

The Squier Mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery: An Analysis of its History, Architecture, & Conditions

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The Squier Mausoleum sits at lot 34 in the Columbine plot of Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, New York. It is set near the back of a 40x48 foot plot off of Myosotis Avenue (*Figures 1-3*). There are two benches facing the road and four footstones marked with crosses. The Gibbs-Ryan plot neighbors the Squier Mausoleum to the northeast. The Essig-Foeller plot is located to the southwest. The Hecht, Diering, and Gachot plots lie just behind the rear property line. Built in 1937, the Squier Mausoleum is the final resting place of Dr. John Bentley Squier II and Leah Ursula Squier. Their son John Bentley Squier III and his wife Isabel Squier are buried northeast of the mausoleum. Their daughter Ursula Squier Reimer and her husband Otto B. Reimer are buried to the southwest.

The inscription on Dr. and Mrs. Squier's sarcophagi perfectly describe the couple: "A Surgeon and Gentleman" and "A Lovely Lady." They were known for their generosity. The *New York Times* praised Mrs. Squier, born Leah Ursula Bradt on October 31, 1875 in Tennessee, for her charitable involvement with the blind. She died of a heart attack on August 9, 1956.¹ Dr. J. Bentley Squier II, born November 6, 1873 in New York, was described as a founder of American urology (*Figure 4*). Although he was a short man with a partially amputated thumb, he was the "urologist to the stars" and a "showman...emerging from the pelvis with the entire adenoma sitting atop his thumb like an apple on a stick."² As a Columbia professor, he founded the Department of Urology in 1917 and conceived the idea for the Columbia War Hospital that treated soldiers returning from Europe during World War I.³ He was the president of the American Urological Society, the American College of Surgeons, and the New York County Medical Society as well as a member of the General Medical Board of the Council of National Defense.⁴ Alongside 104 other physicians, he unsuccessfully sued

¹ "Mrs. J.B. Squier, Surgeon's Widow: Former Leah Ursula Bradt of Chattanooga Dead—Active In Charities Here," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), August 10, 1956.

² Robert Goldfarb, Stephanie Thompson, and Steven Brandes, "Little Big Man with a Short Thumb: J Bentley Squier as Urologic Giant and the Founding of the World's First Academic Medical Center," *The Journal of Urology* 197, no. 4S (May 2017): e1068.

³ "Our History," Columbia University Department of Urology, accessed September 2019; "Dr. J. Bentley Squier," *New York Times Times Machine*, March 3, 1948.

⁴ "Goldfarb, Thompson, and Brandes, "Little Big Man with a Short Thumb"; "Dr. J. Bentley Squier"; "Dr. J. Bentley Squier and His Family Safe; He Cables to Times That They Are in Kyoto," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), September 3, 1923; "Portrait

the U.S. Government to annul Prohibition due to the cited medicinal benefits of some liquors.⁵ Dr. Squier died on March 1, 1948, but his legacy remains through Columbia University and the New York Presbyterian Hospital's urology clinic that bears his name.⁶

Dr. and Mrs. Squier married on August 21, 1902. Their son, J. Bentley III, was born on June 17, 1903, and their daughter, Ursula, was born on March 2, 1905. By 1920, the family was living comfortably on East 68th Street with five live-in servants.⁷ They "travelled widely," although no one in the family held a passport until 1920.⁸ The family coincidentally was in Japan during the 1923 Yokohama earthquake while travelling back to New York from a tour of China. The *New York Times* reported on the family's safety as well as Dr. Squier's selfless decision to treat countless victims.⁹

The children lived successful lives. Before dying of a stroke on November 1, 1967, J. Bentley Squier III was a stockbroker and a *New York Times* Advertising Executive.¹⁰ He lived in Virginia with his wife, Isabel Wright Squier. She was born on May 18, 1902 in Georgia and died on October 19, 1998. She worked at home, but records do not show that the couple had children.¹¹ Ursula Squier, a Bryn Mawr College graduate, married Otto Berend Reimer in 1928.¹² Born in Manhattan on December 21, 1898, he worked as a stockbroker.¹³ The couple lived in Scarsdale and had two children: Ursula Van Anda and John Squier. Mrs. Reimer pre-deceased her husband by almost thirty years, dying on March 13, 1968 after a long illness.¹⁴ Mr. Reimer later married Ottora Maria Douglas, a Swedish-born immigrant. She died in 2001 but is not buried at the Squier Family plot. The location of her remains

Unveiled of Dr. JB Squier: Famous Urologist is Honored by A.S. Ochs Bequest at Clinic He Organized," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), July 2, 1942.

