

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY HISTORIC PRESERVATION STUDIO 1-FALL, 2023

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Wheeler Mausoleum: Documentation and Research



Figure 1: The main façade, photo by author

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Woodlawn Cemetery: The Wheeler Mausoleum

The Woodlawn Cemetery was first established in 1863 and served as a resting cemetery for several significant figures across the nation, including businessmen, artists, and politicians etc (Warren 13)¹. Initially planned and designed by famous architects, the Woodlawn Cemetery was recognized as a National Historic Landmark with diverse monuments and landscapes that record New York City's past. The Wheeler Mausoleum stands out as a significant architectural work in Woodlawn Cemetery's Chestnut field in New York City, with its imposing white classical façade. The Wheeler Mausoleum is a granite architectural monument proposed by Celia Roberts Wheeler, which is dedicated to her husband, Thomas Henry Wheeler, and her family.

Thomas Henry Wheeler was born in Ontario County, Ohio, on July 3, 1844. Wheeler was orphaned at a young age. When he turned 16, he decided to enlist with the New York infantry in the Civil War and was injured and captured in the Battle of Bull Run. After the exchange of the captives, he continued fighting in a few battles during the war. The battles and travels during the Civil War have brought him to various places including Pennsylvania, where oil fields experienced a boom at Pithole City. Mr. Wheeler started to develop his own business that he sold lumber to the initial 15,000 settlers who were desperate to gain their fortune in the oil business. It was the oil business that introduced Mr. Wheeler to the founder of Standard Oil Company, John D.

1. Charles Warren, "Sylvan Cemetery: Architecture, art & landscape at Woodlawn," 2014

Rockefeller, and Wheeler soon developed his career in the oil business and gradually took a position in the coopeage department at Cleveland in 1873. One year before his service in the Standard Oil company, Wheeler married his wife, Celia Roberts Wheeler, who was already “an accomplished musician, excelling as an organist” (*The New York Herald*, 1872)¹, on her twenty-first birthday. After seven years of their marriage, Wheeler was promoted to manager and transferred to Pittsburgh, and he finally relocated his family to New York and served as a member of the old coopeage company in 1884. From 1887 to 1894, Mr. Wheeler served as the president of a Standard Oil subsidiary, and from 1894 to 1913 he became the purchasing agent for the Standard Oil company. Thomas Wheeler finally retired from the business on July 3, 1913, on his sixty-ninth birthday. In addition to a prosperous career, Thomas Wheeler was an avid participant in various social pursuits. He was the owner of a luxury yacht named the Empress and engaged actively with several prestigious organizations, holding memberships with the Thousand Islands Yacht Club, the New York Yacht Club, and the Union League Club. Furthermore, he distinguished himself as the president of the Twenty-third Regiment Association (“T.H. Wheeler Dies”, 1926)².

Thomas Wheeler's prosperity in the oil industry amassed him considerable wealth, which enabled him to acquire a residence at 214 West 72nd Street from Jacob Henry for \$62,500 on July 20, 1898. The house was in the Queen Anne style a total of four stories, constructed with a limestone facade trimmed in contrasting brown stone. Since then, the Wheeler couple and their three daughters who are Mary Louise, Leita, Stella, and one son Emmett, have lived in this house. It was also in this house where the couple's fiftieth



Figure 2, 214 West 72nd Street, Miller, Tom. “Dorothy Parker's Childhood Home - 214 West 72nd Street.”

1. “Mrs. T. H. Wheeler Dies In Summer Home, at 79,” 1929
2. “Mrs T.H. Wheeler Die At Summer Home,” 1929

wedding anniversary was held, as described by *The New York Herald*, “Some of those present had crossed the continent for the occasion, others coming from distant cities” (13)¹. The upper-class golden wedding anniversary invited an orchestra to play during the dinner and the guests brought a tremendous amount of treasure as gifts, as the newspaper recorded, “Many gifts had been sent by relatives and friends, including a table service of gold and other ornaments” (14)¹. Besides the house at 214 West 72nd, the family also owned a summer villa called War-Winnet on Win-Net Island in the Thousand Islands district, and it was also in this home where Thomas Henry Wheeler died because of his heart disease, after suffering several days of serious illness, on September 15th, 1926. During Thomas Wheeler’s last few days, his son, Emmett Wheeler accompanied him even after a traffic accident delay at Cortland that he broke two ribs and experienced several lacerations on his head (“Funeral Services Held”, 1926)². The body was removed to Clayton the next day on Thomas Wheeler’s yacht, the Empress, and then delivered to New York on a central train. Immediately, Celia Wheeler decided to keep the body in the Woodlawn Cemetery until her proposed design for the mausoleum was finished.

