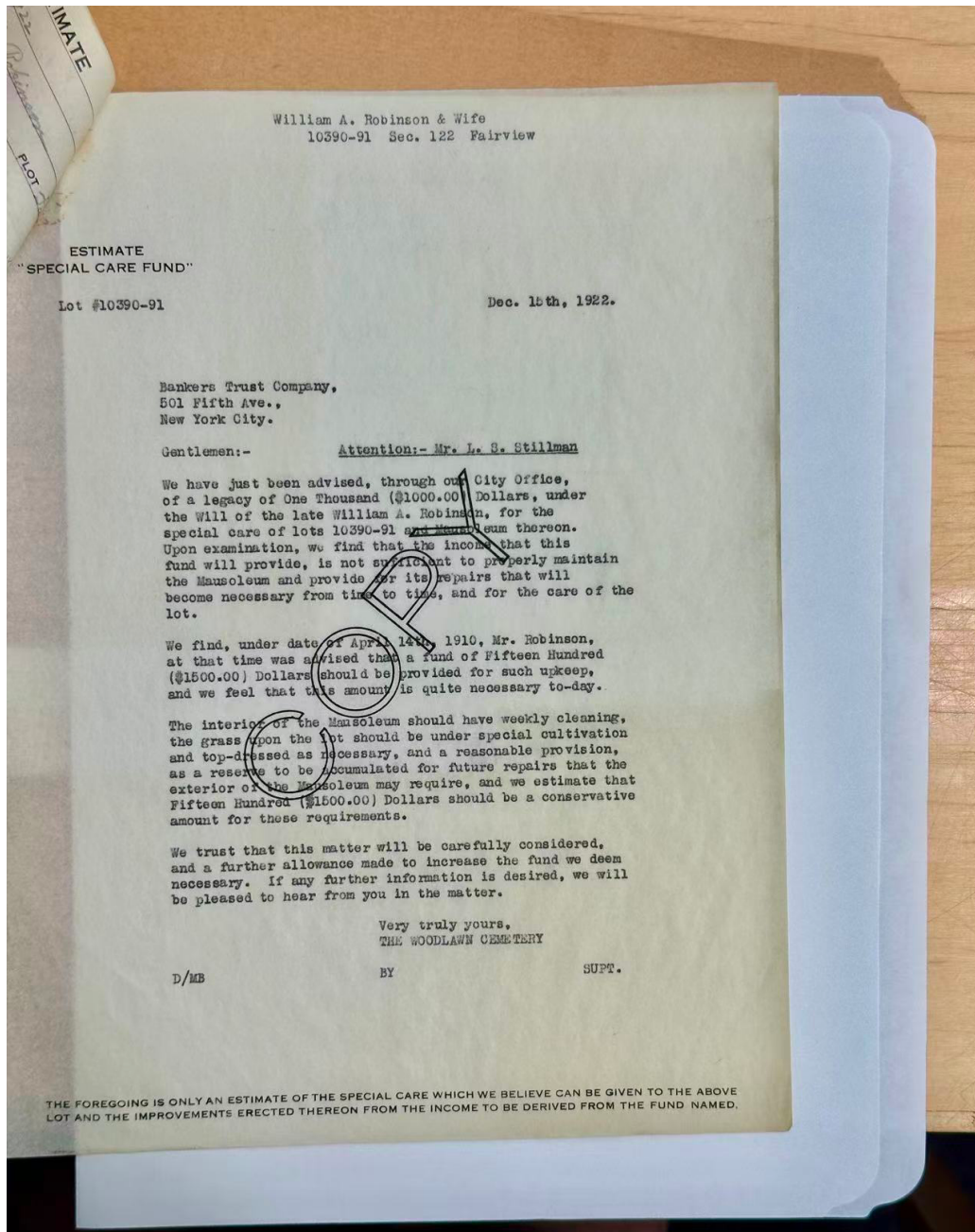
However, these remaining funds proved insufficient for subsequent maintenance and upkeep. During my survey of Mr Robinson's tomb, I discovered severe water damage on its northeast side and front. The interior condition proved even more dire: the marble component above the inner door had fallen and lay haphazardly atop the tomb structure, neglected and unrepaired for an extended period. The stonework damage,

including cracks in the stained-glass windows, likely stemmed from the aforementioned shortage of funds for subsequent repairs (Figure 10).



(Figure 10. Section with general conditions)

Pictures from the Archives of Avery Library



(Figure 7. letter from Avery Library's archive of Columbia University)

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25 OLD BROAD STREET

FIFTH AVENUE AT 42ND STREET
NEW YORK

May 29, 1925.

Re-Estate of William A. Robinson

The Woodlawn Cemetery,
Woodlawn,
New York City.

Dear Sirs:

We are advised by our co-executor, Mr. Edward J. Smith,
of the above named estate that the front of the mausoleum is badly
stained and that he spoke to you about having it cleaned.

We are writing you at this time to confirm his request
that you have this done, if you are in funds available for that pur-
pose.

Yours very truly,

L. S. Stillman
Assistant Secretary.

RECEIVED
THE WOODLAWN
CEMETERY

JUN 1 8 AM 1925

WOODLAWN,
NEW YORK CITY

BY _____

Robinson, Wm. A. and Sarah J. 895

(Figure 8. Letter from Avery Library's archive of Columbia University)

Robinson, William A & Sarah J.

Fairview Lot 10390-91

May 16, 1955.

Mr. E. Hamburg,
Bankers Trust Company,
501 Fifth Avenue at 42nd St.,
New York City.

Dear Sir:-

Re: Estate William A. & Sarah J. Robinson.

We have received a total fund of Fifteen Hundred Dollars (\$1500.00) for the care of this lot and mausoleum. The income from this fund is being used to provide for the regular weekly cleaning of the mausoleum, and the care of the turf on the lot, and the surplus income is being set aside to provide for any repairs that might become necessary at any time.

At the present time there is a surplus of \$51.20.

If there is any further information we can furnish, please let us know.

Very truly yours,

THE WOODLAWN CEMETERY

Superintendent.

JCP-EAS.

Robinson, Wm. A. and Sarah J. 885

(Figure 9. Letter from Avery Library's archive of Columbia University)

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