⁵"J. Bentley Squier, Surgeon, 74, Dead," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), March 2, 1948.

⁶"Our History," Columbia University Department of Urology.

⁷ US Census Bureau, "Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920-Population," *Ancestry Library*.

⁸ "J. Bentley Squier, Surgeon, 74, Dead"; US Passport Application for Squier Family, *Ancestry Library*, May 26, 1920.

⁹ "Dr. J. Bentley Squier and His Family Safe; He Cables to Times That They Are in Kyoto."

¹⁰ "Commonwealth of Virginia-Certificate of Death," *Ancestry Library*: Death Records, 1912-2014 for J. Bentley Squier III, November 1, 1967; US Census Bureau, "Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930-Population," *Ancestry Library*.

¹¹ "Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930-Population."

¹² "Mrs. Otto B. Reimer Dies at 62; Was Active in Charitable Work," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), March 14, 1968.

¹³ "Otto Berend Reimer," Find a Grave, accessed September 2019. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/186571760>.

¹⁴ "Mrs. Otto B. Reimer Dies at 62; Was Active in Charitable Work."

is unknown. Mr. Reimer passed away six years prior to Ottora, and he and Ursula Reimer were survived by five grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.¹⁵

Dr. Squier's *New York Times* obituary mentioned his internment at the "family mausoleum" following a Methodist service at Woodlawn.¹⁶ The mausoleum was designed to hold only two people, but it appears Dr. and Mrs. Squier purchased a large plot with their growing family in mind. They purchased the land on May 27, 1937 for \$11,742, breaking with Dr. Squier's family's tradition of being buried at Hanover Cemetery in New Jersey.¹⁷ Two benches, respectively inscribed with "Squier" and "Reimer," separate the plot into two related halves. The benches match the mausoleum in style and material (*Figures 5 & 6*). They appear to have been part of the plot's original design. The plot's layout and coordinated benches imply that Dr. and Mrs. Squier intended for their son's descendants, if he had them, to be buried to the northeast and their daughter's descendants to be buried to the southwest. The Squier children, however, chose the specific layout of the burials. As discussed in a series of letters between Mr. Reimer and Woodlawn's General Manager in 1968, the Squier siblings arranged for 8 graves—the maximum permitted at the time—around their parents' mausoleum. Shortly after Mrs. Reimer's death and following changes in burial regulations, Mr. Reimer requested additional burial spaces. Today, the plot has 32 double-depth spaces, allowing up to 64 people eventually to be buried in the plot surrounding the Squier Mausoleum.¹⁸

The McNeel Marble Company custom designed and built this mausoleum for the Squier family. Criticized today for building over 140 Confederate monuments, McNeel was praised by Woodlawn employee John Plump in 1950 for building personalized mausoleums to "get away from the standardization and stock design one sees everywhere" and to "educate the American public to

¹⁵ Otto Berend Reimer," Find a Grave.

¹⁶ "Rite for Dr. Squier: Bishop Herbert Welch Officiates at Service for Urologist," *New York Times* (1923-Current File), March 3, 1948.

¹⁷ Internal Woodlawn Database; "Dr John Bentley Squier," Find a Grave Index, accessed September 2019.

