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Problem 3: Field Documentation and Formal Analysis

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The McCann Mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery: A History and Analysis

In the spring of 1933, Charles Edward Francis McCann and his wife, Helena Woolworth McCann, contracted with Farrington, Gould & Hoagland Memorial Corp. of New York City to erect a mausoleum for themselves and their family in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. The mausoleum was to be placed on a site largely obscured by the towering Ehret mausoleum, erected in 1900, and the Egyptian-revival monument built in 1919 for Helena's father, Frank Winfield (F.W.) Woolworth, founder of the Woolworth's chain of five-and-dime stores (Fig. 6). McCann had been a lawyer for F.W. Woolworth & Co., and, when Helena's mother died in 1924, she inherited approximately \$26 million.¹ The McCann mausoleum sits literally and architecturally in the shadow of the Woolworth mausoleum—echoing its style in its subtly battered corner piers and the molding adorning its entrance, but in a smaller, more severe form.

The Family

Charles E. F. McCann was born in New York City in 1876.² His father was brother-in-law to Tammany Hall boss Richard Croker. The elder McCann accused Croker and Mayor Hugh Grant of corruption in hearings that made headlines nationwide in 1890.³ However, Charles McCann, who received his law degree from Columbia University in 1896,⁴ became a deputy assistant to Tammany-aligned District Attorney Asa Bird Gardiner in 1898, and was swept out on the heels of Gardiner's dismissal by Governor Theodore Roosevelt in 1900.⁵

Helena Woolworth, known familiarly as Lena, was born in 1878 in Watertown, New York. She married McCann in 1904. By that time, F.W. Woolworth & Co. had 120 stores, and Frank had moved the

family into a mansion designed by C.P.H. Gilbert at 80th Street and Fifth Avenue in New York City, where the wedding took place.⁶ (Helena, nominally a Methodist, converted to Catholicism to marry McCann.⁷) The McCanns had three daughters and a son between 1905 and 1913; their daughter Gladys died at the age of eight in 1918. In 1916, the McCanns moved into a 35-foot-wide C.P.H. Gilbert mansion on East 80th Street, one of three in a row built by Frank Woolworth for his daughters.⁸

Charles McCann, who cofounded a law partnership in 1912,⁹ took on important roles in the Woolworth business interests. He was a director and later president of the Broadway–Park Place Corp., organized as owner of the Woolworth Building, commissioned from Cass Gilbert and completed in 1913 as the world’s tallest skyscraper.¹⁰ Frank Woolworth died in 1919, and Helena and her sister Jessie subsequently became directors of the company, an unusual position for women in a large U.S. corporation at the time; Helena remained a director until her death in 1938.¹¹ With their share of the Woolworth fortune, the McCanns became supporters of institutions including the Metropolitan Opera and the New York Philharmonic, and collected *objets d’art*.¹² Helena and her husband led a more retired existence than some of their relatives, much of it spent at Sunken Orchard, the country home they bought in the 1920s in Oyster Bay, Long Island, where they hired nationally renowned landscape architect Annette Hoyt Flanders to redesign the 195-acre grounds.¹³

Charles McCann retired in 1933,¹⁴ and that year made the arrangements for the mausoleum. The McCanns again engaged Flanders to landscape the plot. However, for the mausoleum itself, they did not commission an original design, but chose Farrington’s model No. 4440. Charles McCann died three years after Helena, in 1941; the couple and their four children are interred in the mausoleum.¹⁵

The Mausoleum

The McCann mausoleum, sited inconspicuously in the cemetery’s Pine Plot, faces away from the nearest road, and toward a shaded footpath. Its compact rectangular form, in Light Barre Granite, is framed by slightly battered corner piers supporting a ziggurat-like roof, and sits on a plinth—a

streamlined descendant of the Egyptian revival style that had been a fixture of U.S. cemeteries since the mid-19th century. Apart from the piers, which extend only two inches from the facades at their tops, there is no ornament that protrudes from the mausoleum's surface—not even the cavetto cornice typical of the Egyptian revival. The torus molding around the entrance is carved within the wall's profile, and the single stained-glass window in the rear is deeply recessed; both elements serve to exhibit the thickness of the walls and to give the building an inward-looking appearance.

