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Historic Preservation Studio 1: Fall 2021
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October 12, 2021

Donald Robertson Mausoleum: Biographical Research

When Donald Robertson was entombed during the winter of 1927, 4 months after his death at the age of 58, there were two buildings in New York City that bore his name. The more recent structure was his final resting place, a modest mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. The second was just 4 miles away, “Donald Court,” a 10 story elevator building at the entrance to the George Washington Bridge. Today only one of these buildings still stands, with Donald Court lost to New York City’s urban renewal projects of the 1950s. Yet other structures from Donald Robertson’s life still exist and can help share the story of a Scottish immigrant who found great success in the wild world of New York City real estate.

Donald Robertson was born in 1868 in Forres Scotland to Angus Robertson and Janet Jamieson.¹ While in Scotland, Robertson was a farmer before his sisters saved enough money to send him to the United States in the spring of 1887.² By this point he had already met his future wife Helen Ann Bowie. Helen was from Inverness and the daughter of Helen Ann MacPhail and James Bowie—a wine and spirits merchant who had made his fortune in the gold fields of Melbourne, Australia.³ Information on Robertson’s first few years in the New York is limited, but he appears to have been successful early on with an 1890 photo showing him in full Scottish garb taken at Fredricks, the prestigious portrait photography studio in lower Manhattan.⁴ By the late 1890s Robertson felt confident enough to send for Helen Bowie who arrived in New York City and married Donald Robertson in 1898.⁵

By the 1900 census Robertson is listed as living in an apartment building on West 104th Street with his wife and first child Ella, with his occupation listed as a carpenter.⁶ Listing his occupation as a carpenter likely understates Robertson’s true employment at this time as a 1897 listing in the *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide* has him constructing a 5-story brick apartment building in the Melrose section of the South Bronx designed by the architect W.C. Dickerson.⁷ The remainder of the 19th century mostly sees Donald Robertson and his likely partner Alexander Grant trading properties between 100th and 125th Street in Manhattan.

By 1903, Robertson appears firmly established as a New York City real estate developer. He alters the brick tenements at numbers 1570 through 1576 Madison Avenue into mixed use properties by adding ground floor and basement commercial stores.⁸ The same year he erects and then quickly sells a

¹ Cynthia Archer, “Pedigree Chart for Donald Robertson” (Shared with author, October 2021).

² Cynthia Archer, Elizabeth Hill, and Susan Hill Cody, Interview with Cynthia Archer, Elizabeth Hill, & Susan Hill Cody, Zoom, October 8, 2021; Donald Robertson, “U.S. Passport Application” (Department of State, 1920).

³ Archer, Hill, and Cody, Interview with Cynthia Archer, Elizabeth Hill, & Susan Hill Cody; Ella Robertson Brown, “James Bowie,” Photograph of letter, n.d.

⁴ Fredricks, “Donald Robertson” (Fredricks (770 Broadway, NY), 1890).

⁵ Ancestry.com, “New York, New York, U.S., Extracted Marriage Index, 1866-1937, Certificate 6525” (Ancestry.com Operations, 2014).

⁶ “United States Census 1900,” New York, New York; ED 552, sheet 9.

⁷ “23d and 24th WARDS,” *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, January 30, 1897.

⁸ “Alterations: Borough of Manhattan,” *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, June 13, 1903.

6-story tenement at 113 west 106th Street⁹ and plans a pair of 5-story apartments at 167th Street and Amsterdam Avenue (501 W. 167th and 2170 Amsterdam).¹⁰ The same year and just a block south Robertson quickly builds and then sells a different pair of 5-story flats also on upper Amsterdam (2132-2136 Amsterdam).¹¹ The year ends with Robertson buying a vacant lot on the northeast corner of Audubon Avenue and 172nd Street, which he will quickly sell the following year.¹²

In 1905 he is listed as a builder living in an apartment building on West 108th Street with his wife, her sister Marjory Bowie, and their two daughters Ella and Evelyn.¹³ His position is firmly established and he continues to build in a typology that he has found successful—5 or 6 story brick tenements with ground floor retail. The corner of St. Nicholas Avenue and 171st typifies Robertson's construction with both the northeast and southeast corners showing a pair of brick tenements designed by Moore & Landsiedel.¹⁴ The buildings are styled the same way with richly detailed terra cotta window surrounds, prominent quoining and a sheet metal cornice (NB: only extant on northern building). Importantly the buildings both have stores on the ground floor which appears typical of Robertson's buildings.¹⁵ He does not appear to have held onto the properties long, with the smaller southwest corner building selling in January of 1906.¹⁶

