

Project 3: Documentation and Formal Analysis
J. Harper Poor Mausoleum, Woodlawn Cemetery, New York, NY.

The Poor Estate mausoleum is one of many grave sites within the expansive Woodlawn Cemetery in New York City. Commissioned by James Harper Poor in 1919 shortly before he died, the mausoleum houses his tomb, one of his two daughters, and most recently his widow in 1956. A prominent merchant and businessman, Poor hired well-known New York architect John Mead Howells to design his family's final resting place. The limestone and marble mausoleum sits within the major cluster of mausoleums near the main entrance of Woodlawn, sited on a corner plot. The mausoleum reflects the care the architect took in executing it by fusing subtlety of form and the building's complex relationship to its surrounding landscape.

With an entrance facing northeast, the Poor mausoleum sits on a corner plot at the intersection of Golden Rod and Spruce avenues. Unlike its rectangular neighbors, the mausoleum is an octagon in plan and is capped with a slight bell shaped dome. The only fenestration on the building is a window on the southwest facade, across from the entrance. The limestone body massing rests on a wider octagonal foundation with a single step carved into it in front of the entrance. The octagonal body is capped with an inclined roof cornice that is interrupted by a circular frieze supporting the bell-shaped dome. The dome is accentuated at its peak by a fern-like stone plume decorated in the same manner as the frieze. Simplified capitals with no column shaft suggest pilasters that project at each 135° angle and support a similarly protruding but only suggested wall cornice.

Both the exterior and interior are symmetrical but this is most noticeable in the rectangular interior layout. Three tombs vertically stacked flank both sides with the door and window capping the walk space. Marble paneling acts as the cladding for both tombs, ceiling and walls. Marble pilasters support the ceiling and are the only decorative element besides the tomb rosettes. The door is metal with point arched panel decorations and a keyhole with no knob on the right-hand side. The window is a round arched single pane of clear glass with a protective decorative metal grill surrounding it on the exterior. The current windowpane may be a replacement since it seems planer than the rest of the building, but there are no known documents to confirm this. On the exterior, the door and window architraves are extruded outward from the building by 3-4 inches allowing for a subtle but important change in surface texture.

James Harper Poor was a merchant in the cotton industry. Born in Boston, Massachusetts to Edward Erie and Mary Lane Poor on December 17, 1862, he followed in his distinguished father's footsteps as a dry goods merchant. James worked both with his father at his firm of Denny, Poor & Co., and later formed a partnership with his brother E. E. Poor, Jr. In 1901 he established the firm of J. Harper Poor & Co. which in 1906 merged with the dry goods commission house of Armory Browne & Co. with whom he was last associated with.ⁱ After marrying his wife Evelyn in 1883, they had two daughters Evelyn and Mildred and lived in Easthampton, Long Island, although they had more than one property throughout the New York region. The Poor family was extremely social and was often mentioned in the *New York Times* social notes.ⁱⁱ Poor died on August 24, 1919 and was interred at Woodlawn on the 27th. In January of 1919, Poor hired architect John Mead Howells to design his mausoleum, which Poor took an active role in before his death.ⁱⁱⁱ

When James Harper Poor hired John Mead Howells (August 14, 1868 – September 22, 1959), Howells was a well-known architect practicing in New York City. Having trained at the École des Beaux Arts in France as well as at Harvard, Howells worked at his uncle William Mead's firm of McKim, Mead and White before establishing his own firm with Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes. Together they designed St. Paul's Chapel at Columbia University and Woodbridge hall at Yale University.^{iv} The firm had disbanded in 1913 and Howells worked on his own before partnering with Raymond Hood. Howells and Hood won the competition for the Tribune Tower in Chicago, Illinois in 1924. Alone, Howells worked in a neo-Romanesque and neo-Classical style, which can be seen in his design for Poor but also in other monuments and buildings such as Memorial Hall at Pratt Institute.^v