In order to start the construction of Wheeler Mausoleum, Celia Wheeler had purchased lot 112 located in the Chesnut plot. The site was located beside Park Avenue, with a length of 70.83

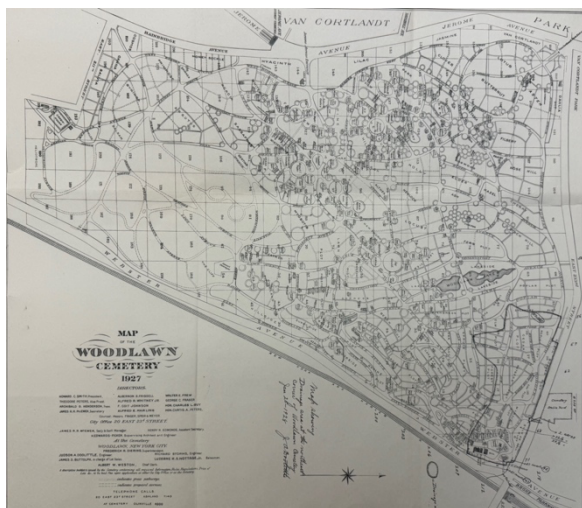


Figure 3, 1927 Woodlawn Map, Avery Drawings and Archives Collection

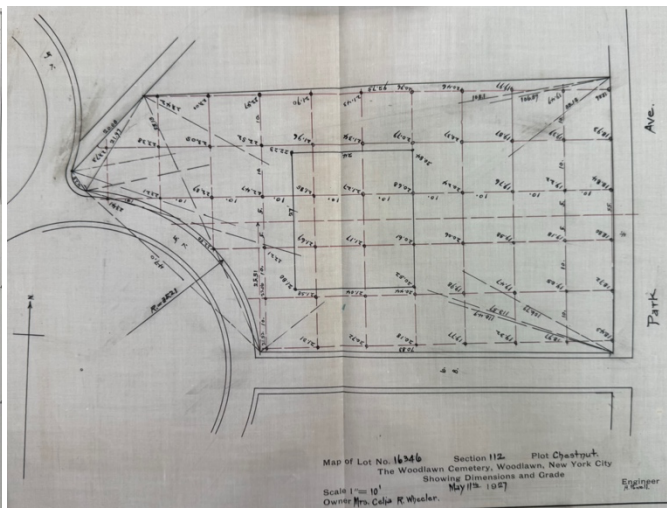


Figure 4, Wheeler Cemetery Lot map, Avery Drawings and Archives Collection

1. “Mrs. T. H. Wheeler Dies In Summer Home, at 79,” 1929
2. “Funeral Services Held For Thomas H. Wheeler,” 1926

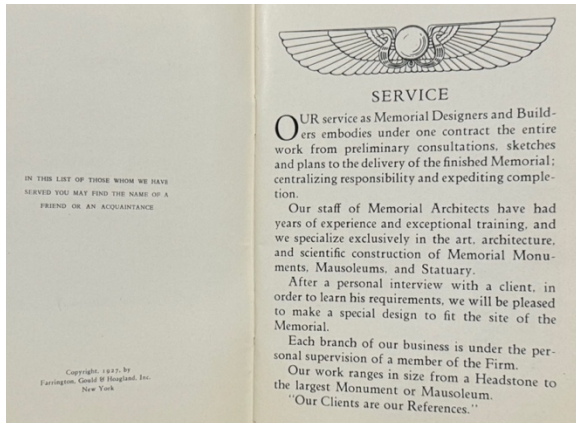


Figure 5, Trade Catalog, Avery Classics Collection

vacant lots according to the Woodlawn Cemetery map of 1927. After the purchase of lot, Celia Roberts Wheeler went the Farrington, Gould & Hoagland company for the design and construction for the mausoleum. Farrington, Gould & Hoagland, located at 258 Broadway, was a company dedicated to building memorials, mausoleums and sculpture and it was a famous in the 1920s. The company aimed to provide a thorough service of mausoleum design, including the process of consulting, sketching and planning the final memorial (Farrington Gould & Hoagland, Inc, 1927)¹. In order to better memorize the dead husband, Celia Wheeler came to Farrington, Gould & Hoagland for its precise control of materials and rigid regulation toward construction process. According to the work documentation by Farrington, Gould & Hoagland company, all the materials used in the Wheeler was to be in the best quality as well as workmanship, and the entire construction progress would be inspected by the owner, Celia Roberts Wheeler.

feet and a width of 55 feet and the total area is 4590 square feet. The placement of the mausoleum would be in the geometric center of the lot. By the time of 1927, the Wheeler Musoleum lot had adjacent musoleums that are occupied by Sledenburg and Hotchkiss, but there are still nine

