

The Robinson Mausoleum

Yekaterina Nestser
Historic Preservation Studio I
Professors Andrew Dolkart and Kate Reggev
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The Robinson mausoleum, featured in the prestigious *Monumental Work of Robert Caterson* (1900) catalog, stood ready over two decades before its eventual occupants—William A. Robinson (1842–1922) and Sarah J. Robinson (née Hobson, 1842–1923)—were laid to rest¹ (Figure 1). While it might be assumed that the decision to commission the monument was a joint one, it remains unclear which of the two initiated the project; in fact, both parties seemed rather indifferent to the upkeep of such a considerable investment. Correspondence from Woodlawn dating to 1910, requesting a 50% increase to the originally projected \$1,000 upkeep budget, reveals that William and Sarah had to be well aware of the mausoleum's maintenance needs. Despite having the funds to do so earlier, the couple delayed providing the suggested payment, obliging only in 1922, when the estate of the now-widowed Sarah issued a one-time check².

After succumbing to pneumonia³, William's will, amounting to \$20,000, was split evenly between Edward J. and Leonard H. Smith⁴, the former acting as the co-executor of the couple's estate; though neither men's relationship is identifiable, Mr. Edward Smith's loyalty to Mr. Robinson is confirmed by a 1933 communication to Woodlawn, requesting that the neglected plot be taken care of immediately. It is unclear whether Mr. Robinson left his wife anything, though it is clear that Sarah was left financially comfortable, as her will left behind a more generous estate of \$95,000, the bulk of which was distributed to medical institutions and individuals in her hometown of Nashua, New Hampshire. Of this, \$75,000 was divided equally among two hospitals and her "faithful nurse," Florence M. Presby. Sarah's younger brother, Harrison Mack Hobson, received a smaller portion, evident of her apparent priority for

¹ Caterson, Robert "The Monumental Works of Robert Caterson." 1905. P. 25. Bronx, NY.

² Robinson, William. Major Monuments Folder, Woodlawn Cemetery Archive, Avery Architecture Library
Columbia University, Box MOC 12 Folder 30

³ "Died" *New York Herald*. March 22 1922, p. 11

⁴ "Robinson Will Filled" *Brooklyn Eagle*, Page 15. April 7 1922

philanthropy over family ties⁵. Notably, two decades earlier, the sibling duo had inherited \$20,000 each upon the death of their father, a self-made man who earned an impressive living at the local Pennichuck Waterworks company. Proportionally, William's inheritance from his father-in-law was a modest \$2,000⁶. Though the sum he received was insignificant in the context of the fortune Mr. Hobson had left behind, it was substantial compared to his own family's working-class assets⁷ which were at least forty times fewer than his wife's⁸.

William, a native of Foxboro, Massachusetts, held a variety of blue collar positions locally⁹ and in Boston – from a boot cutter to a clerk – before eventually finding himself in Brooklyn. In 1866 the couple got married¹⁰ aged 24, commencing their thirty year residence in the borough¹¹. Though it seems William had been able to sustain the union comfortably as a tobacco merchant, it is no coincidence that the couple began to claim various Manhattan residences, progressing through increasingly upscale¹², long-term hotels¹³, following Sarah's significant inheritance. This is also likely the period when the mausoleum was commissioned. Despite embracing newfound affluence, records of multiple trips to Havana—then a center of the tobacco industry—between 1910 and 1914 suggest that William remained active in his trade^{14 15}. When the couple passed away at the now-demolished Hotel St. Andrew, neither William nor Sarah left behind children, and the same was true for the pair's siblings, only some of whom

⁵ "95,000 for Institutions at Nashua" *The Portsmouth Herald*. Jan. 30 1923, p.4

⁶ New Hampshire Probate Records, Vol 151-154, 1895-191. Image No. 837

⁷ 1870 United States Federal Census, Foxboro, Norfolk, Massachusetts, Image 22.

⁸ 1870 United States Federal Census, Nashua, Hillsborough, New Hampshire, Image 1

⁹ 1860 United States Federal Census, Foxboro, Norfolk, Massachusetts, Image 61.

