



Field Documentation and Formal Analysis:
Woodlawn Durant Mausoleum

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Mr. William Crapo Durant chose in the spring of 1925 to have his mausoleum built in Woodlawn cemetery in a plot named for the myositis, the forget-me-not. Mr. Durant, a very accomplished man, certainly would wish to have his life remembered. (FIG. 1) Born in Boston in 1861, his family moved to Flint, Michigan where in 1886 with a friend, Mr. Josiah Dort, he founded the Durant-Dort Carriage Co., buying the rights to and manufacturing various carriage models. That company thrived, and by the turn of the century Durant was a millionaire looking for a new project to take on. He found it in the small, struggling Buick Motor Company.¹ Taking over Buick in 1904, he was soon pushing it towards manufacturing success, and in 1908 moved to combine it with other small automobile companies to make a larger firm, named General Motors (GM). In the stock market depression of 1910 lost Durant control of the General Motors firm. His bold business personality served well in an entrepreneur, but poorly as a president of a large corporation during a slump. Getting involved with Chevrolet, he quietly bought enough GM stock to regain control around 1913. Another depression though would oust him yet again in the 1920's, and cause him to declare bankruptcy. By now Durant was in his 60's and could certainly have rested comfortably on his laurels, but this was certainly not his style, and he founded Durant Motors only stopping work when yet another stock market crash killed demand. He ended his days in New York with his second wife, and was laid to rest in Woodlawn, March of 1947.²

The mausoleum has a square form with a pediment roof. (FIG.2) It sits neatly on a raised, rectangular pedestal. The roof, walls, base, and all exterior elements are made of the same material, a fine granite from Barre, Vermont.³ The roof is made of three large slabs of stone, with the central piece overlapping the two sides. A slight slope encourages water runoff. The walls of the mausoleum are slightly battered, which along with the pediment lend it an air of great mass, and monumentality. The plinth extends on the front into a short flight of 3 steps allowing access to the level of the crypt. There is a central massing centered on the recessed doorway in line with the steps, slightly narrower than the width of the stairs.

The visitor to the mausoleum is led in gradually through the progression of both the stairs and the stepped entranceway. The front facade of the mausoleum is plain, the eye drawn down to the dark of the doorway. The door is topped by a carved lintel that is white against the shadows of the recessed doorway. Having a blank face to the mausoleum creates this interplay between light and dark which adds a strong dynamism to the design of an otherwise plain structure.

¹ Pelfrey, William (2006). *Billy, Alfred, and General Motors: the story of two unique men, a legendary company, and a remarkable time in American history*. pp. 83–85; 96; 106. ISBN 978-0-8144-0869-8.

Gustin, Lawrence R. "The Spark That Created GM: Billy Durant Takes Control of Buick." *The Spark That Created GM: Billy Durant Takes Control of Buick*. GM Heritage Center, 2006. Web. 15 Oct. 2012.
<http://history.gmheritagecenter.com/wiki/index.php/The_spark_that_created_GM:_Billy_Durant_takes_control_of_Buick>.

² "Auto Executives at Durant Rites." *New York Times* (1923-Current file): 22. Mar 21 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2008) with Index (1851-1993). Web. 14 Oct. 2012 .

³ Avery Archive, Woodlawn Archive, Durant Folder

There are two narrow, metal doors leading into the mausoleum. Both are intended to open, but these days only one does. With both open, a visitor would be able to enter walking straightforward, towards the back of the space. On either side of a comfortably open space in the middle are arranged 8 crypts, stacked four high. The floor panel, taking up nearly the whole of the floor space is removable with large metal screws in the corners. Three more internment spaces are under the floor. Each of the crypts is exactly the same, the only variations are caused by the effects of water damage over time. (FIG. 3) The interior of the mausoleum is entirely marble, with small metal accents. The carving on the crypts stands out though not particularly deep or painted.