The next decade sees continued success for Robertson. He continues to build, buy, and sell properties in northern Manhattan and the Bronx. The 1910 Census has him living at 312 west 109th Street with his wife, two daughters (Ella and Evelyn), a sister of his from Scotland and a servant.¹⁷ Further evidence to his success is a 1910 announcement that he will erect a new 6-story elevator building on the southeast corner of St. Nicholas Avenue and 190th Street, but not immediately because "Mr. Robertson is planning a trip to Europe."¹⁸

Robertson's biggest project was announced in January 1911 when it was revealed that he planned a 10-story elevator building on 179th Street and Broadway.¹⁹ Donald Court cemented Robertson's status as a Washington Heights builder. At a time when the area had only tenements and 5 or 6 story apartment houses (with only some having elevators) Robertson had erected a building twice the height of its neighbors. Future news reports about Robertson's activities would now refer to him as a "pioneer builder of apartment houses on the Heights."²⁰

Robertson moved into Donald Court upon its completion and would spend the rest of his life there. In both the 1920 and 1925 censuses Donald and Helen would be listed together with their daughter Ella and her husband William Brown listed in a separate apartment in the same building. Robertson's real estate activities did not end with Donald Court and in fact he sold at least some of the property off fairly soon after its completion. He continued to trade and build properties in Washington Heights, but also extended further afield acquiring the 1,500 seat Luxor Theater in the Mt. Eden section

⁹ "Conveyances," *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, January 16, 1904.

¹⁰ "Apartments, Flats and Tenements," *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, December 24, 1904.

¹¹ "New Owner Bailey Mansion," *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, October 29, 1904.

¹² "Conveyances," *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, December 3, 1904.

¹³ New York Census, "New York State Census 1905," 1905.

¹⁴ "Apartments, Flats and Tenements," *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, April 1, 1905.

¹⁵ 1430 and 1460 St. Nicholas Avenue and 572 West 173rd are other Robertson building from the same era with a similar typology and style

¹⁶ "Private Sale Market Continued," *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, January 6, 1906.

¹⁷ "United States Census 1910," New York, New York; ED 729, Sheet 7.

¹⁸ "Builders to Improve St. Nicholas Avenue Plot," *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, March 19, 1910.

¹⁹ "For a Washington Heights Corner," *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, January 21, 1911.

²⁰ "Haven Court in New Ownership," *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, September 15, 1917.

of the Bronx (purchased in 1925 and ultimately sold by his sons-in-law in 1934) and the Saarfield, a 10-story apartment house on Broadway and 143rd Street (sold in 1928).²¹

Firmly established as a successful real estate developer, Donald Robertson traveled widely with multiple trips to Europe and beyond. The most remarkable of these journeys was a round-the-world cruise in the first half of 1925 that took Donald and Helen Robertson through Asia, India, up the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean and finally to Europe.²² This trip is well documented in the photo album that the Robertson descendants still have. Just a few years later Donald and Helen would travel to Scotland aboard the Anchor liner California.²³ Back at home Robertson had become a member of the Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, the St. Andrew's Society of New York, the Neighborhood Social and Industrial Club, and was on the Board of the Upper Manhattan Property Owner's Association.²⁴

In late October 1926 Donald Robertson passed away. His funeral was held at North Presbyterian Church just a mile south from his apartment in Donald Court.²⁵ Soon after his widow Helen appears to have begun the process of building a mausoleum at Woodlawn. There is no indication that Robertson was involved in the design of his mausoleum, but its design is clearly reflective of his life and love of Scotland. Displayed on the door is the Robertson clan crest—a hand holding a crown—with the motto “Virtutis Gloria Merces” (*glory is the reward of valor*) spelled out beneath. Entering the mausoleum a painted-glass window of St. Andrew, patron saint of Scotland, greets the viewer.