¹⁰ New Hampshire, U.S., Marriage Records, 1700-1971. Box No. 708

¹¹ 1870 United States Federal Census, Brooklyn Ward 11, Kings NY, Sheet 254

¹² Dolkart, Andrew Scott. "*Designing Woodlawn*." In *Sylvan Cemetery: Architecture, Art & Landscape at Woodlawn*, edited by Charles D Warren, 53-89. Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, New York NY.

¹³ 1910 United States Federal Census, Manhattan Ward 20, New York NY, Image 19

¹⁴ U.S. Passport Applications, Roll 0105 - Certificates: 23575-24474, 05 Apr 1910 -13 Apr 1910

¹⁵ New York, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), March 10 1914

survived to adulthood (Figure 2). This pattern of childlessness extended to second and third branches of their kin's relations, leaving the couple's wealth and legacy in the hands of an unfruitful estate. Despite leaving the mausoleum as their final grand mark, the anonymity of the couple's lives seemed to grow with every passing decade leading up to the commission.

The Mausoleum Design

This anonymous legacy is mirrored in the mausoleum's interior design, which seems almost reluctant to accommodate visitors. The marble-clad sarcophagi of Mr. and Mrs. Robinson dominate the limited space, arranged in a distinct 'bunk' orientation with William resting above and Sarah below (Figure 3). The narrow confines allow for, at most, two visitors before the space begins to feel uncomfortable. Marble also sheaths the walls, though signs of neglect are evident. A damp spot in the southwest corner of the granite ceiling hints at humidity concerns, contributing to damage on the coffins and its fine details, such as the crumbling palm leaves, which continue from the exterior theme (Figure 4). An entire panel has even detached from above the entrance portal. Though it seems as if the space was not expecting visitors, the bronze lettering on Sarah's grave is proof of otherwise: the unnaturally flicked-up 2 on her birth date is a unique example of deterioration created by force (even if accidentally spawned) rather than brought on by time. (Figure 5)

A stained-glass window occupies the upper half of the northern wall, possibly a commission from Tiffany Studios. The window depicts an angel holding a scroll inscribed with the faintly legible quote: **THE SOUL IS RISEN** (Figure 6). The challenging design employs a variety of signature motifs such as opalescent glass and favrile glass jewels. While the northwestern placement must offer striking illumination in the massive space that is created above the couple's sarcophagi, its distance from the ground and location in the cramped space

make efficient cleaning and maintenance challenging. Additionally, the artwork is in dire need of maintenance, as the weight of the roof is risking the integrity of the glass panels¹⁶.

The mausoleum stands on an uneven plot in Woodlawn's Fairfield Lawn section, causing the structure to lose about a foot in height between the bases of its northern and southern elevations. This subtle elevation was likely an intentional design choice, creating an effect of ascent reminiscent of more elaborate monuments by the same architect, some of which are reached by grand staircases¹⁷ (Figure 7). The Robinson mausoleum adheres to contemporary trends of its time, drawing inspiration from both Neoclassical and Egyptian Revival styles. Its shape gradually narrows toward the roof, achieved through delicate recessions at the building's corners. Even the flooring outside the entrance is slightly elevated, enhancing the architect's attention to detail. The gable roof features a winged orb contained in a triangular frame as its central ornament, with palm leaves adorning each upturned corner; the same design is mirrored at the north elevation. The family name, *ROBINSON*, boldly identifying the mausoleum, is carried out in honed granite right below, on the frieze of the facade. A rosette completes each end of the name. Twin columns envelope the entrance, each pairing a fluted Greek doric column on the inner side with a rigid, pilaster on the outer, adorned with granite floral tassels.

The east and west walls are symmetrical. The main body acts as a granite frame, encasing two rows of five rusticated stones (Figure 8). On the northern wall, the same type of stone similarly occupies the space but only on the lower half of the elevation, while the top half

¹⁶ "Woodlawn Cemetery Stained Glass Condition Assessment" *Liberty Stained Glass Conservation*. New Jersey. November 2021

¹⁷ Caterson, Robert "The Monumental Works of Robert Caterson." 1905. P. 4. Bronx, NY.

contains a curvaceous, bronze window grille, protecting the aforementioned stained-glass window.

