

Field Documentation and Formal Analysis: Johnson Mausoleum

The mausoleum of Dr. Samuel King Johnson and family sits nestled under a canopy of trees of varying species and size, on the west side of Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, New York, just south of the entrance gates Woolworth Memorial Chapel. Although located near many of the buildings that facilitate the management and operation of the cemetery, the Johnson mausoleum sits away from both primary and secondary paths, and is accessed only through small, tertiary walking paths. The mausoleum, which sits centred on three lots, can be viewed frontally from Linden Avenue, the closest road (secondary path); however, there is no path inviting a visitor to actually approach the building, and a small tree obstructs the main facade, leading to only a partial view (**fig. 1**). Thus, visitors are required to find and take one of two paths that approach the building from either side. Even with the guided approach from either side the visitor is not able to fully contextualize or understand the building, as the whole of it is never all at once in sight. The approach to the mausoleum is dictated by an exact formal procession (Greek) that is imbued with the beauty and irregular qualities of the picturesque: the paths take the visitor through a series of curves and turns, around other mausoleums and trees, all of which continually block some part of a full view of the building (**fig. 2**). It is not until the visitor is directly in front of the mausoleum that the landscape opens up, and a full view of the mausoleum finally becomes available (**fig. 3**).

The Johnson Mausoleum, although quite small compared to many mausoleums at Woodlawn Cemetery, announces its presence clearly and appears much larger than it actually is,

due in part to the structural use of rusticated granite blocks and slabs, and also because of the monumental plan chosen for the building (fig. 3, fig. 4). While it does not at first appear similar to a Greek temple, viewing this building in plan reveals that it is in fact very much akin to a Greek distyle temple; the similarity is also experienced moving through the various space divisions of the mausoleum (fig. 5). The first space division in which this is experienced is in the transition from outdoor to semi-outdoor space, wherein the visitor is guided down a long concrete path to ascend three stairs, all the width of the mausoleum, in order that they arrive to the semi-outdoor space: a massive portico held up by two thick, square columns. From the semi-outdoor space, the pronaos, the visitor is about to enter what, in a Greek temple, would be the cella.

The divide between the semi-outdoor and indoor space is more clearly defined than the previous transition between the outdoor and semi-outdoor space, thanks to the traditional division of a door and masonry walls. Before entering the cella space the visitor is confronted with a beautifully detailed bronze door (fig. 6). Although the bronze door features some classical details (lion's head doorknockers and egg-and-dart patterns as trim), it is predominately decorated with details of a more organic nature: vines and floral motifs make up the majority of the bronze-work while a curvilinear lintel give the door frame added decoration. The mix of picturesque materials and motifs and the Greek plan of the mausoleum repeats the same marriage of styles as those found in the approach to the mausoleum.

Through the threshold the visitor first sees a brightly coloured stained glass window decorated with a Christian motif and shaped with the same arches as the doorframe (fig. 7). The small space is made to feel clean and spacious by the use of white marble on the crypts, walls, and ceilings, and simple mouldings offer the only decoration other than the stained glass inside

the mausoleum (fig. 8). While the mausoleum is certainly Greek in plan, movement through the space divisions reveals a deliberate mixing of style—from the curving stairs and doorframe to the organically patterned bronze-work with Greek motifs—all of which reflect the Johnson family’s desires at the time they commissioned the building of their mausoleum.

The first documentation for the Johnson Mausoleum, commissioned by Dr. Samuel Johnson and his wife Mary Johnson, dates to June 1911. A letter between Queens architect Benisch Bros. Monumental Works and Woodlawn Cemetery details the materials, construction methods, and plans of the mausoleum. While the decision to build at this time is unknown, it may be due to a recent death of one of the Johnson’s children, David Samuel Johnson, who had died earlier that year at age 30, and for whom the stained-glass window inside displays a commemorative message. It reads: “In Loving Memory of David.” Eight crypts exist in the mausoleum, three of which belong to the Johnson children, Grace, David, and William, two of which are Samuel’s parents, Mary and David Richard, and the last belonging to Dr. Samuel Johnson. Curiously his wife does not rest in the mausoleum with the family.