¹⁸ Letter from Dudley Clarke of Woodlawn Cemetery to Mr. O.B. Reimer, April 8, 1968, Major Monuments of Woodlawn Cemetery Records, Avery Library Drawings & Archives, Box 16, Folder 99, 2006.009, Avery Library at Columbia University.

the fact that a memorial can be more than just a block of stone.”¹⁹ The Squier Mausoleum is one of seven McNeel mausoleums documented at Woodlawn, a fairly low number considering McNeel self-identified as “America’s Largest Builder of Marble and Granite Memorials.”²⁰ A memorialist firm, McNeel claimed to help plot owners “save by Buying Direct” from the builder.²¹

Beyond commissioning the customized main mausoleum, the Squiers spent time and money carefully curating detailed bronze grilles on the windows and doors (*Figure 7*). Inscribed on the bottom of the door is the signature “J. Novelli, Sc. © 1937” (*Figure 8*). James Novelli was a prominent sculptor who created many award-winning mausoleum doors, a few of which are located at Woodlawn.²² Each window on the Squier Mausoleum measures 47.5x37 inches and, based on the cost of similar Novelli pieces, likely cost hundreds a piece.²³ It is unclear if Novelli designed the accents specifically for the Squier family. However, his elaborate embellishments stand out from the less detailed, reproduced metalwork, many from unidentified artists, on neighboring mausoleums.

Both Novelli and the McNeel Marble Company saw mausoleum design as art.²⁴ Embracing the rise of modernism, they employed the Art Deco style in the Squier Mausoleum (*Figures 9 & 10*). McNeel designed many mausoleums in the Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles.²⁵ The Squier Mausoleum has strong angular and geometric forms, evidenced in the exterior side walls’ stepped protrusions which create three parallel planes of progressively thicker units of stone (*Figures 11 & 12*). The scalloping above the roofline shows the softly-curved shapes also representative of Art Deco.²⁶ The

¹⁹ Ben Brasch, “Marietta Company Made 140 of the South’s Confederate Statues,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 21, 2017; Report from McNeel Marble Company to American Cemetery Association, August 7, 1950, Trade Catalogs, Avery Library Classics Collection, AA6120M233, Avery Library at Columbia University.

²⁰ Major Monuments Records Spreadsheet, Woodlawn Cemetery Records, Avery Library Drawings & Archives, Avery Library at Columbia University; McNeel Marble Company, “Almost Half a Century Devoted to Creating & Building,” 1932, Trade Catalogs, Avery Library Classics Collection, AT7105M231932, Avery Library at Columbia University.

²¹ McNeel Marble Company, “Almost Half a Century Devoted to Creating & Building.”

²² Josephine Murphy, *Novelli, A Forgotten Sculptor*, (Boston: Branden Books, 2003), 77.

²³ Murphy 83.

²⁴ Murphy 78; Report from McNeel Marble Company to American Cemetery Association.

²⁵ McNeel Marble Company, “Almost Half a Century Devoted to Creating & Building.”

²⁶ Cervin Robinson and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, *Skyscraper Style: Art Deco New York*, (Oxford University Press, 1975), 39.

reeching around the door creates an illusion of a column, adapting classical architecture into modern forms (*Figure 13*).²⁷ Novelli furthered this stylistic adaptation and “infus[ed] the style of an everyday world into one of elegance and sophistication.”²⁸ His usage of Greek keys placed in a geometric pattern, spirals, and floral motifs on the grilles emphasizes the Squier Mausoleum’s Art Deco style.²⁹

Although the design of the Squier Mausoleum is more modern than many others in Woodlawn, the materials are relatively traditional. According to a 1937 letter from a McNeel employee, the exterior walls are Barre Granite (*Figure 14*).³⁰ Barre, Vermont has produced granite mausoleums since the 1890s, and this granite is prevalent in Woodlawn Cemetery and in McNeel mausoleums.³¹ After examining laboratory samples and consulting original correspondence, the interior cladding appears to be Golden Vein Yule marble from Colorado (*Figure 15*).³² The sarcophagi seem to be French Tennessee Pink Marble, possibly an homage to Mrs. Squier’s home state (*Figure 16*). The scalloping on the top of the sarcophagi echoes the scalloping on the mausoleum’s exterior. The aforementioned 1937 letter notes that the stone of the 6-inch high baseboard is French Tennessee Rose Marble (*Figure 17*).³³ This classification is questionable, as this stone does not appear in Tennessee Marble catalogues or match laboratory samples. Viewed under a microscope, the baseboard has sedimentary layers (*Figure 18*). If the baseboard is French Tennessee Rose Marble or another limestone, its darker color shows it was quarried at a different area along the French Broad River than the sarcophagi limestone.