Although granite comprises most of the structure's exterior, it is the use of dark bronze that draws the eye to the mausoleum's focal point: the entrance. This is where the most intricate details reside. At this stage, most of the surface had developed a striking green oxidation. The doors, window guards, and crypt lettering were crafted by the Gorham Architectural Bronze Company, a renowned local firm. The laurel wreaths and inverted torches featured on the double-door panels, featured as patented designs in Gorham's 1910 catalog¹⁸, are symbolically placed (*Bronze Mortuary Work*). The former icon, evoking eternity, is found at eye level, while the latter, depicting extinguishment of life, is positioned lower, drawing the gaze down as a sign of respect upon entry (Figures 9, 10, 11,).

Despite the decades of inflicted neglect, the structure remains in relatively good visual condition. Aside from some manageable material deterioration, most of the maintenance appears more easily reversible. The pattern of organic growth corresponds to the natural disposition of rainfall. This is why one of the most damaged external parts is the roof being provoked by landscaping. Although the Robinson plot is barren of any additional natural elements besides grass, a visit to the cemetery on a rainy day depicts how their neighbor's Japanese Maple tree, accidentally extending to the northwestern corner of their plot, is causing humidity to concentrate at the spot (Figure 12).

¹⁸ *Bronze Mortuary Work*, Gorham Manufacturing Company.1910. New York, NY.

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Figure 1: *The Monumental Works of Robert Caterson (1900)*



Figure 2: *Hotel St. Andrew, Broadway and 72nd Street, New York City, circa 1916, Roege, William J. Via Digital Culture of Metropolitan New York*



Figure 3: Nestser, Yekaterina. *Mausoleum with Open Entrance*. September 2024



Figure 4: Nestser, Yekaterina. *Marble Deterioration on Upper Sarcophagus*. September 2024

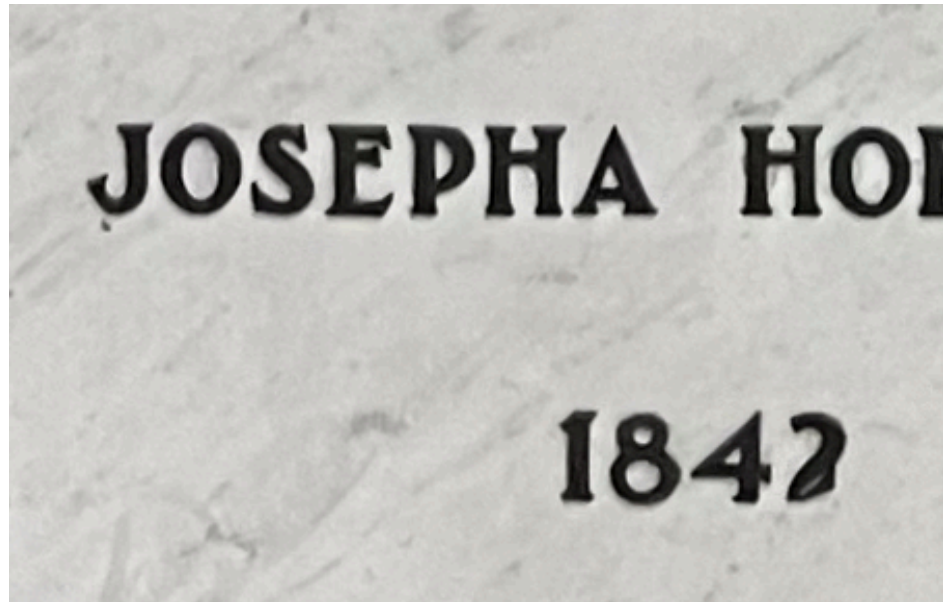


Figure 5: Nestser, Yekaterina. *Indent Occurring on Bronze Lettering.* September 2024



Figure 6: Nestser, Yekaterina. *Stained-Glass Window.* September 2024



Figure 7: Image 1 from *The Monumental Works of Robert Caterson* (1900)