The mausoleum was designed by Farrington Gould and Hoagland with a design approved by Helen Robertson, who managed the construction of the mausoleum. The design is unique for Farrington with a very modern appearance unlike other mid-1920s mausoleums they designed. An examination of two sets of Farrington mausoleum photographs suggests that the lack of traditional Egyptian or classical motifs is quite rare for the company.²⁶ Instead the design might be best described as Art Deco with a sweeping concave entrance. While research has not located any buildings in this style erected by Robertson it is not surprising that a real estate family would be familiar with the modern style. No significant plantings are extant although previously there may have been some as Robertson's son-in-law requested the trimming of an overhanging tree in 1966 (the tree no longer exists).²⁷

The exterior of the mausoleum is a light-grey granite. Four battered columns mark the corners of the mausoleum, with monolithic blocks placed in-between to make up the walls. Horizontal granite blocks are set above the four columns with a carved flower detail at the corners. The roof consists of a single granite block with two sloped surfaces meeting in a peaked roof above the mausoleum. At the front and rear of the roof of the mausoleum additional carved granite presents a triangular pediment.

²¹ “Bronx Deals Lead Quiet Market Here,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 1931; “Investors in \$750,000 Deal: Donald Robertson Acquires The Saarsfield, On Broadway,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 1923.

²² “Cunard-Anchor Liner Sails on World Cruise,” *New York Herald Tribune*, January 26, 1925.

²³ “11 Liners Sail for Europe in Busy Week End,” *New York Herald Tribune*, June 5, 1926.

²⁴ “Died.,” *New York Times*, October 30, 1926; “Heights Owners Elect Officers,” *Real Estate Record and Builders Guide*, December 13, 1919; “Industrial Club Meeting,” *New York Herald Tribune*, November 22, 1925.

²⁵ “Died.”

²⁶ Farrington Gould Hoagland, Inc, *Farrington Gould and Hoagland, Incorporated : Memorial Designers and Builders : Mausoleums, Monuments, Statuary* (Farrington Gould Hoagland, Inc, 1927), <https://archive.org/details/farringtongouldh00farr>; Farrington Gould Hoagland, Inc., *Photographs of Mausoleums* (Farrington Gould Hoagland, Inc., n.a.).

²⁷ “Notes from Call with Mr Robert E. Hill,” January 25, 1966, Mausoleum Owners Correspondence Box 12, Columbia University Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library--Woodlawn Cemetery.

The entrance to the mausoleum consists of a large granite block that is set into the ground. It leads to a set of stairs, flanked by granite urns, that rise towards the concave entrance of the mausoleum. The entrance to the mausoleum consists of what appears to be a bronze door set into a large carved piece of granite that gently curves, along both the horizontal and vertical axes, towards the door (*see figure D*). Surrounding the mausoleum is a continuous series of large cut blocks that provide a uniform ledge around the structure, at the same level as the threshold. This is most clearly seen from the side (*see figure C*). The exterior of the mausoleum is plainly decorated with just the aforementioned carved flowers, the occupants' names, and simple metal vents that appear to be bronze or another copper containing alloy.

The interior of the mausoleum is what appears to be a polished pink Tennessee limestone. This material lines the walls and ceiling of the mausoleum while a polished grey granite makes up the floor. The limestone fronts of the occupied catacombs are carved with the names and dates of the deceased. Opposite the entrance is a painted stained-glass window set into a metal frame. Below this is a bench carved from the same limestone upon which are three urns (*see figure E*). The interior is plainly decorated with elegant moldings and simple metal rosettes supporting the ceiling.

Today the mausoleum is much as one would have found it in 1927. The only initial difference is the inclusion of the "Brown" name above the door. This was added by his son-in-law William Brown who had married his daughter Ella in 1918. Family lore suggests that William insisted on adding his name to the mausoleum with one grandchild recalling he said: "If I'm going in that god-damn place I'm putting my name on it."²⁸

There is existing damage to the mausoleum, but it does not appear to be structural. There is water exposure in the northeast corner of the mausoleum that is causing deterioration to the polished finish from the interior Tennessee pink marble (*see figure H*). The water could be from condensation in the attic, but could also be a leak related to the insipient spalling of the large granite pediment on the east side of the mausoleum's roof (*see figure G*). Some smaller pieces of granite have already flaked off and there is meaningful damage to the mortar in this area, which indicates water intrusion. This may in time lead to movement of the stone through freeze-thaw cycling or may allow water to leak into the interior of the structure. The mineral deposits (likely calcites born by rainwater running through mortar joints) on the ledge that surrounds the mausoleum, directly below where water runs off from the damaged roof area, is additional evidence for the degradation of the roof's mortar. What caused the damage to the pediment is not known, but may be original to the stone (e.g., micro fractures) or was caused or exacerbated during installation—either way the crack has likely progressed over time. Notably the western pediment, which is of the same design, does not have a similar failure. A permanent solution is needed as the site is hard to access and there is a danger of further damage occurring. Freeze-thaw cycling and continued exposure to water will likely continue to deteriorate the mortar and potentially expand the existing cracks, potentially creating pathways for water into the interior.