After speaking to Woodlawn employees, it is evident that the Squier Mausoleum is in worse condition than expected. Driving or walking by the Squier Mausoleum, the only obvious possible issue

²⁷ Robinson & Bletter 58.

²⁸ Murphy 85.

²⁹ Robinson & Bletter 39.

³⁰ Letter from E.S. Fowler of McNeel Marble Company to Woodlawn Cemetery, July 15, 1937, Major Monuments of Woodlawn Cemetery Records, Avery Library Drawings & Archives, Box 16, Folder 99, 2006.009, Avery Library at Columbia University.

³¹ “About BGA,” Barre Granite Association, accessed September 2019.

³² Letter from E.S. Fowler of McNeel Marble Company to Woodlawn Cemetery.

³³ Letter from E.S. Fowler of McNeel Marble Company to Woodlawn Cemetery.

is some biological growth on the granite near the ground. A closer inspection, however, shows a number of signs of structural movement or displacement. The south corner has shifted west, as evidenced by the joint widening from its original 3/8 inches to 3/4 inches (*Figure 19*). Many of the other joints on the rear elevation have not widened but contain numerous cracks. There is evidence of previous repointing on the other three elevations, such as the darkened and raised mortar on the horizontal joint above the window on the Southwest Elevation (*Figure 20*). Beyond small horizontal cracks present in the repointed joints, there are long, vertical cracks running down the center of many repointed joints. These cracks suggest that there has been ongoing movement since the repairs.

The interior damage appears more severe (*Figures 21 & 22*). Large cracks suggesting downward pressure line the entirety of the baseboard, causing large stone chunks to fall on the floor (*Figure 23*). The marble cladding on the ceiling is displaced (*Figure 24*), and the sarcophagi are severely damaged. The stone with Mrs. Squier's inscription moves upon a light touch. There is a thin crack running slightly south at the rear of her sarcophagus (*Figure 25*). The cracks on Dr. Squier's sarcophagus are more substantial. Running east, one crack travels the entire length of the sarcophagus (*Figure 26*). It is located just past the thickness of the supporting slab which, unlike on Mrs. Squier's sarcophagus, is not flush. The two-inch gap between the tops of the sarcophagi narrows to a point where the sarcophagi meet the rear wall, indicating a large slab has shifted position. The joints on the corners of each sarcophagus have widened in the same direction as the cracks on the respective sarcophagi (*Figures 27 & 28*). The corner joints may have been repaired, as they have hard, cement-based grout with what appears to be lime chalk aggregate that does not match the grout on the baseboard.

The degree of damage and the mirrored movement of the cracks suggest that this issue goes beyond cracks caused by planes of weakness at the natural veins in the stone (*Figure 29*). The damage could have occurred over a long period of time or could have been the result of a major cataclysmic event. The options are not mutually exclusive, but it is likely that the issue involves the foundation

and ongoing water damage. As was common, the cemetery laid the foundation instead of the builder.³⁴ Woodlawn poured a total of 704 cubic feet of concrete into footings.³⁵ An 8-inch thick granite slab, according to the blueprints, supports the perimeter of the interior. The soil around the mausoleum is waterlogged; a ladder placed beside the structure sunk a few inches without additional weight. It is probable that water is getting below the slab, maybe causing the mausoleum to move with soil movement. Additionally, if the footings do not go below the frost line, frost heave could create pressure at the mausoleum's center, causing the weight to shift gradually outward on both sides. McNeel urged the American Cemetery Association to construct larger foundations, suggesting there were previous issues with mausoleum foundations.³⁶

The Squier Mausoleum contains the remains of a famous surgeon and the art of a famous sculptor, giving it historical and architectural significance. Yet, regardless of fame, it is the final resting place of someone's family. Moving forward, it will be important to locate Dr. and Mrs. Squier's descendants to see where they have chosen to be buried and to inform them of their right to the burial plots. Then, working with Woodlawn Cemetery and the family, it will be possible to create a preservation plan to determine the causes of the ongoing damage, implement remedial measures, and ensure the Squier Mausoleum remains dignified for years to come.

