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Sidney A. Kent Biography and Mausoleum

Introduction

The Woodlawn Cemetery located in the Bronx borough of New York is the permanent residence for more than 130,000 people.¹ The cemetery is recognized for its park-like environment and grand memorial architecture.² Woodlawn is home to over 1,300 monuments and mausoleums that widely vary in architectural style, size and grandeur. One of the most prominent mausoleums at the cemetery is the Sidney A. Kent mausoleum. Located on Central Avenue, which is reserved for the most impressive mausoleums. It is impossible to miss whether approached on foot or by car. Mausoleums of this stature are usually owned and occupied by wealthy and prominent figures who can afford their construction. The Kent Mausoleum was commissioned for Sidney Albert Kent, an important individual in the Chicago meat packing industry and the Chicago Union League.

¹ "Our History: Woodlawn Cemetery Crematory Conservancy." Woodlawn Cemetery Crematory Conservancy. Accessed October 5, 2023. <https://www.woodlawn.org/about/history/>.

² "Woodlawn Cemetery - New York Landmarks Conservancy," New York Landmarks Conservancy - Preserving the City We Love, October 18, 2019, <https://nylandmarks.org/explore-ny/woodlawn-cemetery/>



Figure 1. *Sidney A. Kent*. University of Chicago Photographic Archive, [apf1-03180], Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago

Biography

Sidney Kent (fig. 1) was born in 1834 in Connecticut to parents Albert and Lucinda Kent. Kent was raised in Suffield with three other siblings on his father's farm that belonged to the Kent family for several generations. He had a happy childhood and spent most of it being a farmer, taking on his father's practice. His family was well off and he lived comfortably.³ It was at sixteen when he attended the Connecticut Literary Institution, that he developed a deep interest in education and became a teacher himself after concluding his studies. In 1853 at the age of eighteen his father passed away and Kent moved to Illinois. It is unclear if the events are related but Chicago was a growing city that attracted a lot of youth at the time. He spent his first few years in Chicago as a teacher before his interest in business became apparent.

Sidney wasn't wealthy at the time and took a job as clerk in a dry goods store along with his teaching position. His brother Albert E. Kent was also interested in business and in 1856, taking

³ Goodspeed, Thomas Wakefield. *The University of Chicago Biographical Sketches* (University of Chicago Press, 1922), 84-85

advantage of Sidney's new gained experience, they started a business by selling fur and grain.⁴ There are some speculations that whatever money their father left them assisted them in starting their business, and it is safe to say that the Kent brothers were successful. It was not long after their success that they started their own meat packing company, by observing the market they noticed that it was a potentially profitable venture.⁵ They established their firm A. E. Kent & Company and it was profitable indeed. Sidney Kent became known as a meat packer and it was mainly how he accumulated his wealth. In the early 1860s they opened an office in New York which helped them supply meat to the army during the Civil War, and from there on their rise to success continued.⁶ In the early 1870s the Kent brothers incorporated their company into Chicago Packing & Provision Company alongside Benjamin P. Hutchingson. Success followed suit and the company became one of the most prominent meat processors in the United States, with Sidney Kent as company chair.⁷

Although meat packing was what he was mostly recognized for, Sidney did much more outside of meat packing. From being the president of the Corn Exchange, to director of the Board of Trade, to member of the Chicago Union League, he was involved in the community as well as many industries such as steel and gas.⁸ Sidney Kent was truly a jack of all trades. Until his death

⁴ Goodspeed, Thomas Wakefield. *The University of Chicago Biographical Sketches* (University of Chicago Press, 1922), 86

⁵ Goodspeed, *University of Chicago Biographical Sketches*, 87

⁶ James R. Grossman et al., "Kent (A. E.) & Co," in *Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2004), <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2739.html>.

⁷ James R. Grossman et al., "Chicago Packing & Provision Co.," in *Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2004), <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2605.html>.

⁸ *The Biographical Dictionary and Portrait Gallery of Representative Men of Chicago, Milwaukee and the World's Columbian Exposition*. United States: Brookhaven Press, 1892.

in 1900 he was regarded as a modest man and widely remembered by his employees for sympathizing and adhering to their demands.⁹

The Mausoleum

The Kent Mausoleum is the final resting place for Sidney Kent himself as well as some of his family members. His wife Stella Kent who died in 1913 is buried alongside him, so are both of his daughters.¹⁰ Stella Legare who died in 1922 is buried there with her husband Hugh Legare who died in 1941. Kent's other daughter Helen Massenat who died in 1949 and her urn resides in the mausoleum, as well as the urn of Alberta Metcalf who died in 1962.



Figure 2

Standing within a circular plot the cylindrical mausoleum (fig. 2) stands out within its surroundings. The mausoleum is about 26 feet tall and is covered with a beautiful granite dome for a roof. The entrance extends outside the circular plan of the building and is flanked by two sets of Ionic columns. The columns carry a cornice that wraps around the façade and a pediment that

⁹ Goodspeed, Thomas Wakefield. *The University of Chicago Biographical Sketches* (University of Chicago Press, 1922), 91

¹⁰ Sidney A. Kent. United States Census. Chicago Ward 13, Cook, Illinois, 1870

highlights the entrance, the former is decorated with dentils and the latter is decorated with an elaborate, leaflike granite ornament. A similar detail can be seen above the entrance door. There is a pattern with the ornamentation on the mausoleum, the maker incorporates curves and circles in all details. The polished granite discs on the dome are a great example of that, it's as if the maker sees the circular nature of the mausoleum not just as a form but as a paradigm.

The exterior materials of the mausoleum are fairly simple and repetitive, polished granite on the column shafts and decorative discs, and a unified smooth granite on the steps and remainder of the façade. The once bronze door is completely corroded and tarnished but still holds its decorative elements. Deterioration has eaten its way to the mausoleum, many of its mortar joints are open, inviting in water damage, and the exterior suffers greatly from biological growth and is already showing signs of cracking. A very unfortunate state for a mausoleum of such stature.

Its interior is just as beautiful as its exterior. The same granite used on the exterior can be found in the interior, it is what's used for the table that sits at the farthest end of the mausoleum and houses the urns, and it is also used for some portions of the interior walls. The remainder of the interior consists of three variations of marble, white marble for the chambers, pink marble slabs for the separation between the chambers, and blue marble for the wall base. With open joints seeping water into the mausoleums, it is unfortunately water damaged. Crystallized salt covers a significant area of the marble and the floor shows traces of water pooling. A now crystallized oozing bacterial growth is also affecting the marble chamber.

In order for the Kent Mausoleum to maintain its longevity it must be restored. If not for its architectural significance then for the history of those who lie within its walls.

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