A 1920 article in *Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening* magazine proclaimed that a sense of “massiveness” and “great strength” were the essential attraction of Egyptian architecture, and that it was important in designing a mausoleum to preserve these effects, rather than creating a “scaled down” temple of “futile diminutiveness.” (Fig. 5.)¹⁶

Accordingly, maximizing its resources to make an impression of size from the front, the structure is much wider than it is deep: at its base, the structure atop the plinth is 14' 8" wide, and 11' 2" deep. (Figs. 1–3.) This emphasis on the front may have been reinforced by the original landscaping. A plan sketch in the Woodlawn archives, likely dating from the 1980s, indicates that bushes at one point lined both sides of the mausoleum; those are now gone, but plantings still partially screen the sides from the frontal view. The archives sadly contain no evidence of Flanders's original landscape plan.

The façade's core consists simply of a pair of massive, whole rectangles of granite to each side of the door, with another forming a huge lintel. This recalls not so much a true building as the stereotypical imagery of a Biblical tomb: an unadorned door in a wall of rock. But this thick dolmen is framed by the battered piers, also monolithic, supporting the recessed roof slabs, supplying the more truly architectural effect.

The battering of the piers relates the structure's silhouette to the Egyptian-revival tradition. But they also have a distinctive effect, because they simultaneously resemble buttresses, though they do not support the walls, and applied pilasters, though they are piers as thick as the walls). This ambiguity lends complexity to the otherwise simple form. The piers' unbroken height, breadth and battering

enhance the sense of “massiveness,” while their shallow degree of protrusion from the main surface—their seeming thinness—turns them into a refined, lighter element to the otherwise thick and blunt building. (Fig. 4.)

The piers also form an important connection to the plinth. While the mausoleum otherwise emphasizes enclosure, the plinth and its stairs give visitors an avenue of approach. From the sides, this plinth looks awkwardly like a sort of sled that the mausoleum, with its dinky side elevation, is riding atop; from the rear, it is self-effacing, because here it extends a mere two inches beyond the mausoleum wall. But at the front, where it matters, the plinth is tied into the structure, because the platforms at each side of the steps form a continuation of the piers (abstractly echoing yet another Egyptian form: the sphinx).

The McCann mausoleum’s unassuming proximity to the Woolworth monument, and their common Egyptian revival lineage, make comparison inevitable. It is notable that the McCanns, members of a family that made such important architectural commissions for their business and their homes, did not follow suit in planning their mausoleum, and that they chose a design so somber in comparison with the ornamental exuberance of the elder Woolworth’s. However, it is not inconsistent with the McCanns’ relatively sedate style of life, having long lived secure in a social sphere that Frank Woolworth pushed so hard to attain. And it may reflect prudent plans being made by a businessman going into retirement during a period of economic gloom. The result is a mausoleum exuding the quiet confidence of a family that has long since made its mark in New York City—and in Woodlawn Cemetery.