³⁴ Report from McNeel Marble Company to American Cemetery Association.

³⁵ Letter from Woodlawn Engineer to McNeel Marble Company, July 21, 1937, Major Monuments of Woodlawn Cemetery Records, Avery Library Drawings & Archives, Box 16, Folder 99, 2006.009, Avery Library at Columbia University.

³⁶ Report from McNeel Marble Company to American Cemetery Association.

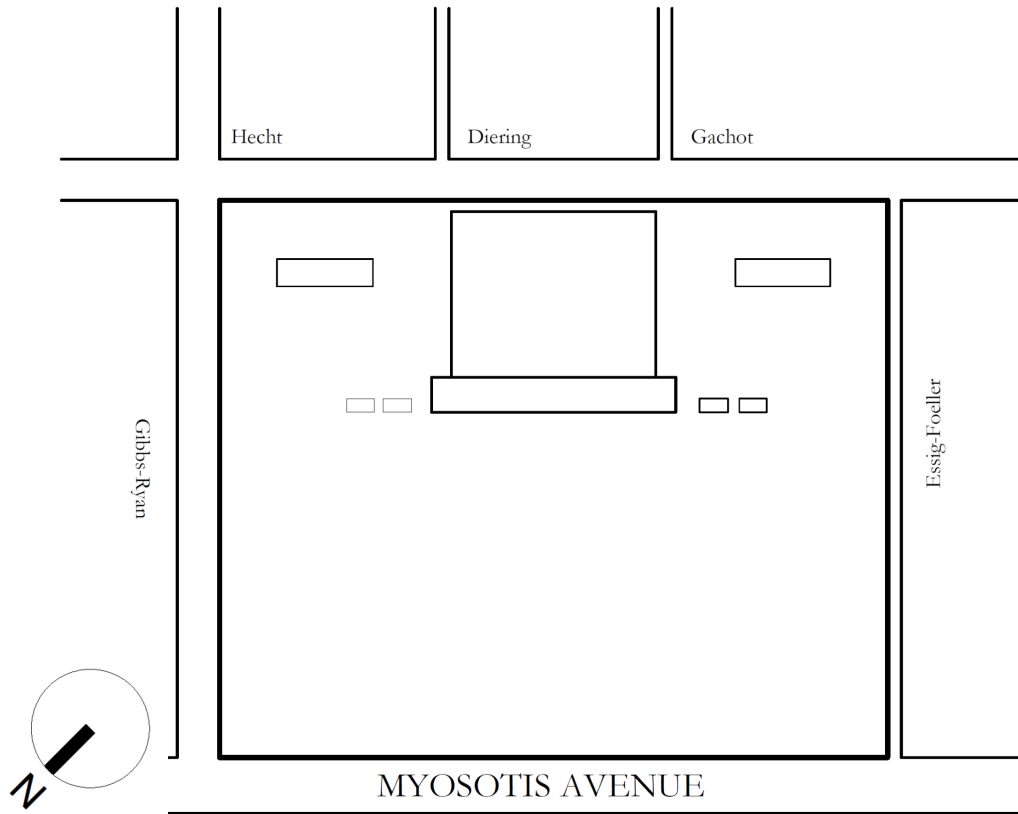


Figure 1: Site plan of the Squier Mausoleum



Figure 2: The Squier Mausoleum (far left) from Myosotis Avenue



Figure 3: The Squier Mausoleum (second from left) at the intersection of Walnut Avenue and Myosotis Avenue



Figure 4: Photo of Dr. J. Bentley Squier at work (Source: Columbia Urology Department, <http://www.columbiaurology.org/about-us/our-history>)



Figure 5: The Reimer Bench southwest of the Squier Mausoleum



Figure 6: The Squier Bench northeast of the Squier Mausoleum



Figure 7: Close-up of J. Novelli window grille on northeast elevation



Figure 8: "J. Novelli, Sc. © 1937" inscription on bottom of front door



Figure 9: Façade (Northwest Elevation) of Squier Mausoleum



Figure 10: Rear (southeast) Elevation of Squier Mausoleum



Figure 11: Side (southwest) Elevation of Squier Mausoleum with stepped protrusions



