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The Mausoleum of Richard T. Wilson
A Chapel in the Woods.
A Place of Retreat for the Wilson Family



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Richard T. Wilson may not be a household name today, but his impact on New York society is certainly one to be noted. Recently published in 2007 in *The New York Times*, Wilson is mentioned, "In the 1860's, thousands of white southerners moved north to [New York]...they transformed themselves into financiers, merchants, railroad tycoons, lawyers, politicians, and public intellectuals....perhaps the most remarkable of the group was Richard T. Wilson, a former Confederate financier and blockade runner from Georgia."¹ Richard Wilson came from humble upbringings to control an extremely profitable business in New York and contribute to the culture of the city.

Richard Wilson was born into a poor farming family in 1831 in Habersham County, GA. He worked as a clerk in Knoxville, saved his money, and then bought the store.² He set up business with local farmers as a commission merchant and during the Civil War supplied the Confederate troops with food. He became an "exceptional speculator in gold, currency, cotton and real estate, [for himself] and for some of the South's military and political leaders." He took on the risky business of running cotton around federal blockades and eventually he had to leave America. He fled to London with his wife Melissa Johnson and children to become an English agent for the southern cotton crop industry.³

He returned to America in 1866 after receiving presidential pardon and moved to New York. His business became cotton trading and running an investment banking firm, R. T. Wilson & Co. He financed American properties and made money off of the southern railway system. Tangentially he owned some mining and chemical companies. He controlled gas companies in Manhattan and Brooklyn. The ones he owned in Brooklyn eventually became Con Edison.⁴ One of Wilson's most notable contributions to society was the impact he had on the creation of the subway system in New York. He drafted plans that for a publicly financed railroad system that was privately run. He even offered to raise \$15,000,000 to help fund the project.⁵ His idea was controversial but eventually his original concept

¹ Fromson, Brett D. "Confederates Among Us." *The New York Times* 15 Apr. 2007. Print.

² "Wilson Death Puts Many in Mourning." *The New York Times* 27 Nov. 1910. Print.

³ Fromson, Brett D. "Confederates Among Us." *The New York Times* 15 Apr. 2007. Print.

⁴ "Wilson Death Puts Many in Mourning." *The New York Times* 27 Nov. 1910. Print.

⁵ "For Underground Road." *The New York Times* 9 Apr. 1893. Print.

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was altered to pass the Rapid Transit Act in 1984.⁶ Richard Wilson remained prominent in the social scene in New York throughout his life. He retired 4 years before dying of a weak heart.⁷

Richard Wilson left behind 4 children, all of which had married extremely well into high society in New York. The book *Mrs. Astor's New York* explained, "In the marrying business, no one was more successful than Richard T. Wilson."⁸ His eldest daughter Mary R. Wilson married Ogden Goelet, who inherited a large family fortune from real estate investments. Goelet was a well-known yachtsman.⁹ His eldest son, Marshall Orme Wilson married Caroline Schermerhorn Astor, who belonged to the prestigious Astor clan. Lilia Belle Wilson married Hon. Michael Henry Herbert from Salisbury, England. He served as the British Ambassador to America.¹⁰ Richard T. Wilson Jr. married Marion Mason Steadman. Richard Wilson Jr. followed in his father's footsteps and worked in the banking industry and also took great interest in horse racing.¹¹ The youngest daughter, Grace Wilson married Cornelius Vanderbilt III. Richard Wilson's sons, their spouses, and children are also interred in the Wilson mausoleum.

One might think that Richard Wilson would hire a famous architect to design his final place of resting, but he contracted Harrison Granite Company to build his family's mausoleum. Harrison Granite Company was a prestigious company in New York with offices located at 200 5th Ave. Their quarry was in Vermont and they boasted having completed work in forty states ranging from, "Monumental pieces of public interest, to the simplest of private tributes."¹² They designed a miniature Gothic Church for the Wilson family.

The mausoleum is sited upon a small hill on a relatively large plot. The structure is set back off of the road and away from its neighbors to create a place of retreat. There is no clear entry path or designated approach incorporated into the landscape, hinting that the owners wanted a private secluded setting. The Gothic design of the chapel is unique. Gothic architecture is, "Characterized by the pointed arch, the rib vault, the development of the exterior flying buttress, and the gradual reduction of the walls to a system of richly decorated fenestration."¹³ The

⁶ Fitzpatrick, Tracy. *Art and the Subway: New York Underground*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2009. Print.