In the records file for the mausoleum, there is a site plan with a proposed landscape plan laid out.⁴ (FIG. 4) There were two paths set by the Woodlawn planners; these form the left and front boundaries of the plot. While only traces remain, the plans are enough to give a clear sense of the approach to the mausoleum that the designer intended. With the plants grown in, there would have been three potential approaches, each of these framed by groupings of plants set against the green of the grass and the white of the mausoleum. There were four planting groups planned, it is unclear which were completed, the only plants remaining are one lone conical pine to the left hand-side, and some low bushes by the steps of the mausoleum. Planned were symmetrical pines at the end of the steps, and two masses of flowering trees and bushes at the two back corners of the structure. The writing on the plans is illegible, so the only two plants I could identify for certain were the pines at the front, and a dogwood tree as one of the rear trees. When these rear plantings grew in, the mausoleum would appear to the visitor as framed by, and rising out of the colorful backdrop, making the white of the mausoleum appear that much more stark and solemn. With this green backdrop the plainness of the front would be emphasized, and the entrance brought that much more to the visitor's attention.

In the 1929 catalog, listing Mr. Durant as a familiar name of Society and Commerce, the Presbrey-Leland Studios lay out a guide to selecting a memorial. They divide the types of mausoleum and memorial available. These tended to follow a general form, to be altered as the buyer wished. The form that the Durant mausoleum follows is the "Square Form-Columnar and Non-Columnar- And Stepped Roof"⁵ (FIG. 5). Done without columns Durant's mausoleum also lacks a stepped roof, simple evidence of the customization that did occur within the general categories of structures.

The structure was designed by the Tayntor-Davis division of Presbrey Leland Studios, formerly the C.E. Tayntor Granite Co., and constructed by a Presbrey-Leland crew. Mr. Durant's mausoleum was the only mausoleum that the Tayntor Granite Company designed in Woodlawn cemetery in 1925. According to the cemetery records, the only one from around 1919 to the early 1950's, at least part of this time they continued as a division of the Presbrey-Leland firm. Looking at two examples of work that the company did, the Ansinck and Ziegler mausoleums, one can see strongly classical designs. The two mausoleums look like Greek temples in miniature. Compared to these, the Durant mausoleum has only classical elements. The mausoleum is small, interesting for a man of stature like Mr. Durant, listed among the Presbrey-Leland "Celebrities Among Presbrey-Leland Patrons: Society and Commerce". Certainly it

⁴ Avery Archive, Woodlawn Archive, Durant Folder

⁵ Avery Archive, Woodlawn Archive, Durant Folder

seems reasonable or even logical that the founder of one of the Big Three automobile firms would have a more ornate mausoleum.

Buried in the mausoleum are Mr. William Crapo Durant, and his second wife Mrs. Catherine Lederer Durant, who are in the center two crypts to the left of the door as you enter. On the window ledge is an urn containing Mrs. Margery Durant Green, daughter of Mr. Durant and his first wife. Across the aisle, in the second crypt from the ceiling, is Mrs. Rebecca Crapo Durant, Mr. Durant's mother. Below her are Mr. Aristo Scrobogna and his wife Mrs. Matilde Sorgo Scrobogna. Mr. Scrobogna was Mr. Durant's private secretary. The correspondence file in the archives holds a letter from Mrs. Durant to the cemetery, stating that she is giving the Scrobognas permission to be buried in the mausoleum.⁶ Mr. Durant had two children with his first wife, a son and daughter, his daughter had three children. While there are photos of the family together, it does not appear that they were particularly close. In her letter, Mrs. Durant remarked that she had no extended family, and based on this and her and her husband's relationship with Mr. and Mrs. Scrobogna, she wished their inclusion in the mausoleum. There was a letter from a Mr. Paul Durant, of Yonkers, NY in 1968, but it is unclear if he is a relative. The only relative that was traceable was Mr. Alexander Sanger, who maintains a website on Margery Durant.

There is a large amount of water damage inside, coming down both on the walls, as well as on the inside faces of the crypts. A lot of damage is concentrated in the upper right corner, this is also seen on the outside of the building up underneath the cornice. A hypothesis is that one of the metal flashings over the roof joins has failed, letting water in. Once water has gotten in, the construction of the mausoleum is such that it has a hard time escaping. This is what causes the large amount of biological growth present inside the structure. In this case, the well-fit door acts against the condition of the structure, trapping more moisture inside.

While it doesn't appear that the mausoleum is in immediate danger, it does need more upkeep than it has gotten. Mr. Durant was a notable man, leading an interesting life that deserves to be remembered. It would be sad to lose his resting place, the stone falling to water and the forgetfulness of time.