Figure 12: Side (northeast) Elevation of Squier Mausoleum with stepped protrusions



Figure 13: Reeding around front door on façade of Squier Mausoleum

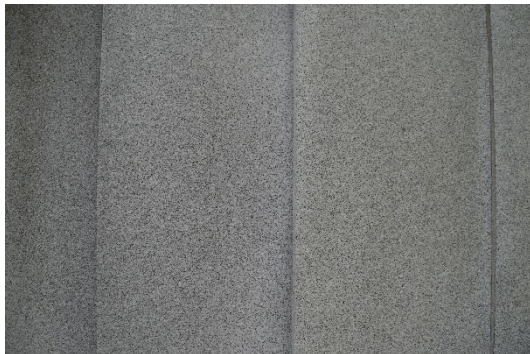


Figure 14: Sample of exterior granite on northeast elevation



Figure 15: Sample of interior cladding on ceiling

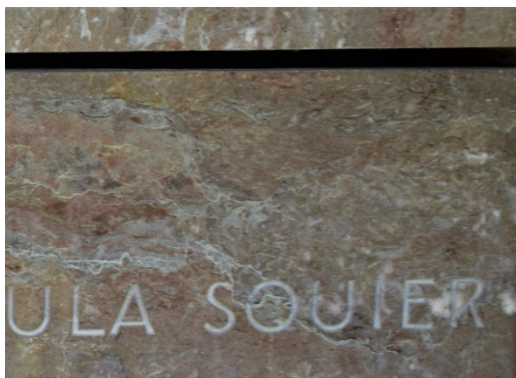


Figure 16: Sample of sarcophagi stone

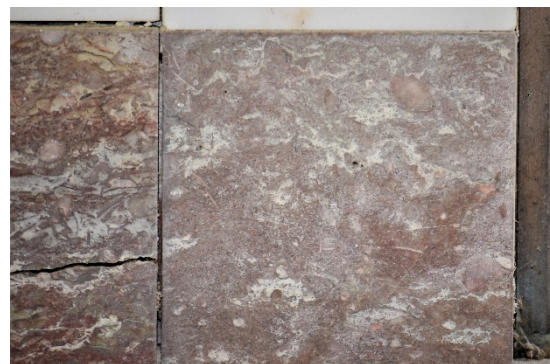


Figure 17: Sample of baseboard stone

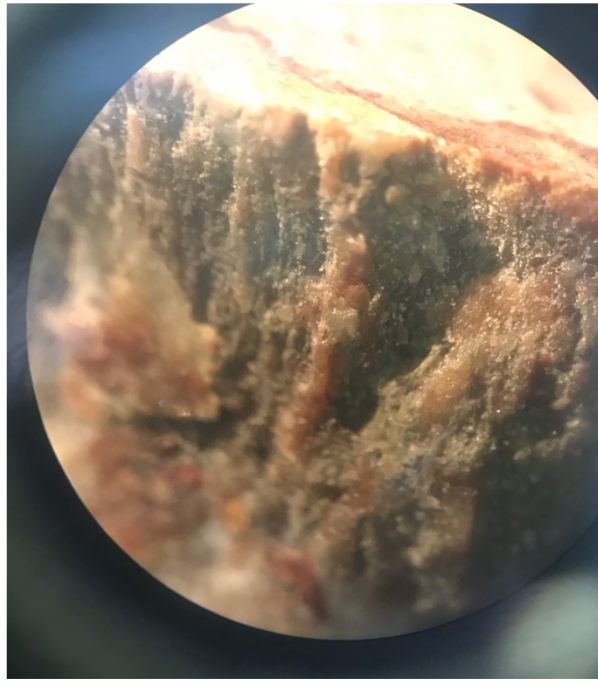


Figure 18: Baseboard stone under microscope



Figure 19: Widened joints on South Corner



Figure 20: Repointed mortar on Southwest Elevation



Figure 21: Longitudinal view of interior



Figure 22: Transverse view of interior



Figure 23: Cracking baseboard with rusting metal (circled)