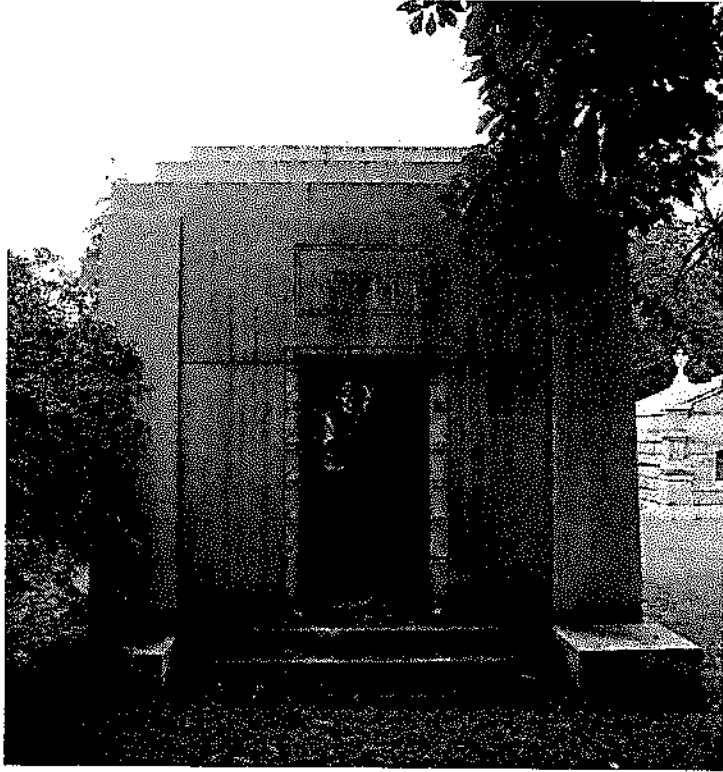


Fig. 1. McCann Mausoleum, Woodlawn Cemetery, front (Woodlawn photos by author)