Figure 8: Nestser, Yekaterina. *East Elevation*. September 2024

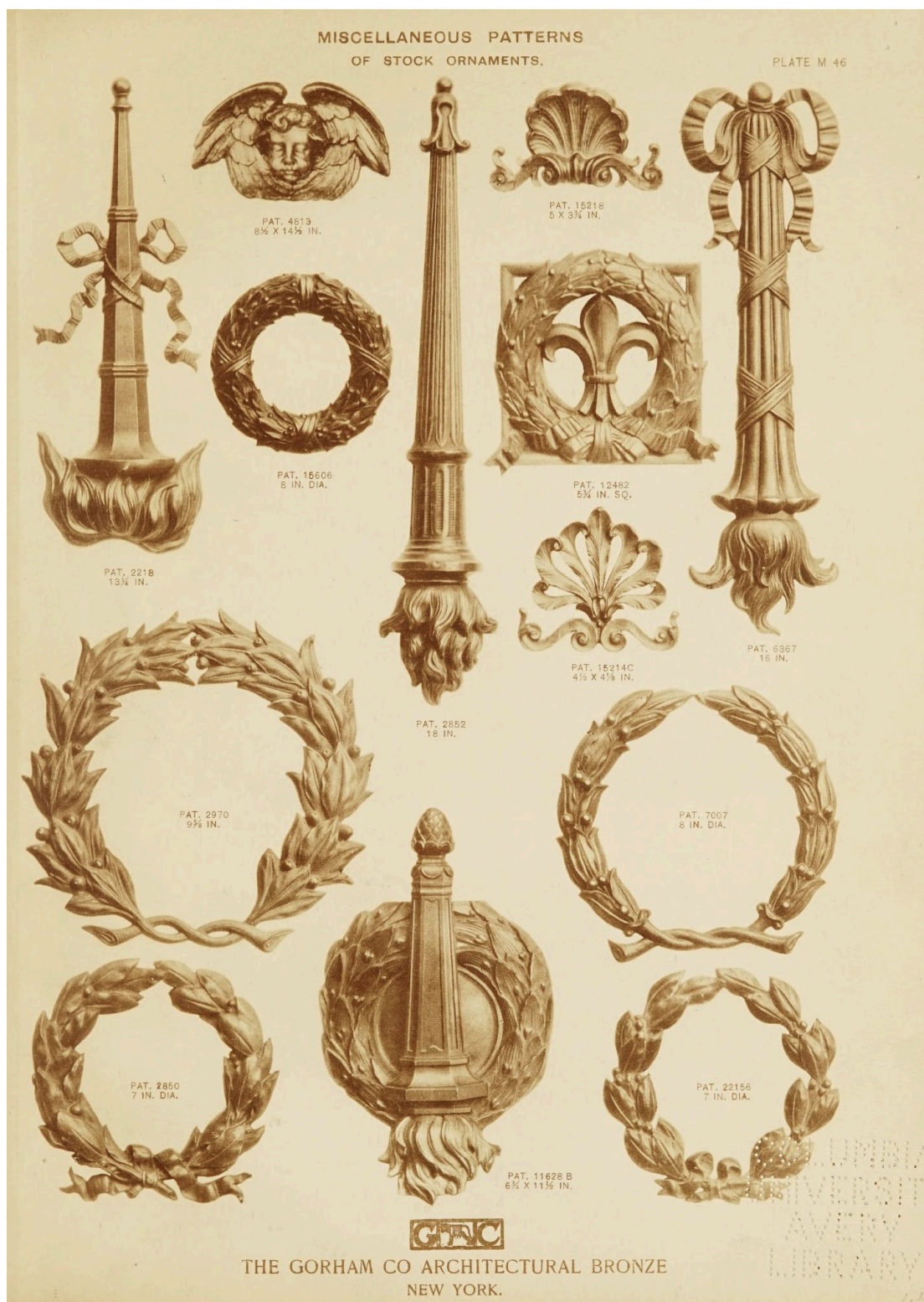


Figure 9: Plate M46 from *Bronze Mortuary Work*, (1910) Gorham Manufacturing Company



Figure 10: Nestser, Yekaterina. *Bronze Door Detail, Laurel.* September 2024



Figure 11: Nestser, Yekaterina. *Bronze Detail of Torch.* September 2024



Figure 12: Nestser, Yekaterina. *Northern Elevation on Rainy Day, Featuring Japanese Maple Tree.* September 2024