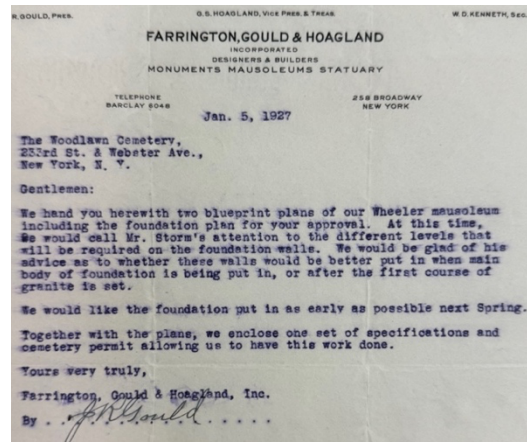


Figure 6, Letter, Avery Drawings and Archives Collection

The majority of the design was finished on January 5th, 1927, as Farrington, Gould & Hoagland company wrote to the Woodlawn Cemetery to enclose the initial set of specifications, according to cemetery specialist's advice on the foundation plan. According to the letter, the

1. Farrington Gould and Hoagland, Incorporated, 1927

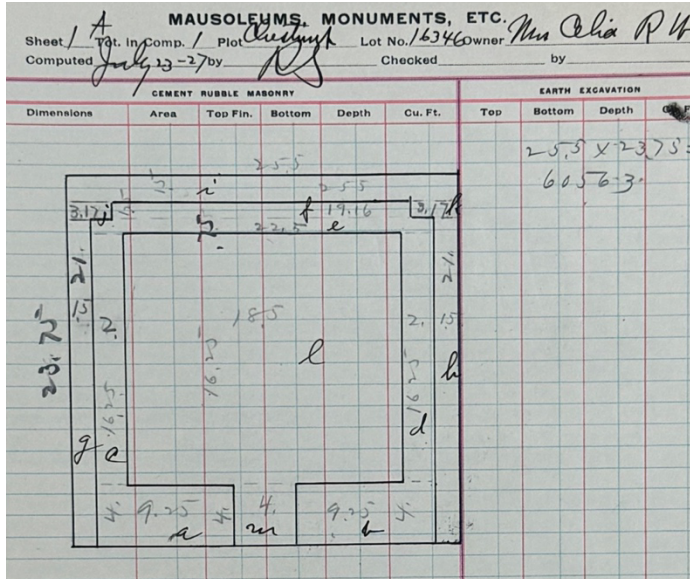


Figure 7, Foundation Plan, Avery Drawings and Archives Collection

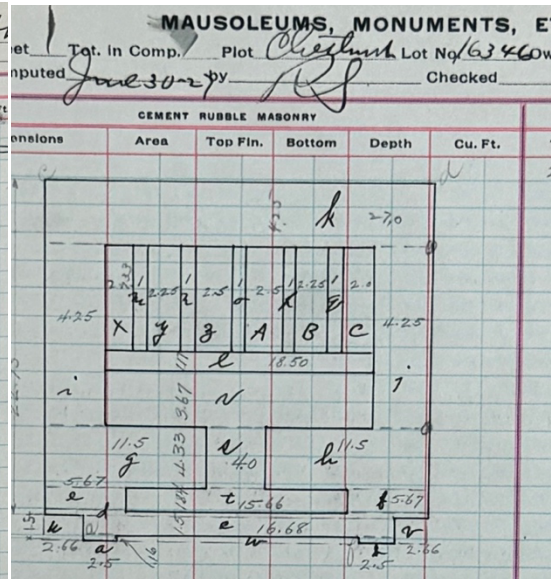


Figure 8, Catacombs Plan, Avery Drawings and Archives Collection

foundation is proposed to be installed by the spring of 1927 (Avery Drawings and Archives Collection)¹. Worth noticing, the excavation and the foundation work of the mausoleum strictly followed the rules of the Woodlawn Cemetery that Farrington, and Gould & Hoagland company had consulted with the cemetery throughout the constructions process. The foundation of the mausoleum is 25.5 feet in length and 23.75 feet in width, and the major monument's dimension are 22 feet in length and 16.25 feet in width. Inside the foundation, there are six coffins space: the center two coffins have a length of 2 feet 6 inches, the middle two coffins have a length of 2 feet.

