



FALL 2012 HISTORIC PRESERVATION STUDIO
PROBLEM III : FIELD DOCUMENTATION AND FORMAL ANALYSIS
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ZAW LIN MYAT OCTOBER 15, 2012

The George Bliss Mausoleum in the Woodlawn Cemetery is the final resting place of George T. Bliss, Jeanette D. Bliss and Susan D. Bliss. It was designed and built in 1901-02 by Heins and LaFarge Architects. There were design additions by Charles Mink and Eggers in 1920 and alterations by Delano and Aldrich architects in 1924. George T. Bliss was a prominent banker of the firm Morton, Bliss & Co. which his father, George Bliss, founded together with Levi P. Morton in 1863.ⁱ Morton was a representative of New York in Congress, the 22nd Vice-President of the United States under President Benjamin Harrison and the Governor of New York in 1895. Governor Morton attended George Bliss's funeral in 1896 at the time when George T. Bliss was in Paris engaged in business with Morton, Rose & Co., a European arm of Morton, Bliss & Co.ⁱⁱ George T. Bliss was left with a large fortune by his father who at the time of his death had wealth estimated at 15 million dollars which he shared with his mother and six other siblings.ⁱⁱⁱ He returned to the United States to work in Morton, Bliss & Co. Jeanette D. Bliss, the wife of George T. Bliss, was a daughter of Amos T. Dwight, a cotton merchant. She was also left a fortune of several estates by her father in Connecticut from which she had the income. Susan Dwight Bliss, their only daughter, and she never married. She was a founding member of the social service executive board of St Luke's Hospital. She was particularly concerned with the social and medical welfare of children and adults with psychiatric problems.

At the time of George T. Bliss's death in March 1901 at the age of 49, five years after his father's death, the family was living in a rented house at 860 Fifth Avenue.^{iv} George T. Bliss was prominent in the council of the Episcopal Church in which his father was previously a Treasurer.^v There might have been a connection between the Bliss family and Heins & LaFarge architects through Episcopal Church since the firm designed the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on 110th street and Amsterdam Ave. Mrs. Bliss and daughter later moved to the mansion at 9 East 68th Street that Mrs. Bliss commissioned Heins & LaFarge to design.

A few months later after Bliss's death, Mrs. Bliss chose Heins & LaFarge to design the mausoleum in Woodlawn Cemetery for her family of three as the drawings in the archive are dated September 1901. The deed for the circular plot at the corner of Chestnut Hill Ave and Pine Ave in Woodlawn was obtained in October, 1901.^{vi} Revision drawings were made by Heins & LaFarge on December 20, 1901.

Originally, red cedars were planted along the circular plot line behind the mausoleum as a background of greenery. The front façade is oriented towards the intersection of Chestnut Hill Avenue and Pine Avenue. The landscape that surrounds the mausoleum effectively directs the attention of the visitor towards the front façade as it covers up side and back façades.

The mausoleum design is symmetrical. It has an octagonal plan topped by an octagonal Guastavino vault and dome with a foliage top. The gabled entablatures on all four sides of the mausoleum are decorated with anthemion friezes and dentils. On each façade wall are intricately curved hanging stone garlands.

The building is elevated on the grass terrace bordered on each side by stone fences which creates an exterior domain. Ascending another flight of stairs from the grass terrace, one arrives inside the mausoleum through a large ornate bronze door. Entering the space through the door, a rectangular opening on the floor at the center of the space is encountered first. The bronze railing bordered the opening allows visual access to the crypt below where three sarcophagi of the Bliss family members are entombed. This octagonal space with marble walls is capped with a 23 feet-high ceiling vault creates an atmosphere of importance in this vertical axis between the dome and the crypt through the opening with the viewer in the middle plane. The one and only window which is tall and large, gives the viewer connection to outside greenery on the same axis as the entrance.

