

**F. Ray Comstock Mausoleum**



**Biography**

F. Ray Comstock was born in Lynn, Massachusetts in 1880 and raised in Buffalo, New York. At fifteen, he moved to New York City. Starting out on Broadway as a ticket seller and then a treasurer, he soon began to climb the ranks in the theater industry, earning his fortune and name as an influential theater manager and producer of the time. In 1913, Comstock commissioned the building of the Princess Theater on West 39<sup>th</sup> Street. Together with Morris Gest, William Elliott and Elizabeth Marbury, Comstock produced a variety of shows at the Princess and other theaters from his less successful one-act thrillers in the Grand Guignol style to his pioneering form of the intimate musical comedy. After a lucrative and well-traveled career, featuring much importation and exportation of productions and performers throughout the United States and the world -including exchanges with London, Moscow and Tokyo- Comstock retired to Boston. He died of a heart attack on October 15, 1949 at age 69. Comstock had commissioned the building of his mausoleum in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx ten years before his death. Having no children and only marrying after the mausoleum was built, it makes sense that this mausoleum was built only for him as the sole occupant.

## Site Analysis, Plan, Materials

The F. Ray Comstock mausoleum was built by The Harrison Granite Company in 1938-1939. It is located on Wintergreen Avenue, occupying a small lot in the Acacia Plot, with an east-facing front. There is no grand lead-up or special path that leads up to the mausoleum. Rather, one just comes upon it off the road. The Comstock mausoleum is similar in scale and form to the surrounding mausoleums, the fronts of which follow the line of the road. In fact, the form of the F. Ray Comstock mausoleum is very similar to many other mausoleums at Woodlawn, with a door centered in front flanked by urns and a window centered at the back. In addition, it uses the same types of materials which are common to mausoleum construction, an exterior of gray Barre granite, a more decorative interior with ceiling and walls made of a more delicate Tennessee Pink marble and floor of a coarser-grained Pink Minnesota granite, and a cast bronze door. While the materials reflect the standard for this type of building, they are not used or placed unsystematically. On the other hand, the thought put into the visual appearance of the materials can be clearly seen from the way the marble panels on the walls are carefully book-matched and the veins are orientated to reflect the directionality of various parts of the interior. For example, the ceiling veins are oriented east-west, reflecting the orientation of the mausoleum, the wall panels have vertical veins, and diagonal veins frame either side of the window.

### Façade

Overall, the mausoleum's façade can be described as massive and dense. These qualities are achieved in a number of ways. The gray color, the use of large stone blocks with few joints, the battering of the walls on all sides, and the simplicity of the design through the incorporation of only a few main elements (pediment, door, steps) all serve to convey a sense of massiveness despite the mausoleum's small size, and density because of it. The façade is symmetrical and balanced with a low pediment. The entranceway is centered and shallow, approached by ascending a single step and framed by fluting and urns on each side.

### Interior Elements

The mausoleum has a minimal number of elements in its interior. The back wall contains a simple stained glass window, composed of colored squares in an arrangement of six columns and three rows. Set against the back wall is a single sarcophagus, which one approaches by ascending a step. The area between the step and the doorway has two benches on each side, reflecting a social space for visitation, presumably for Comstock's acquaintances or fans, more so than family members since he had no children and was not even married at the time of the mausoleum's construction. After his death, it appears that his wife did visit quite often, and following in her husband's footsteps, wrote a number of letters to the Cemetery concerning proper upkeep of the mausoleum as warranted under the special care fund for perpetual endowment. One particularly entertaining exchange involved a letter from Fannie Comstock in 1956, who upon finding a paper cup in the mausoleum, expressed her concern that "cleaners had sat down on the bench and eaten their lunch", which "naturally...up set [her] considerably."<sup>1</sup> The cemetery quickly replied that the paper cup was in fact a container for a chemical to keep insects out, stating, "We assure you that none of our employees are allowed to eat their lunch in the interior of a mausoleum."<sup>2</sup> It may

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<sup>1</sup> Fannie Comstock to Woodlawn Cemetery. Aug. 29, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> Woodlawn Cemetery to Fannie Comstock. Aug. 31, 1956.

also be interesting to note that F. Ray Comstock had also made provisions for the upkeep of his mother's and stepfather's graves in Woodlawn Cemetery's Butternut Plot.

