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FALL 2012 HP STUDIO I: Reading Historic Buildings

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Problem 3: Field Documentation & Field Analysis- Oelsner Mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery

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Woodlawn Cemetery located in Bronx, New York. Woodlawn is home to many mausoleums, among these, there is a small Gothic mausoleum. The Oelsner Family commissioned the mausoleum in 1915 from E.H. Stone Monuments.

Rudolph Oelsner was born on January 1, 1850 in Germany. According to his naturalization record he came to New York on February 24, 1873¹. It is not known why he left Germany, but it may have had something to do with the beer importation industry. After being in NY for a few years, Rudolph marries Dora. Dora Oelsner was born from German immigrant parents in New York on April 2, 1855². On October 4, 1886, Rudolph and Dora have their only child, Martha. In December 6, 1908, Martha has a son, Rensleo. It is unclear but it appears that his father was no longer in the picture as Rensleo's last name was changed from Johnson to Oelsner³.

The Oelsner's did well for themselves. There are census records of them living in Westchester, Yonkers, Long Island, and Manhattan⁴. In "The Long Islander" newspaper, it lists the Oelsner's as being assessed at over \$58,000, signifying their economic status⁵. The Oelsner's owned a large estate on Bay Shore on Long Island, New York, The Awixaxa⁶. The property was a nine acres waterfront estate with private docks and nine-hole golf course (See Figure 1). This was a large estate representing a wealthy family. The property was sold for \$100,000 in 1923 and eventually sold and split into 4 different estate lots⁷. Besides his large estate and property, not much is known about Rudolph.

On September 10, 1915, Rensleo Oelsner drowns in an accident in NYC at the age of six. Shortly after his death, preparations are made for the mausoleum to be located on the Golden Rod lot. You can see the mausoleum as you walk up a small hill. At first it appears as though you

may find a temple in the woods, but all the trees are located on different lots, with only one tree actually located near the mausoleum. Besides this one tree, there is no foliage around the mausoleum and whatever is there was not in the original plans.

All that is known about the mausoleum is from files located in Avery Library at Columbia University. Among these there are drawings from E.H. Stone Monuments sent to Woodlawn Cemetery for the proposed mausoleum on October 25, 1915. Two days later, letters between E.H. Stone and Woodlawn are sent for excavations to begin. According to the Examination Sheet, the exterior is rusticated Green's Landing Main Granite on Ashlar concrete foundations. The interior walls, and floor are finished in 2-inch fine vein marble. The rest of the crypt is made of Pennsylvania Black Slate.

There is one door, containing elaborate bronze work and a stained window. There is another stained glass window directly across from the entrance that was supplied by Rudolph. On the outside there are two urns flanking the entrance (See Figure 2). It is unknown when these urns were placed there nor if they were in the original design. The urns sit on top of large stone bases, indicating that something was designed for this spot.

Another interesting addition to the Gothic design was on May 29, 1920, when there was a statue placed on the lot. The statue is on axis with the entrance to the mausoleum. As with the urns, the meaning of the statue is unknown. However, I was able to find pictures of the statue and a note stating to place the statue on the site (See Figure 3). I was told that there is a story attributed to the statue. According to a groundskeeper the statue is of a maiden girl. She is holding a cloth in her lap and has a pair of scissors at the base of her feet. While working away a mouse appears by her right leg, scaring her to death, literally. Unfortunately, most of these

details have been worn away by the weather.

In 1922, seven years after the completion of the mausoleum, Rudolph moves his family to Port Richey, Pasco, Florida⁸. On November 1, 1925 Rudolph dies and is the second person to be buried in the mausoleum. Dora and Martha chose to remain in Florida on their property, "Shell Mound," an Indian burial mound. Nothing is really known about Dora, but she is the third person to pass away on April 28, 1946 and to be placed in the mausoleum.

After her mother dies; Martha makes preparations to preserve this Indian mound referred to as the Oelsner Mound⁹. The community looks upon this favorably and Martha becomes a well-known community member. She has been said to be a kind, caring woman¹⁰. Due to Martha's doings, the City Council designates a "Martha Oelsner Day," gets a street named after her as well as a recreational park names "Oelsner Park"¹¹. Martha dies on December 10, 1981 and is the last person to placed in the mausoleum.

The firm involved in the Oelsner mausoleum, E.H. Stone, was commissioned to do three other mausoleums at Woodlawn. One was for Ann Weaver in 1915 located on the White Wood Lot. It has all the same materials as the Oelsner mausoleum and is treated the same. The differences include: 9 crypts in The Weaver mausoleum instead of 4 in the Oelsner mausoleum. Another difference is an addition of four columns in the front and grander stairs (See Figure 4).