The raised platform allows the crypt to be buried half at the subterranean level. The floor above the crypt is supported by Guastavino arches. This was done similarly to what had been done in 1897 in

Grant's Tomb by architect John H. Duncan in Riverside Park where Guastavino tile vaulting was used to support the floor above the crypt but the Bliss Mausoleum is only smaller.^{vi} In Heins & LaFarge's design of the Bliss mausoleum, the crypt is accessible from the main floor of the mausoleum through an iron stairway at the center opening. This was changed in later alterations by architect Charles Mink and Eggers of the architecture firm of John Russell Pope in 1920 four years before Mrs. Bliss died.^{vii} The iron stairs were removed and the access to the crypt was made through the side of the building. One descends from the outdoor grass terrace through a stone door into a very small room at the south side which again connects the crypt with another marble stairs.

When these modifications were made, one side wall of the crypt had to be cut through. In order to maintain visual symmetry outside, a same small room at the north side was built which it had no access to crypt, its only purpose was ventilation. The large stone urns above the two rooms that flanked the building on each side balance the main structure which otherwise is very vertical. The addition by Charles Mink and Eggers' design to the original Heins & LaFarge's design can be considered a success since it not only allows a better access to the crypt but also completes the proportion and composition of the mausoleum by adding variety and repetition to the visual.

The last time the mausoleum went through major design changes was in 1924 at Mrs. Bliss's death. Delano and Aldrich architects were hired and they altered the crypt's structure to provide better support for above structure with concrete footing and concrete arches.^{ix} The mausoleum went through regular maintenance and structure upgrade through the years until Miss Susan Bliss died in 1966. She left \$ 7000 in trust for perpetual care of the mausoleum.^x The mausoleum is in a way the legacy of Mrs. Jeanette Bliss who perhaps had the idea to build a mausoleum for the family when George T. Bliss unexpectedly passed away at a rather young age of 49. She had been cited as the client in the architectural drawings and also, Woodlawn archival files were under Mrs. George T. Bliss.

Although showing signs of aging and deterioration and it is in need of repair, the Mausoleum still stands as an imposing structure in Woodlawn Cemetery with the background of lush greenery. Designed by Heins & LaFarge, added modifications by Charles Mink and Eggers, and later altered by Delano & Aldrich, the George Bliss Mausoleum can be described as a work of sequential improvements of well-known architects throughout the lifetimes of Mrs. Bliss and her daughter. It is a mausoleum uniquely designed for the Bliss family that Mrs. Bliss and her daughter evidently put much effort in improving and maintaining it as the family's final resting place.

END NOTES

ⁱ "George Bliss" *Outlook*, Feb 8, 1896; 53, 6; American Periodicals, pg. 256.

ⁱⁱ "The Funeral of George Bliss." *New York Tribune*, Feb 5, 1896.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Will of George Bliss Filed: Large Charitable Bequests Made By The Banker." *New York Times*, Mar 12, 1896.

^{iv} Census Year: 1900. Census Place: New York, New York.

^v "George T. Bliss Dead: Unable to Rally from an Attack of Appendicitis." *New York Tribune*, Mar 25, 1901.

^{vi} Heirs of George T. Bliss Deed. Woodlawn Cemetery Archive, Avery Library Drawings and Archives, Columbia University, Sept 25, 2012.

^{vii} Kahn, David (January 1980) <http://www.nps.gov/gegr/forteachers/upload/Kahn-Historic-Resource-Study-1980.pdf> (Accessed October 12, 2012)

^{viii} Charles Mink Architect Drawings. Woodlawn Cemetery Archive, Avery Library Drawings and Archives, Columbia University, Sept 25, 2012.

^{ix} Delano and Aldrich Architects Drawings. Woodlawn Cemetery Archive, Avery Library Drawings and Archives, Columbia University, Sept 25, 2012.

^x Woodlawn Cemetery Inter-Office Memo, November 18, 1966. Woodlawn Cemetery Archive, Avery Library Drawings and Archives, Columbia University, Sept 25, 2012.

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