Figure 24: Displaced cladding on ceiling



Figure 25: South-running crack on Leah Ursula Squier's sarcophagus



Figure 26: East-running crack down J. Bentley Squier's sarcophagus



Figure 27: Displaced corner joint on J. Bentley Squier's sarcophagus



Figure 28: Displaced corner joint on Leah Ursula Squier's sarcophagus

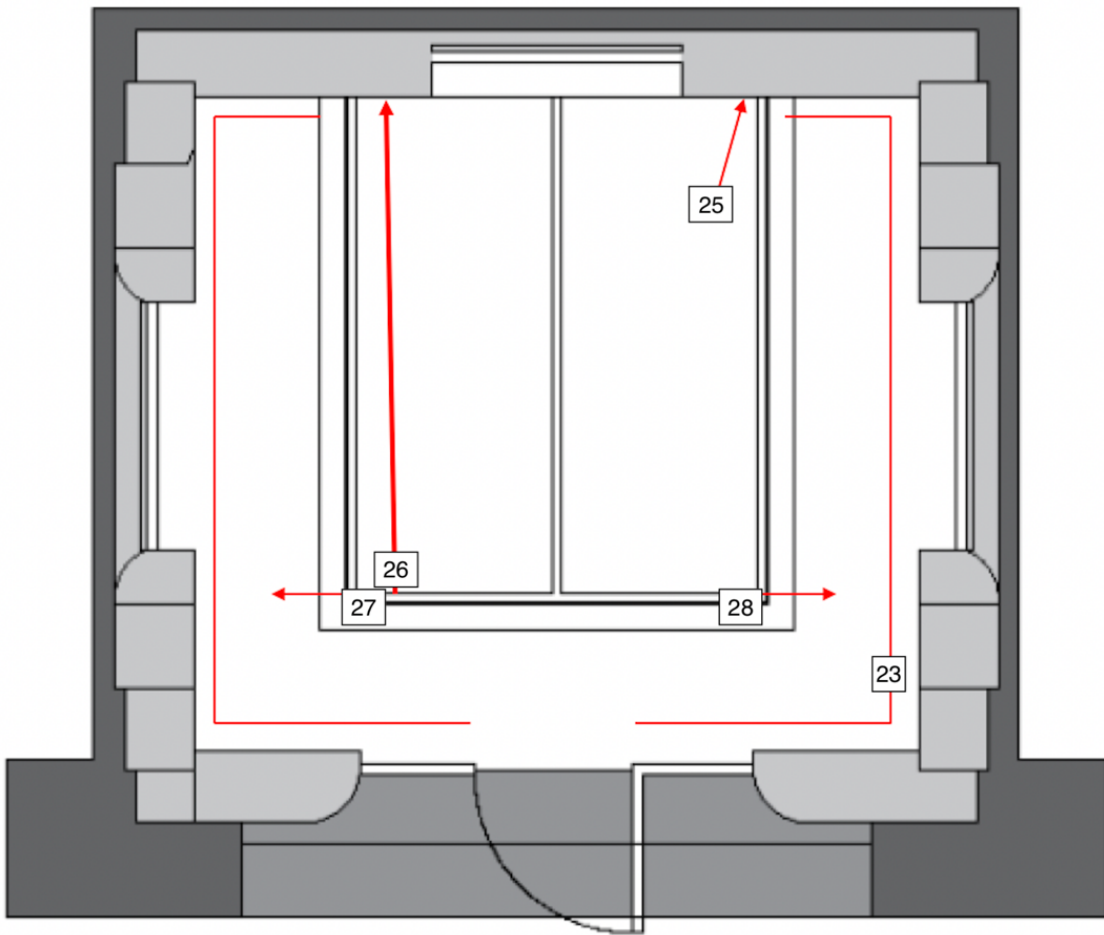


Figure 29: Floor plan with major interior cracks annotated in red. Locations of Figures 23 and 25-28 labelled.