The other area of concern is the painted stained-glass window of Saint Anthony. The image's border has flaked off and is only still extant at the bottom of the window. So far, the central figure has remained intact. The windows seal has clearly failed with light visible through a crack on the southern

²⁸ Interview with Josh Brown, Telephone, October 7, 2021.

side of the window frame. It is possible that the intrusion of moisture through the unsealed window frame is causing the deterioration of the border. It is also possible that the border was painted without firing the glass and as such the pigment is not integral to the actual glass (unlike the central figure). It would be advisable to both re-seal the window and stabilize the existing paint border.

On the exterior of the mausoleum there is biological growth on both the north and south side of the mausoleum as well as the large front granite slab before the mausoleum. However, this is an aesthetic rather than structural concern at this time. Additionally, the bronze door appears to have had either an unevenly applied coating of some sort or an improper cleaning that is giving the door a two-toned appearance (*see figure F*). Ideally this coating could be removed and the door could either be left untreated, or treated with a more appropriate chemical to achieve the desired patina. Overall, for an almost 100-year-old structure, it is in very good shape. The mausoleum stands firmly on West Border Avenue with its concave facade gently inviting visitors in.

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FREDRICKS,
1890.

770 BROADWAY, N. Y.

Figure 1: Donald Robertson (courtesy of Robertson family)