⁶ Avery Archive, Woodlawn Archive, Durant Folder

Source Citation: Year: 1910; Census Place: *Flint Ward 2, Genesee, Michigan*; Roll: T624_642; Page: 88; Enumeration District: 0013; Image: 931; FHL microfilm: 1374655.

Source Citation: Year: 1900; Census Place: *Flint Ward 1, Genesee, Michigan*; Roll: 710; Page: 12A; Enumeration District: 10; FHL microfilm: 1240710.

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FIG. 1

<http://history.gmheritagecenter.com/wiki/index.php/File:163946.jpg>



FIG. 2



FIG. 3

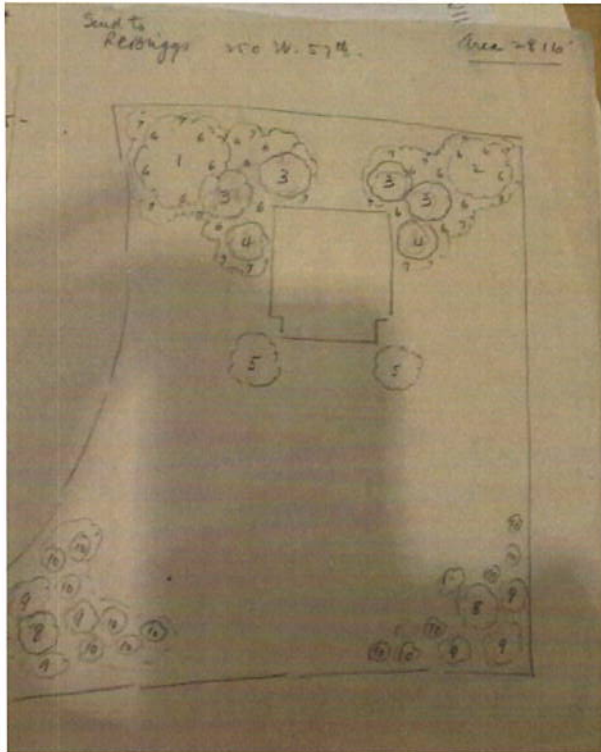


FIG. 4

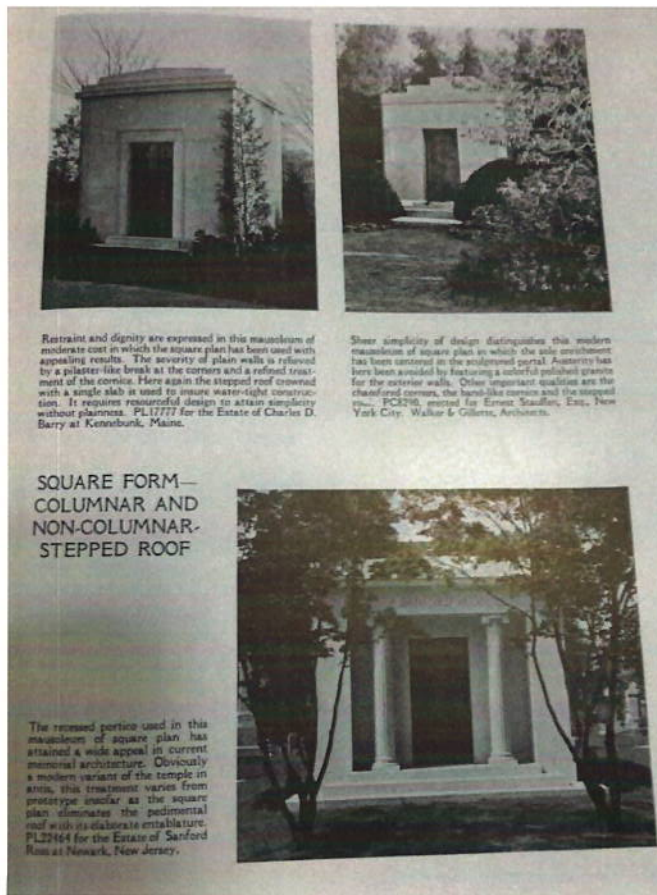


FIG. 5