

Michelle Leach
Studio 1 Historic Preservation
Professors Andrew Dolkart, Kate Reggev, and Claudia Kavenagh
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De Witt Mausoleum

The De Witt family commissioned a mausoleum from Harrison Granite Company to be built at Woodlawn Cemetery in 1907. The structure is on a round lot in the Dogwood section of the cemetery. Jacob Henry De Witt commissioned the mausoleum around the time of his youngest son Sidney's death. Sidney was the first to be interred there in 1907 followed by his parents, Harriet H. De Witt and Jacob Henry De Witt, and his siblings, Charles, Harriet M., and George. George's wife Daisy is also interred here as well as their son Howland and his wife Julie.¹ At the time of Sidney's death, the De Witt family was successful. Jacob Henry was no longer working, but he had made a living as a wholesale dry goods merchant at 476 Broadway, New York City, NY.² This section of Broadway had many shops for textiles, so it is possible that this is the type of goods he sold. Charles and George worked as brokers (possibly stockbrokers due to their office's proximity to Wall Street) at Charles' business named Chas H & Co Brokers at 74 Broadway.³

The De Witt mausoleum itself is a moderately sized building on an impressive lot. The mausoleum is set back from Elder Avenue a significant distance and is placed at the top of a hill.

1. Family information gathered from census data:
US Census Bureau, 1880 United States Federal Census, Census Place: *New York City, New York, New York*;
Roll: 893; Page: 214C; Enumeration District: 550, digital image, prepared and accessed from
Ancestry.com, Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010.

2. *Goulding New York City Directory for 1876-77*, Surname De Witt, pg 341, digital images,
Ancestry.com. *U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc.,
2011.

3. *New York, New York City Directory, 1913*, Surname De Witt, pg 370, digital images, Ancestry.com. *U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2011.

With no surrounding trees, any visitor is met with an open view of the mausoleum from the road and a raised view of the cemetery from the mausoleum itself (figure 1). This view was preserved by the family as Charles requested to have trees removed that had been planted on the lots adjacent to the De Witt's on either side of the path to their mausoleum.⁴ The mausoleum itself is made of large blocks of Barre Vermont granite⁵ that is heavily rusticated with smooth Doric columns. The most striking elements of the building are the beautiful bronze doors and matching window grille over the stained-glass on the rear façade. The design for this building was inspired by another mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery. The Edwards mausoleum was built in 1904 by the Harrison Granite Co. and was specifically mentioned in the design drawings and specifications for the De Witt's building.⁶ It too has heavily rusticated granite blocks, and the bronze door and window were replicated for the De Witt mausoleum. The main difference between the two buildings is the columns. Where the Edwards family chose to have short, rusticated, rectangular columns, the De Witt family picked taller, Doric columns. This gives a slightly more refined look to the De Witt mausoleum. While the De Witt mausoleum is not vastly impressive in size or style, there is sophistication to the details. The bronze door and window are intricate, the interior of the building has white veined Italian marble, and the stained-glass window depicts a beautiful landscape that catches the afternoon light.

The De Witt family was active in correspondence with Woodlawn Cemetery. They had the stained-glass window repaired in 1932. They changed the landscaping by having bushes and

4. Correspondence from Woodlawn Cemetery to Charles De Witt, 17 January 1936, Box MOC 04, Folder 82, Woodlawn Cemetery Records (1863-1999), Avery Drawings & Archives, New York, NY.

5. Specification for De Witt Mausoleum, 1907, Box MM 04, Folder 77, Woodlawn Cemetery Records (1863-1999), Avery Drawings & Archives, New York, NY.

All material identifications were made through the specifications in the archive.

6. Ibid.

trees removed and often wrote to verify the documentation for ownership of the mausoleum upon the death of a family member.⁷ This was particularly relevant because Charles and George passed away before their sister Harriet, leaving Harriet and George's son Howland as the only two remaining people with rights to the mausoleum. Through their correspondence with the cemetery, the De Witt family requested estimates for the cost of a perpetual care fund on three separate occasions. This occurred in 1941, 1946, and 1952.⁸ This shows an obvious interest in the upkeep of the family's mausoleum and lot, but the family never established an endowment. On one occasion, just before the younger Harriet's death, there is explicit correspondence from her lawyer claiming that Miss De Witt could not afford the estimated costs for the fund.⁹ The correspondence between the De Witt family and Woodlawn cemetery ended when Harriet died in 1953.