What is most striking about the Poor Family mausoleum is the subtlety of its craft and design. While the octagonal shape is most obviously less common (compared with Greek and Roman temple mausoleum forms common in Woodlawn) as a design concept, it is the exterior compositional elements that give the building a layered sophistication. All of the textural complexity is applied to the top of the building in the frieze and dome plume. Multiple layers of molding details in the cornice aided by the sculptural elements in the frieze contrast the smooth limestone masonry blocks in the body of the structure. This draws the eye upwards, focusing on the verticality of the mausoleum; in a sense, lifting the eye to the heavens. The subtle articulation of the pilasters on the octagonal corners act as a prelude to the dome above. The shaft of the pilaster is articulated only by the vertical mortar joints of the limestone blocks, a sort of allusion to traditional pilasters. The way the limestone blocks were cut and carved also adds to the building's sophistication in that they all adhered to the restrictions of the mortar grid. To prevent water leakage, the base blocks that curve upwards to meet the central body were

carved from the same stone block, resulting in a huge waste of material but maintaining the integrity of the mortar joints. This can also be seen in the architraves and the alternating corner blocks and their relationship to the joints (figure 1).^{vi} These subtle but intricate design elements enhance the sophistication of the mausoleum, separating it from its neighboring catalogue-listed counterparts.

Given that the interior of the building is nondescript and simple, the exterior is where the architect wanted the building to shine. This can be concluded by its most fundamental shape: the octagon. The building has eight facades to be engaged with, fully encompassing its entire surrounding landscape. The phantom pilasters recognize this by not hindering the integrity of the corners and allow for the unrestricted understanding of the octagon. That there are no entrance stepping stones, urns, or pathways also allow for the octagon to sit autonomously within the site. The original landscaping of the site supports a natural approach to significance in that the entrance is indicated by two small fir trees.^{vii} The mausoleum is almost tree-like in its development; the octagon trunk supports a delicate blossoming dome that recognizes its relationship to the surrounding natural landscape. Since the name "Poor" is nowhere to be found on the exterior, the lack of branding eliminates an initial sense of ownership providing for an equal relationship between land and building. By siting the entrance at the upper west edge and towards the corner of the plot, Howells actively recognized circulation flow of the road but saw no need to overstate the relationship with pathways or flamboyant porticos. I believe he intentionally wanted the viewer to understand the mausoleum as a "natural" entity, springing from the land and harmonizing with it, rather than merely sitting on top of it.

James Harper Poor had the means to hire a true designer to represent him for his final resting place. John Mead Howells delivered by providing Poor a plan to negotiate a humbleness between tomb and natural environment but sophisticated enough to represent the wealth of the Poor family. Subtle elements, such as phantom pilasters and careful construction relate it to its surrounding landscape. Tree-like and unobtrusive, the mausoleum uses all of its facades to engage its site with mutual respect. A unique mausoleum interpretation, Howell's design and Poor's legacy deserve to be recognized as an important piece of architecture.



Poor Mausoleum, south facade.



Poor Mausoleum, northwest facade with window.



Figure 1: Mortar and Block Relationship

ⁱ JAMES HARPER POOR DIES :Prominent New York Merchant Succumbs at His Summer Home.. (1919, August 24). *New York Times* (1857-1922),22. Retrieved October 16, 2010, from ProQuest Historical Newspapers *New York Times* (1851-2007) w/ Index (1851-1993). (Document ID: 100983143).

ⁱⁱ SOCIAL NOTES. (1911, January 5). *New York Times* (1857-1922),9. Retrieved October 17, 2010, from ProQuest Historical Newspapers *New York Times* (1851-2007) w/ Index (1851-1993). (Document ID: 105018700).

ⁱⁱⁱ Howells, John M. "Foundation Permit." Letter to Woodlawn Cemetery. 12 Apr. 1919. MS. Woodlawn Archive, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.

^{iv} F. J. Sypher, . "Stokes, Isaac Newton Phelps"; <http://www.anb.org/articles/15/15-00659.html>; *American National Biography Online* Feb. 2000. Access Date: Sun Oct 17 01:14:29 2010

^v New York Landmarks Preservation Commission, comp. "Pratt Institute Main Building." Rep. New York, 1981. Designation List 151. Neighborhood Preservation Center. Web. 16 Oct. 2010. <http://www.neighborhoodpreservationcenter.org/db/bb_files/1981PrattInstituteMainBldg.pdf>.

^{vi} Mortar and Block Relationship, Poor Mausoleum, Woodlawn Cemetery, New York, NY. Personal photograph by author. 2010.

^{vii} "Soldiers and Sailors Memorial, Barre, Vermont [and some other work by John Mead Howells]." *American Architect and Architecture* 121 (1922): 181-5. Avery Index. Web. 17 Oct. 2010.