Pedigree Chart for Donald Robertson

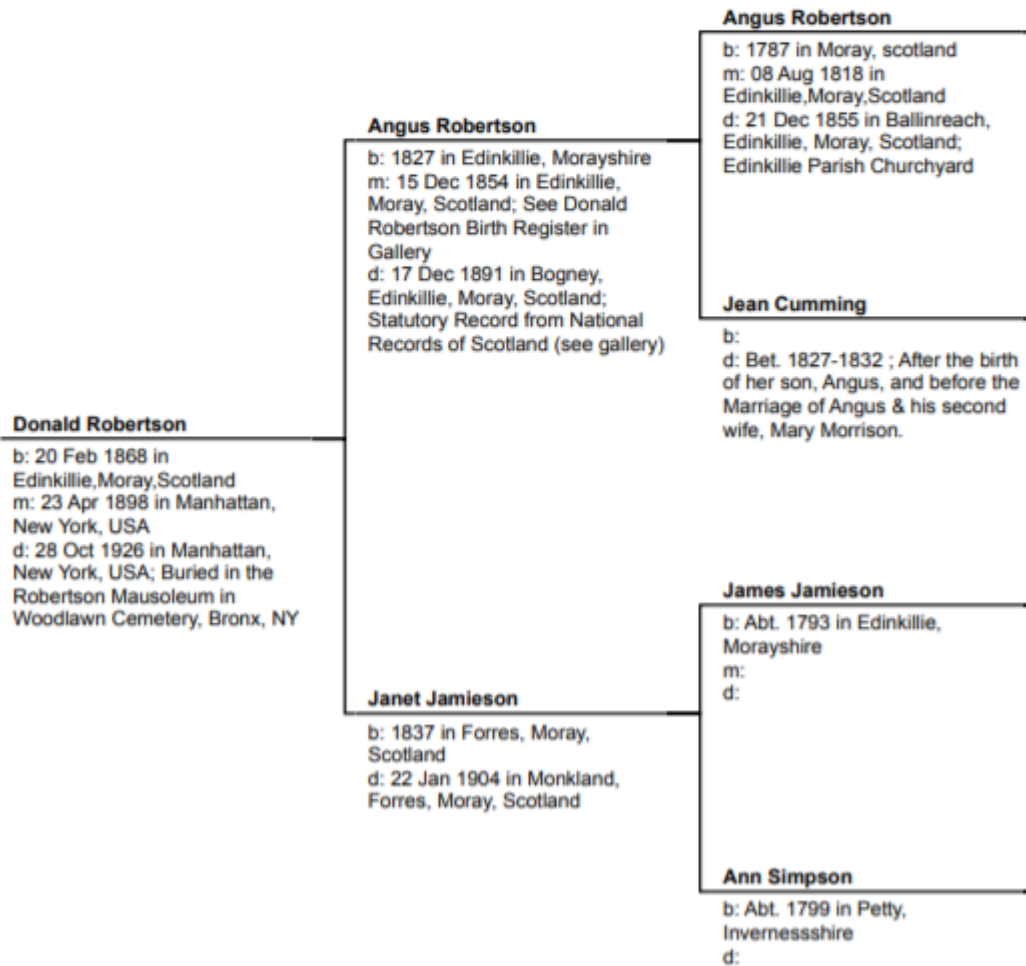


Figure 2: Donald Robertson Pedigree Chart (*courtesy of Robertson family*)

Pedigree Chart for Helen Ann Bowie

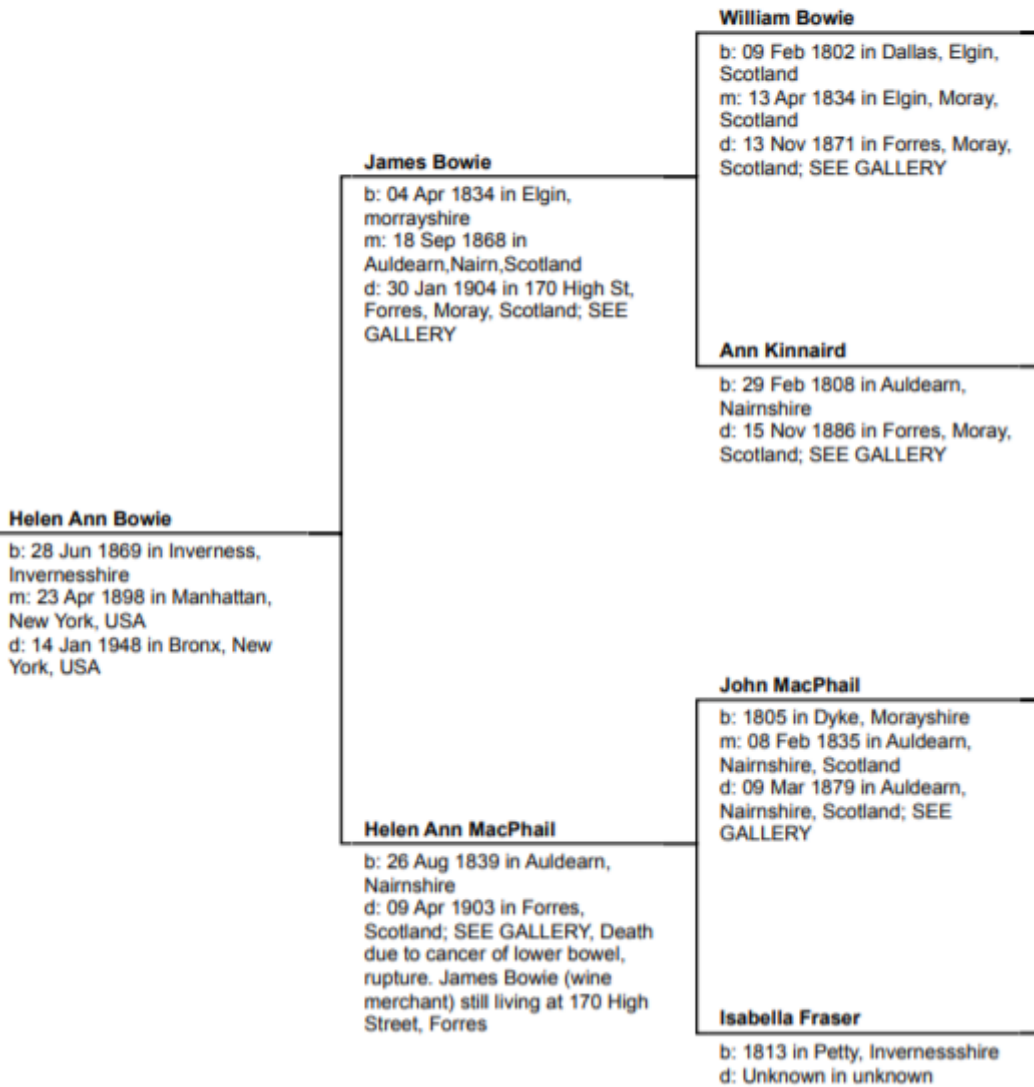


Figure 3: Helen Ann Bowie (courtesy of Robertson family)