The second commission E.H. Stone does is for Grace Lyon in 1916. It is located on the Butternut Lot. This mausoleum also has the same treatment and materials as the previous mentioned mausoleums. The differences here are the number of crypts, being only two, and therefore this mausoleum is a much smaller scale than the others (See Figure 5). The last commission was for Mary Selmes in 1917. This is the most similar to the Weaver's mausoleum.

There are only three crypts in here but it still has the same grand feel. There are two columns instead of four, but all the materials and treatment are the same (See Figure 6).

The Oelsner Family is a wealthy family in New York. Rensleo Oelsner dies at a young age in a tragic accident and the Oelsner's find themselves commissioning a mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery in Bronx, NY. This mausoleum is a unique Gothic style structure among structures of Classical Architecture. It is small, housing all four Oelsner members, but it stands head high. After many decades of inactivity the structure is still in great condition.

¹ Ancestry.com. *New York, Index to Petitions for Naturalization filed in New York City, 1792-1989*

² Ancestry.com and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. *1880 United States Federal Census*

³ Ancestry.com. *New York, State Census, 1915*

⁴ Ancestry.com. *United States Federal Census. Years: 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920*
Ancestry.com. U.S., *Indexed County Land Ownership Maps, 1860-1918*

⁵ The Long-Islander. "Huntingtonians Assessed \$10,000 & Over." December 11, 1925.

⁶ "Awixaway real estate ad, 1931." http://fjj.smugmug.com/History/Bay-Shore/Bay-Shore/387287_gqGgn/9/17095678_VoDyA#!i=17095678&k=ZSh3FvX

⁷ "Awixaway real estate ad, 1931."

⁸ "History of Pasco County: Early Residents of Pasco County."
<http://www.fivay.org/pasco2o.html>. July 11, 2012.

⁹ St. Petersburg Times. "Friends celebrate her 91st birthday." Oct. 1977.

¹⁰ St. Petersburg Times.

¹¹ St. Petersburg Times.



Figure 1: Awixaway Property at Bay Shore, Long Island, New York



Figure 2: Oelsner Mausoleum Front Facade



Figure 3: Picture of Maiden Statue



Figure 4: Weaver Mausoleum 1915

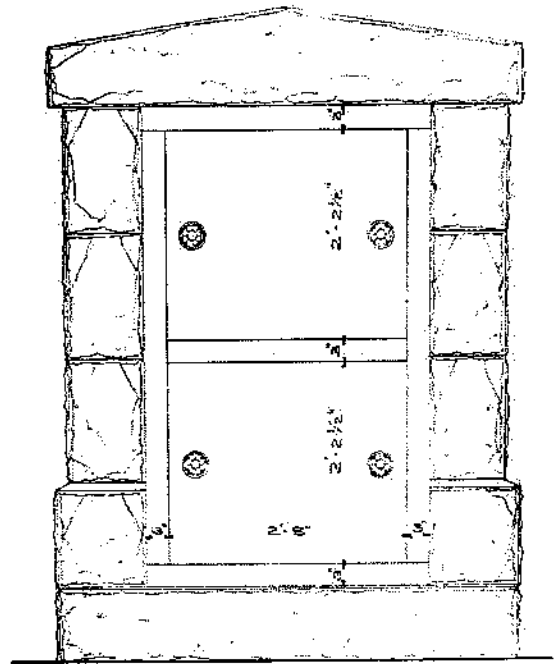


Figure 5: Lyon Mausoleum 1916

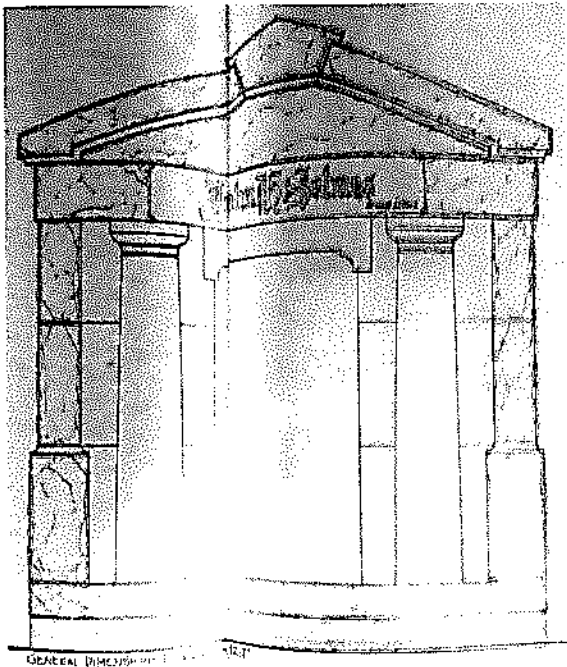


Figure 6: Selmes Mausoleum 1917