⁷ "Wilson Death Puts Many in Mourning." *The New York Times* 27 Nov. 1910. Print.

⁸ Homberger, Eric. *Mrs. Astor's New York: Money and Social Power in a Gilded Age*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2002. Print.

⁹ "Death of Ogden Goelet." *The New York Times* 28 Aug. 1987. Print.

¹⁰ "Wilson Death Puts Many in Mourning." *The New York Times* 27 Nov. 1910. Print.

¹¹ *New York State's Prominent and Progressive Men*. New York Tribune, 1902. Print.

¹² *Harrison Granite Company Clientele Catalog*. New York, 1 Jan. 1918. Print.

¹³ Harris, Cyril M. *Illustrated Dictionary of Historic Architecture*. New York: Dover Publications, 1983. Print.

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Wilson mausoleum borrows these Gothic elements and adds them to a simple structure to create a miniature Gothic chapel in the woods.

The grey granite exterior is different from the surrounding mausoleums in its "neighborhood" which are typically white stone and have a stronger presence along the street. The Wilson mausoleum has the feel of a miniature gothic church set back into the woods. The shape is rectangular with the entrance along a shorter side. Facing the entrance, the viewer immediately notices the large buttresses that flank the corners and sides of the building. There are intricate pinnacles at the top of the buttresses. (Fig. 1) As one looks up to these pinnacles, focus shifts to the center and top of the roof where a large cross protrudes. Bringing focus down to human scale, the entryway consists of double bronze doors have equilateral gothic arches and quatrefoils that line the top of the door panel. The surround of the door is flanked by grouped Roman Corinthian columns. Above the doorway a large gothic equilateral archway is carved into the granite that contains two trefoils and a quatrefoil. (Fig. 2)

Inside gothic arches set the scale and repetition of the space. (Fig. 3) There is a prominent axis of symmetry from the entry doors to a stained glass window and altar at the rear of the mausoleum. This axis sets the intended focus for the mausoleum, focusing on the white altar piece which stands out from the smooth pink marble cladded walls and the Tennessee grey marble floor. Twenty catacombs line the walls in four sets of five high. Small bronze ornaments bookend the engraved names of the deceased on each catacomb. The stained glass window is signed by C De Bouche and depicts scenes from the bible. (Fig. 4) Carl de Bouché was a stained glass artist from Munich.¹⁴ He established his own stained glass shop in 1873 and was very well known. He was even appointed Royal Hofglasmaler, which translates to "glass painter."¹⁵

In summary, the Wilson Mausoleum is a perfect representation of the lifestyle of the Wilson family. The use of high quality materials, symmetrical and formal composition, and the addition of intricate gothic detailing express wishes of Richard Wilson, hinting at his personal taste and the things that mattered to him. The elements of the altar, stained glass, elaborate bronze doors show that he wanted this to be a very special place. The choice of a scaled

¹⁴ Raguin, Virginia. (Professor of Art History at Holy Cross). "Question about Stained Glass." E-mail interview. 16 Oct. 2011.

¹⁵ "Karl De Bouché." German Wikipedia, 1 Sept. 2011. Web. 16 Oct. 2011.

down gothic church shows in the early 1900's the Gothic style was revered as a formal style that would be appropriate for his, and his family's, final place of resting. The Wilson Mausoleum serves as a "chapel in the woods" and the secluded nature of the structure shows that the family wished to have it as a private place for prayer and retreat. The design of the building contributes to its significance because it acts as a physical reminder of the presence of the Wilson family in New York. It is a social marker of their wealth and contribution to society.

Referenced Figures



Fig. 1: Pinnacle Detail



Fig 2: Entry Detail

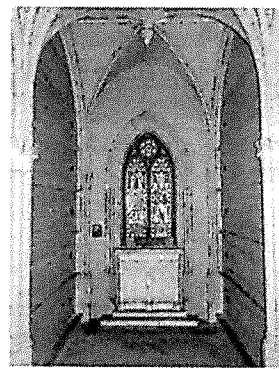


Fig 3: Interior View

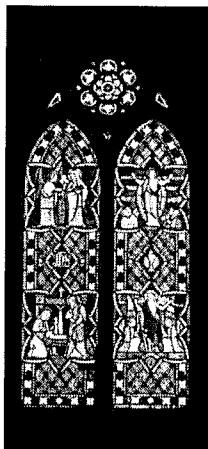


Fig 4: Stained Glass