Little is known about the lives of the Johnson family, except for Dr. Samuel Johnson, who is celebrated for his contribution to “...the first mass expression in American history of the belief that nonhuman beings are integral not just to the quality of this life, but to the “afterlife” that follows.”¹ In short, Samuel Johnson, the first registered veterinarian in both New York State and City, was a pioneer in animal welfare and for the development of the human/animal relationship that is now a normal part of domestic life for many. He did this through both his contribution in the co-founding of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

¹ “Hartsdale Pet Cemetery,” National Register Nomination, Section 8, 2012.

(ASPCA) and more notably through the creation of the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery in Hartsdale, New York (fig 9).²

In 1896, after hearing the concern of a patient who recently lost her dog and was troubled by the inability to give it a proper burial (a recent change in New York City law banned animal burials within its limits),³ Dr. Johnson offered her the opportunity to give the dog a final resting place at his apple orchard (and home) in Hartsdale (fig. 10, 11). As time passed he devoted more and more of his land to others wishing to give their pets a permanent resting place, and by 1914 Dr. Johnson had incorporated the Hartsdale Canine Cemetery ensuring the cemetery's future.⁴

Over 100 years later Samuel Johnson's contributions have not been forgotten. Year by year the number of animals buried at Hartsdale Cemetery continues to grow, and other pet cemeteries have been founded as a result of his compassionate act in 1896. Just this year the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery was awarded a place on the National Register of Historic Places, illustrating further Dr. Johnson's considerable contribution to the growth of human/animal relationships, and to American culture and enlightenment in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

² "Hartsdale Pet Cemetery and Crematory History."

³ "Hartsdale Pet Cemetery and Crematory History."

⁴ "Hartsdale Pet Cemetery and Crematory Home."

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Figure 1: Johnson Mausoleum as viewed frontally from Linden Avenue; photo by author

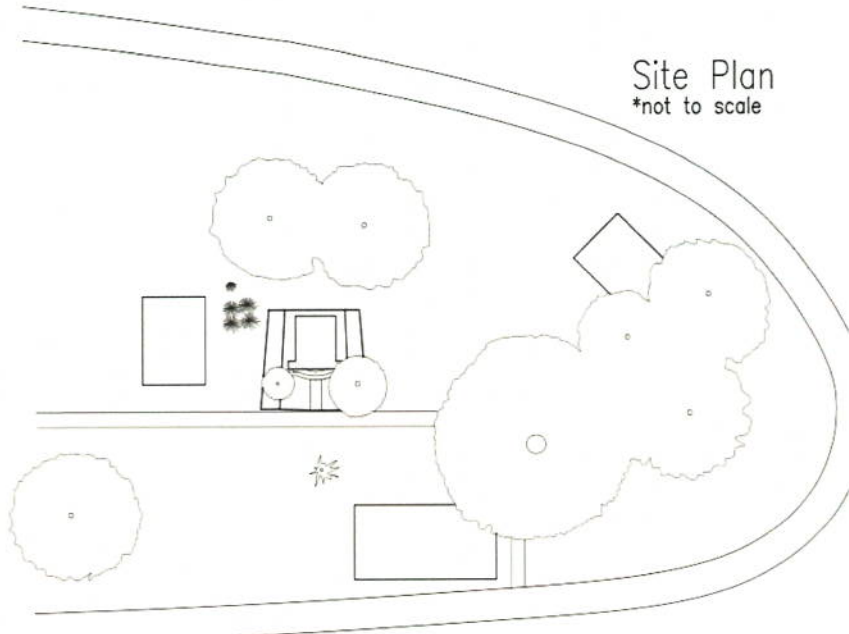


Figure 2: Site Plan



Figure 3: Johnson Mausoleum as viewed from tertiary walking path, upon arriving at building; photo by author

