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Woodlawn Cemetery: Graphics and Research
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Aitken Lot, Chestnut Hill

In 1916, in fulfillment of his father's will, John W. Aitken's son commissions a mausoleum to be designed by Harrison Granite Co. with construction overseen by Woodlawn Cemetery.¹ Harrison Granite Co., Inc. was established in 1845 and by 1921 the company had branches in Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis and New York.² When John Aitken's son contacts them, they have completed over 50 mausoleums at Woodlawn.³ They design the mausoleum and note in their specifications that the mausoleum they completed for architect Charles P.H. Gilbert (constructed in 1913 for his wife) in the Hickory Knoll plot is to be used as a basis for material quality.⁴

The Aitken mausoleum is a 1,928 sq ft. private family lot located within the Chestnut Hill plot in Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx, NY. This Classical style building is situated on a slight incline with the front facade oriented north-west. The front façade includes four smooth 8'6" doric columns with an egg-and-dart enriched echinus on the capital (see images 15, 16). The capital supports a simple entablature including an architrave, unornamented frieze, and cornice.⁵ The interior contains ten catacombs (five on each side) and a stained glass window.

No formal landscape designs were found in the Avery library archives however, per an image taken shortly after the mausoleum was completed, at least one tree was present on the lot in 1921. As of September 2018 there is a large tree, measuring 46" DHB on the lot, possibly the same chestnut tree that was present in 1921. The lot is currently owned by Thomas M. Aitken, the great-grandson of John W. Aitken (b.1850).

¹ Harrison Granite Co., *Specifications for the mausoleum to be erected on the lot of Aitken*, Sept 20, 1916

² *Memorials By Harrison*, 1931 Ad, <https://www.magazine-advertisements.com/harrison-granite-co-inc.html>

³ Avery Library, *WCA Major Monuments list*

⁴ Harrison Granite Co., 'Specifications for the mausoleum to be erected on the lot of Aitken', Sept 20, 1916

⁵ Summerson, John. *The Classical Language of Architecture*. Thames & Hudson, 1980, reprinted edition 2018

John W. Aitken (b.1850) was the son of Scottish immigrants Ann Anderson and John Aitken of Cumbernauld, Scotland.⁶ His father was a dry goods merchant specializing in millinery goods in 1835 and, after graduating from Princeton in 1869, John joined his father's business as a clerk.⁷ In 1877 he married Helen F. Powers, the daughter of a banker and they had two children: Helen and John W.(b.1879) As of the 1910 census, he was widowed and lived at 24 West 54th street (which he owned) with three servants. By the time he passes away, he is a former trustee of the Bowery Savings Bank and the Polyclinic Hospital; a Director of the Second National Bank; 5th Ave Safe Deposit Co. and Aitken, Son & Co.; a member of the Union League, Metropolitan, University, and Princeton Clubs; and has been listed in Herringshaw's American Blue Book of Biography.⁸ By 1912 Aitken, Son & Co. had grown to at least two stores and John had begun to invest in commercial and residential real estate.⁹ His daughter, Helen, received his property at 30 west 54th street and ultimately sold to John D. Rockefeller Jr.¹¹ Upon his death, John W. Aitken's estate was valued at \$2,219,075 [estimated \$53,112,159 in 2018] of which his son, John, receives half.¹² His son is also left in charge of his father's estate and, in addition to establishing a scholarship in honor of his father at Princeton, commissions the family mausoleum.¹³

Interestingly, when the mausoleum is completed, the bronze window grill in the original plan is eliminated and a stained glass window is included at the end of the vestibule.¹⁴ It does not contain the Aitken family crest but rather shows an image of a cross with a sword blade and the inscription 'In Cruce Salus' (salvation from the cross). This is very similar to the Taylor clan crest which derives from the French word 'tailler' or to cut cloth.¹⁵ Further research may show a direct connection between the Aitken and Taylor

⁶ 'Endowed Undergraduate Scholarships: John W. Aitken Scholarship,' giving.princeton.edu

⁷ New York Census: 1870; Ward 22 District 3, New York, New York; Roll: M593_1011; Page: 837B

⁸ Herringshaw, Thomas William. Herringshaw's American Blue Book of Biography, American Publisher's Association, 1914.

⁹ Real estate transaction 1 -- no title, *New - York Tribune*, Nov 25, 1905

¹⁰ 'Aitken & Son Lease Store,' *New - York Tribune*, Dec 01, 1912

¹¹ 'The Real Estate Field,' *New York Times*, Jan 24, 1917

¹² 'Aitken Estate Has Value of \$2,219,075,' *New York Times*, April 07, 1916

¹³ Obituary, *New - York Tribune*, Sept 4, 1915

¹⁴ Harrison Granite Co., Plans for Aitken Mausoleum, May, 1916

¹⁵ 'Clan Taylor,' www.scotclans.com/scottish-clans/clan-taylor/

families. It could also be that John Aitken's son wanted to select an image representative of the success the Aitken family had found in the clothing industry over the past three generations. John Aitken's son, John W. Aitken, his son's second wife, Harriet B. Aitken, his grandson, John W. Aitken, and granddaughter, Barbara Aitken Colby, are also buried in the mausoleum.¹⁶

Harrison's design specifications note that the mausoleum was to be constructed primarily of granite (exterior) with the top of the foundation laid with Atlas Portland cement mortar bed and Tennessee pink marble for the interior cladding.¹⁷ Two bronze rosettes were included in the design to anchor the ceiling cladding and intended to also serve as ventilators. Additional bronze features included: eight bronze grates (four on the right and four on the left side of the mausoleum), two bronze doors, two bronze rosette ornaments on each of the ten catacomb tablets, and a bronze grate on the back window. Bangor ribbon slate was used for the interior of the catacombs and inside closet door.