In its current state, the mausoleum now has signs of its age and some concerning features that need to be addressed. The exterior has problems with various types of biological growth. On the south, east, and west facades, the biological growth is mostly contained to areas near the roofline or close to the ground. On the North façade (figure 4), this is a much more prevalent issue. A large portion of the north façade is covered with black biological growth. It is in an interesting pattern, being more prevalent towards the back of the mausoleum. The north side of the building remains cool and damp because it does not get very much sun. This could contribute to this problem. The Edwards mausoleum, which has a both a similar design and orientation has

7. Correspondence from De Witt family to Woodlawn Cemetery, 1941-1952, Box MOC 04, Folder 82, Woodlawn Cemetery Records (1863-1999), Avery Drawings & Archives, New York, NY.

8. Ibid.

9. Note from a phone call between Mr. Plum and Mr. Friedman, 21 July 1953, Box MOC 04, Folder 82, Woodlawn Cemetery Records (1863-1999), Avery Drawings & Archives, New York, NY.

a similar pattern of biological growth on its north facade. This indicates that the problem could be related to both the direction and design of the mausoleum. The drawings for both mausoleums found in the archives indicate that the catacombs are placed against the side and back walls with only a small gap between the catacomb and the walls. This could contribute to the extra moisture in this area of the north walls for both mausoleums. The problem could also be worsened by the number of vents in the mausoleums. There are only two on each long side of the building, one placed near the base of the building, and one placed under the roof line. Many of the mausoleums at Woodlawn Cemetery have double this amount, so this lack of ventilation could lead to increased moisture and increased biological growth.

While the biological growth on the exterior is visually problematic for the mausoleum, the much more concerning problem is moisture. The entire floor of the mausoleum is covered in biological growth and the pattern indicates that water drips off the ceiling (figure 7), contributing to the problem. This has left the granite floor of the mausoleum bright green with biological growth as well as affecting the marble of the lowest visible catacombs. The marble above the stained-glass window also has streaks and stains where water has been present. This problem could be due to condensation occurring in an attic space that is indicated in the archival drawings, which needs to be investigated and addressed by Woodlawn. The extra moisture in the building has also led to the hysteresis affecting the marble near the ceiling of the mausoleum. Hysteresis often occurs in slabs of thin marble when the temperature or humidity is not the same on all sides of the slab. This causes the marble to bow, leaving gaps or edges that do not meet in the way they were intended. In the De Witt mausoleum, hysteresis is minor but could have large effects. The facing panels of the catacombs are affected very minimally but the curved pieces of marble along the ceiling are the most noticeable because the hysteresis has caused gaps at the

corners of the ceiling (figure 9). The staining due to water and biological growth on the west wall could be related to these small marble pieces fitting incorrectly and increased moisture and should be addressed. The correspondence materials for both the De Witt and Edwards families mention various issues with the roofs of these buildings.¹⁰ Reports of leaks or necessary repointing of the roofs were brought up in multiple letters about these mausoleum's conditions. Without upkeep since Howland's death in 1993, if not since the death of Harriet the younger in 1953, it would be unsurprising to have an issue with the roof of the building. For this reason, Woodlawn should also inspect the roof for any leaks that could also be contributing to the moisture inside the mausoleum.

The average person walking along Elm Avenue may not walk up the hill to closely view the De Witt mausoleum, but the De Witt's clearly thought about the design, placement, and landscaping of their mausoleum. The large granite blocks that give the building a heavy and eternal feeling have in fact kept the mausoleum structurally sound through the more than hundred years it has held De Witt family members at Woodlawn cemetery. Sometime soon, the source of the moisture needs to be determined and addressed if possible. This could alleviate the problem of biological growth on the interior of the mausoleum and help avoid further water damage that could hurt the granite and marble over time. It would also aid in returning the mausoleum to the way that the De Witt family intended their mausoleum to be seen. From the De Witt's correspondence about the building's upkeep, it would seem that the family would be glad that someone has taken interest in the preservation of their mausoleum once again.

10. Correspondence from Woodlawn Cemetery to Joseph B. Edwards, 10 January 1917, Box MOC 05, Folder 19, Woodlawn Cemetery Records (1863-1999), Avery Drawings & Archives, New York, NY.

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Figure 1: Mausoleum Site photo 1



Figure 2: Mausoleum Site photo 2



Figure 3: East Elevation



Figure 4: North Elevation



Figure 5: South Elevation



Figure 6: West Elevation



Figure 7: Conditions Detail 1, interior biological growth



Figure 8: Conditions Detail 2, exterior biological growth



Figure 9: Conditions Detail 3, water staining and hysteresis