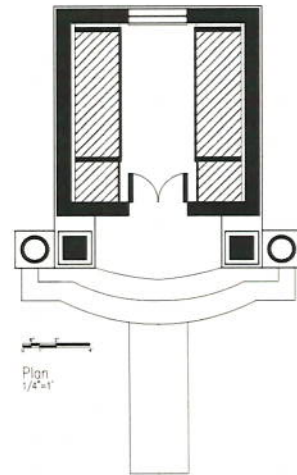


Figure 4: Johnson Mausoleum plan

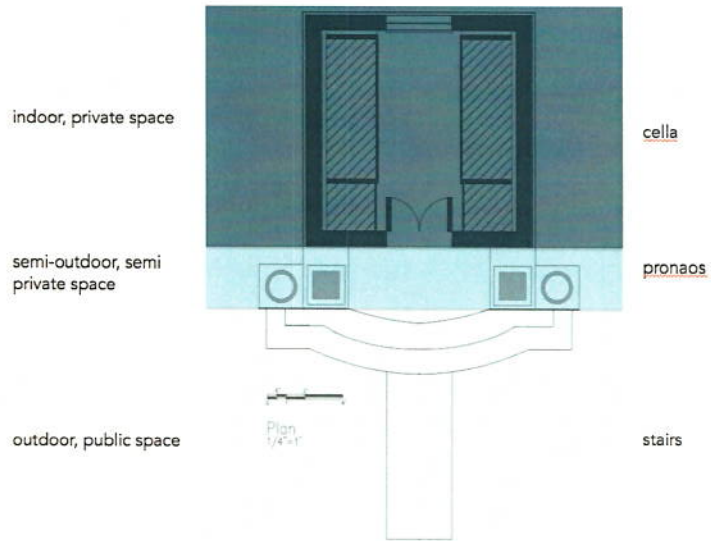


Figure 5: Johnson Mausoleum space divisions



Figure 6: Johnson Mausoleum bronze door; photo by author



Figure 7: Johnson Mausoleum stained glass; photo by author



Figure 8: Johnson Mausoleum interior white marble; photo by author

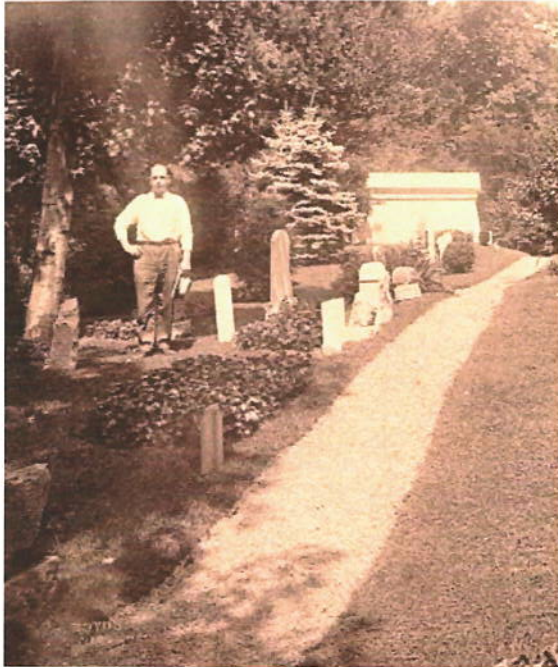


Figure 9: Samuel Johnson in 1922 at his home and pet cemetery, Hartsdale, NY; photo courtesy of Hartsdale Pet Cemetery and Crematory



Figure 10: Samuel & his wife Mary Johnson at their home and pet cemetery (1922); photo courtesy of Hartsdale Pet Cemetery and Crematory





Figure 10: Hartsdale Pet Cemetery 1920 and today; photos courtesy of Hartsdale Pet Cemetery and Crematory and Google Images