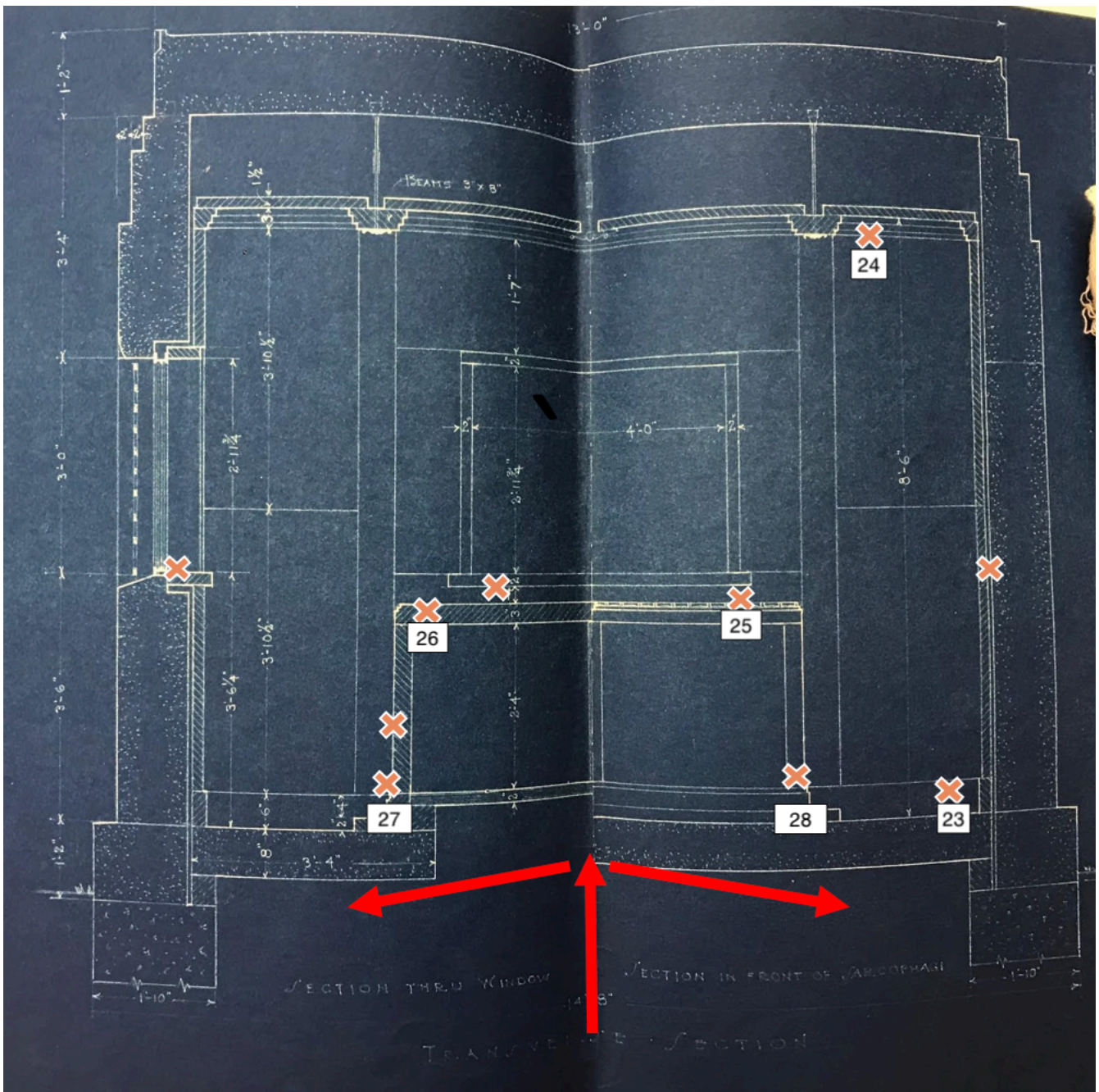


Figure 30: Annotated McNeel blueprint with major cracks marked and hypothesized movement below granite slab shown with red arrows. Locations of Figures 23-28 labelled. (*Blueprint Source: Major Monuments of Woodlawn Cemetery Records, Avery Library Drawings & Archives, Folder 109, 2006.009, Avery Library at Columbia University.*)

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US Passport Application for Squier Family. *Ancestry Library*. May 26, 1920.

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