### **Religious Symbolism**

Christian symbols can be found in the mausoleum, but these are subtle rather than ostentatious religious displays. Greek crosses make their appearance faintly in the center of the sarcophagus and in the small circular details at the bottom of the door. The door is a carving of grapevines and grape clusters. In Christianity, grape clusters are a representation of the blood of Christ poured out in wine and grapevines symbolize the relationship between God and man. Thus, grapes and grapevines serve as appropriate symbols to have on the door, marking the transition into the sacred interior of the mausoleum.

### **Style: Classical Modernism**

The mausoleum embodies the style of Classical Modernism that prevailed in the United States during the interwar period. This synthesizing style employs the basic formal composition and elements of Classicism but pares them down and reinterprets them into a more modern aesthetic that is less ornate and more austere.<sup>3</sup> The Comstock mausoleum exhibits classical elements such as symmetry and balance, a low pediment, plinth, and fluting at the entrance. Yet, these elements are simplified compared to traditional Classical structures: The pediment is not paired with a full entablature but with a simpler molding. The fluting consists of incisions in the stone instead of separate columns. The entranceway is much shallower (whether this counts as a "portico" can be debated), making the transition between outside and inside spaces much more immediate. The mausoleum sits on a much smaller plinth with only one step leading up to it. There are many examples of public buildings constructed during this decade, some built through the Depression's New Deal programs, that show this prevailing classical modern aesthetic, including the Bronx County Courthouse (1934), the Federal Office Building in Manhattan (1933-35), and smaller structures like the Mott Haven and West Farms Station post offices in the Bronx (1936).<sup>4</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Comstock Mausoleum reflects the prevailing architectural consciousness that shaped American buildings in the interwar years, being very much a "natural, inevitable, result of its place, its function, and material" to quote Hamlin Talbot's characterization of the period.<sup>5</sup> It exhibits the materials and design that fulfilled the function of "mausoleum." At the smallest scale, the Comstock mausoleum fits its immediate place by being of the same scale and form as surrounding mausoleums. It fits within Woodlawn cemetery as a whole because it looks similar to many mausoleums there. At a larger scale, the mausoleum finds its place in the wider architectural style of Classical modernism that prevailed in New York and the rest of the United States in the 1930s.

Indeed, the simplicity of design embodied by the Comstock mausoleum may be attributed to these wider trends. However, it is worth noting that the mausoleum design may be as much a product of its time and place as a product of its owner's personality. Mary Henderson, writing for the American National Biography, characterizes Comstock as "a level-headed but adventurous businessman" who was

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<sup>3</sup> Stern, *New York 1930*, p. 21-23; *New York 1960*, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> For further information on the classical modern features of these buildings, please see PowerPoint Slides 7 and 8.

<sup>5</sup> Stern, *New York 1930*, p. 21.

“less flamboyant than his partner Gest and most of the rest of the producing fraternity of his time.”<sup>6</sup> The mausoleum is certainly not flamboyant; it does not draw attention to itself but blends compatibly with its surroundings. In fact, correspondences with Woodlawn Cemetery reveal that Comstock had rejected proposals for a landscape plan which would have engulfed his mausoleum in a huge display of plants upon his small lot.<sup>7</sup> He also insisted on only having geraniums in his urns instead of a more variegated combination of flowers and plants.<sup>8</sup> These decisions, whether based on a disinclination for showiness or on level-headed cost calculations, or a combination of both, provide a greater understanding of the relationship between the mausoleum’s design and its owner’s personality. Thus, by situating the F. Ray Comstock mausoleum in both the wider architectural context and vis-à-vis Comstock’s personality, one can more easily make sense of its formal and functional design as a simple and dignified resting place for a key figure in early twentieth century American theater.

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<sup>6</sup> Henderson, *F. Ray Comstock*.

<sup>7</sup> Woodlawn Cemetery to F. Ray Comstock, Sep. 22, 1939; F. Ray Comstock to Woodlawn Cemetery, Sep 27, 1939.

<sup>8</sup> Woodlawn Cemetery to F. Ray Comstock, Jun. 7, 1948.

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