Observations of the interior show a white, grey, and light pink polished marble with some veins and swirling, matching the typical aesthetic characteristics of pink Tennessee marble. Likewise, the features indicated as bronze on the original plan's exterior appear to have a green patina with no visible organic growth immediately beneath these features. While formal testing is required to confirm the material, these reactions are consistent with copper oxidation and its antimicrobial qualities.¹⁸ Similarly, the exterior shows grey and white flecks. Given granite's low rate of absorption, durability, higher compression strength, and lower cost made it a popular material for mausoleums in the early 20th century and is likely the material used for the exterior.¹⁹

¹⁶ Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission; Pennsylvania, USA; Certificate Number Range: 027501-030500

¹⁷ Harrison Granite Co., 'Specifications for the mausoleum to be erected on the lot of Aitken', Sept 20, 1916

¹⁸ Grass, Gregor, Christopher Rensing, and Marc Solioz. "Metallic Copper as an Antimicrobial Surface." *Applied and Environmental Microbiology* 77.5 (2011): 1541-1547. *PMC*. Web. 28 Sept. 2018

¹⁹ Trebay, Guy. 'For a Price, Final Resting Places That Even Tut Could Appreciate,' 4/17/06, nytimes.com/2006/04/17/us/17mausoleum

While overall there appears to be minimal damage to the material cladding, two conditions were noted of concern on the site: organic growth and the presence of moisture (see images 8-14). Organic growth appears to be on all exterior facades with a lower concentration on the right facade. The columns in particular have flattened, leaf-like green, yellow, and orange growth that could possibly be lichen. The growth and moisture is likely due to the building being nearly completely shaded by nearby trees. Only the right facade, which faces southwest and receives the most sunlight, shows minimal growth. A similar issue was acknowledged in 1944 when John Aitken's son wrote Woodlawn requesting that the mausoleum be cleaned.²⁰ A note from Woodlawn indicates that a chestnut tree in front of the mausoleum is likely the cause.

Observing the interior after rain shows that moisture is penetrating the building, possibly through the roof or through the copper vents. Access to the roof may provide insight into whether this is due to cracks in the mortar or other possible ways for water to infiltrate. Water marks on the floor line up with the two rosettes on the ceiling and condensation can be seen on the catacomb tablets. The marble ceiling cladding shows some discoloration and possible deterioration but requires closer analysis along with assessment of the ventilation and drainage noted on the original plans.

²⁰ Unknown, Woodlawn. Note regarding John Aitken's call to clean mausoleum. 1944

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- Unknown, Woodlawn. Note regarding John Aitken's call to clean mausoleum. 1944

Exterior Elevations and Overall Views



Image 1: front facade



Image 2: rear facade



Image 3: left facade



Image 4: right facade



Image 5: View from southeast corner



Image 6: View front front of lot



Image 7: View from Paterno lot

Materials: Images 8-14



Image 8: grate on exterior



Image 9: growth on column base



Image 10: close-up of growth



Image 11: ceiling cladding



Image 12: condensation on interior



Image 13: interior floor

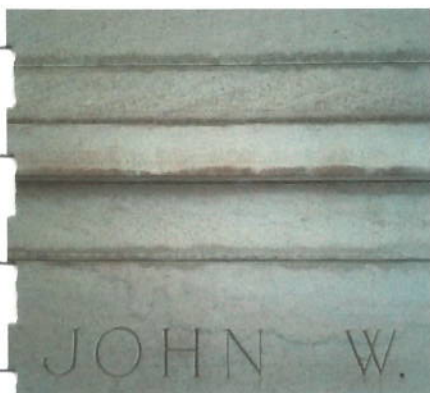


Image 14: condensation

Location



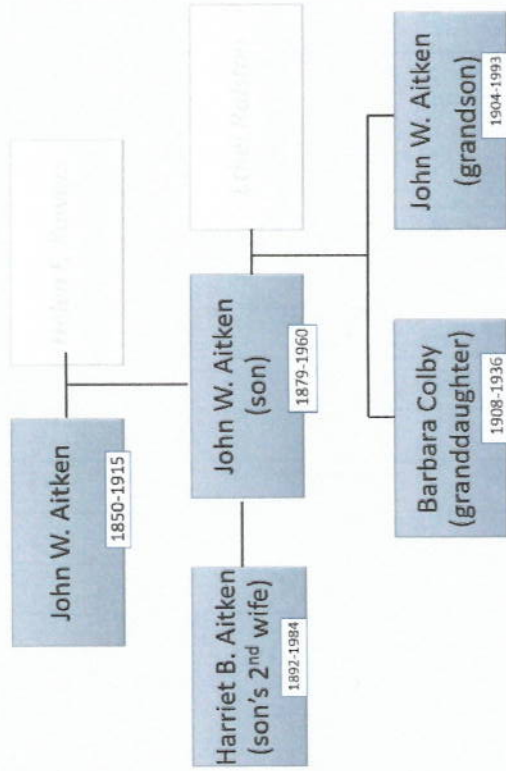
Designed by Harrison Granite Co. in 1916.
Site selected by John W. Aitken (son).



Image 15, 16: location



Aitken Family



Drawings:

1. Site Plan
2. Front Elevation
3. Back Elevation
4. Right Elevation
5. Left Elevation
6. Section
7. Detail