As one transitions from the foundation to the structure itself, the Wheeler Mausoleum impresses visitors with its grand scale and the clean, geometric lines of its façade. Anchored by four sturdy Doric columns on both the front and rear, the mausoleum's façade features a frieze with a recurring motif of three vertical stripes and spheres. The entrance door is gracefully adorned with geometric patterns, crowned by a lion's head at the center that seems to both guard and welcome visiting families. Despite its appearance as a square box, the front and rear façades extend two feet longer than the sides, subtly altering its proportions. Most importantly, the façade has been well-

1. Major Monuments, Woodlawn Cemetery Records, 1863-1999,



Figure 9, Mausoleum Exterior Photo, photo by author

preserved, bearing only minor signs of gypsum deterioration at the top and some biological growth at the lower sides. The simplicity and solemnity of the monument command attention as one walk by, leaving an impression of serene dignity. In

terms of material choice, the document from the Farrington, Gould & Hoagland company also indicates their strict selection and finishes of the material. In this case, all exterior structures are to be constructed of Light Barre Granite and the exposed surface would be hammered carefully. On the other hand, the stones are to be cut with full beds and joints while the cut surfaces are sufficiently washed or pitched to drain. The setting utilized Atlas Portland and White Atlas Cement in the proportion of three to one. There are eight vent openings on the granite façade and four on the ceiling that is covered with bronze screens and grilles. Mrs. Wheeler chose her preferred color for the Pink Tennessee marble for the interior surface, and the slate is set to be Pennsylvania



Ribbon Slate (Avery Drawings and Archives Collection)¹.

Furthermore, there are seven people in the catacombs in total, with Thomas Henry Wheeler in the center-left sarcophagus, and Celia Roberts Wheeler in the center-right sarcophagus. During Mrs. Wheeler’s lifetime, she devoted much of her time to charity in Manhattan society, as she took care of the Jennie Clarkson Home for destitute children. The name of Celia Roberts Wheeler also appeared in a benefit concert’s patronesses list held at Waldorf-Astoria in January 1905, accompanied by the prestigious Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Helen Miller Gould, and Mrs. Harry J. Luce. On the left side of the catacombs, the names from bottom to top are Emmert Wheeler, who was the couple’s son, and William Thompson Dewart. JR. On the right side of the catacombs, the names from bottom to top are Henry G. Pearce, William Thompson Dewart, and Mary Wheeler Dewart, who is the couple’s daughter. Mary Louise married William Thompson Dewart, who was the vice president of the Frank A. Munsey Company, in April 1908. The company was famous for its publication of periodicals like *Sun’s Magazine* and newspapers like *New York Daily News*. On the other hand, Mrs. William Thompson Dewart was known for her aristocratic lifestyle as described by the *New York Times*, “Miss Wheeler is a musician, an equestrienne and an accomplished linguist” (1929)¹. The last family member, Leita Wheeler Pearce, was placed on the shelf. Leita married Lieutenant Charles Preston Nelson of the United States Navy on April 25, 1905, and the wedding was striking for the universal navy uniforms. However, on December 15, 1919, Leita divorced her famous husband and married Henry George Pearce, who was a Philadelphia steel executive, two months later. Until

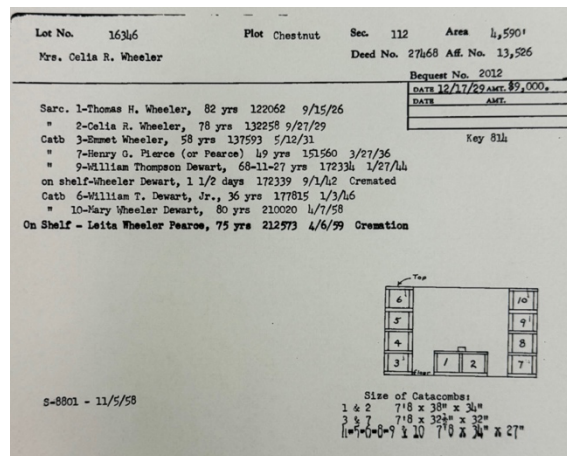


Figure 10, Entrance, photo by author

Figure 11, Stairs, photo by author

Figure 12, Ceiling, photo by author

Figure 13, Catacombs Layout, Avery Drawings and Archives Collection

1. Major Monuments, Woodlawn Cemetery Records, 1863-1999,

1. “Mrs. T. H. Wheeler Dies In Summer Home, at 79,” 1929

today, the catacombs remain remarkably well-preserved, adorned with the exquisite pink Tennessee Marble that graces their walls, forever imprinting their names on this enduring work of art.

To sum up, the Wheeler Mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery stands as a testament to the remarkable life of Thomas Henry Wheeler and his family. Mrs. Celia Roberts Wheeler envisioned and designed the mausoleum to reflect the family's prominence and affluence. As time marches on, the Wheeler Mausoleum continues to stand with dignity that reveals the Wheeler family's significant impact on New York social and industrial landscape.

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