Fig. 2. McCann Mausoleum, side

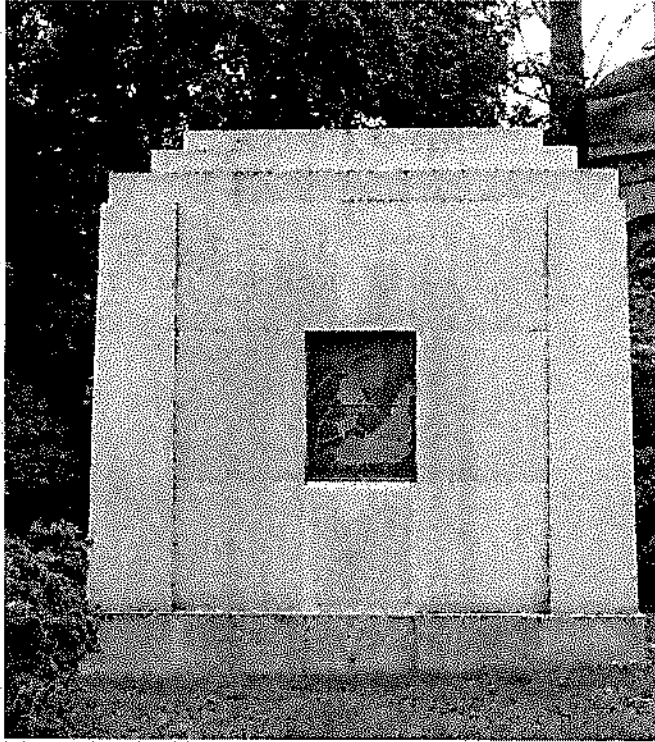


Fig. 3. McCann Mausoleum, rear

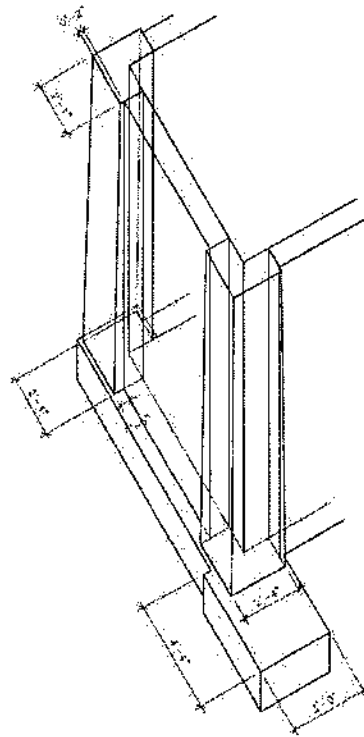


Fig. 4. Detail of corner piers, McCann mausoleum

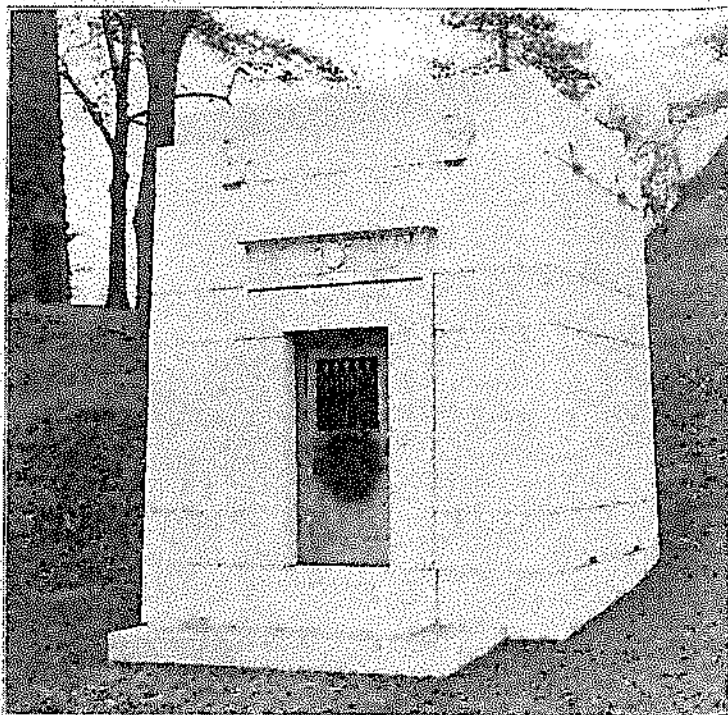


Fig. 5. A "Well Designed Egyptian Mausoleum": Reifsnider Mausoleum, Glendale Cemetery, Akron, Ohio.
Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening (1920)



Fig. 6. F.W. Woolworth Mausoleum, Woodlawn Cemetery

NOTES

¹ "Mrs. C.E.F. McCann Dies in Home Here," *New York Times*, March 16, 1938, p. 23.

² According to newspaper obituaries and the catacomb inscription; in his 1918 draft card and his 1922 passport application, his birth year is given as 1875.

³ E.g. "Tammany Is Doomed," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 27, 1890, p. 1.

⁴ *The Brown Book: A Biographical Record of Public Officials of the City of New York for 1898-9* (New York: Martin B. Brown Co., 1899), p. 190

⁵ *Brown Book*, p. 190; "Philbin to Hunt Vice," *New-York Tribune*, Jan. 1, 1901, p. 3; "Philbin Lops Off Four More Official Heads," *New York Times*, Jan. 1, 1901, p. 2.

⁶ Pitrone, Jean Maddern. *F.W. Woolworth and the American Five and Dime: A Social History*. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co. Inc., 2003), pp. 28, 31.

⁷ Brough, James. *The Woolworths*. New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1982, p. 171.

⁸ "To Pay \$15,000 Rental for Furnished House," *New-York Tribune*, Nov. 17, 1915, p. 6.

⁹ *Columbia Alumni News*, vol. 4., no. 15, December 20, 1912, p. 225.

¹⁰ Pitrone, p. 50; Ingham, John N., *Biographical Dictionary of American Business Leaders* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), vol. 4, p. 1679.

¹¹ "Women on Board. Daughters of Late Capitalist Elected Woolworth Directors," *New York Times*, May 20, 1920, p. 22; *New York Times* 1938.

¹² *New York Times* 1938; Phillips, John Goldsmith, *China-Trade Porcelain: An Account of Its Historical Background, Manufacture, and Decoration, and a Study of the Helena Woolworth McCann Collection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956); "McCann Art Nets \$25,692," *New York Times*, Nov. 18, 1942, p. 18.

¹³ Plunkett-Powell, Karen, *Remembering Woolworth's: A Nostalgic History of the World's Most Famous Five-and-Dime* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 136; Zaitzevsky, Cynthia, *Long Island Landscapes and the Women Who Designed Them* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.), 2009, pp. 174ff.

¹⁴ "Chas. McCann Dies; A Retired Lawyer," *New York Times*, Feb. 1, 1941, p. 17.

¹⁵ *New York Times* 1941.

¹⁶ "Modern Types of Mausoleum Work," Feb. 1, 1920, p. 308.