Figure 4: St. Nicholas Avenue and 171st (Google Street View)



Figure 5: St. Nicholas Avenue and 171st (New York Municipal Archives)



Figure 6: Donald Court, 700 West 179th street (at Broadway) (New York Municipal Archives)



Figure A & B: Robertson Mausoleum and context

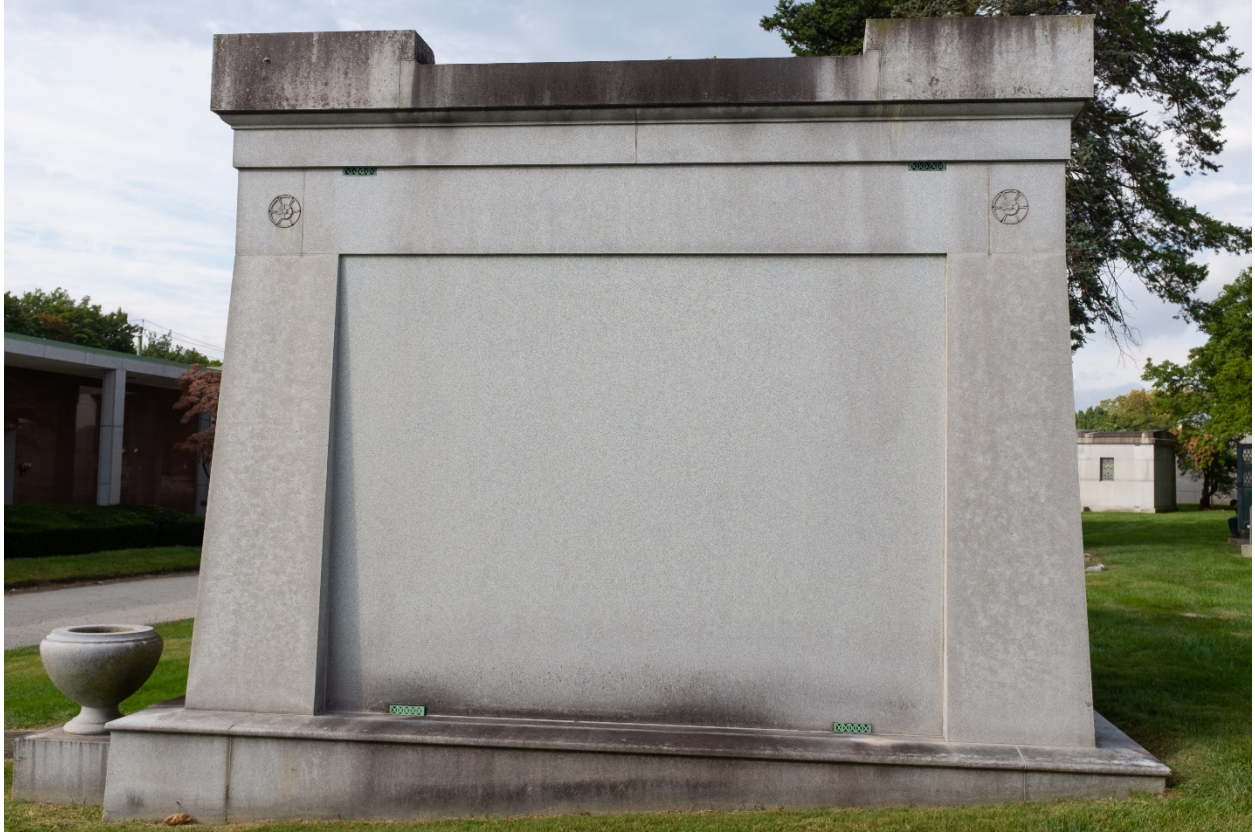


Figure C & D: Robertson Mausoleum (south elevation and facade)



Figure E: Robertson Mausoleum interior



Figure F: Robertson Mausoleum (door detail)



Figure G: Insipient spalling on east roof



Figure H: Interior water damage (northeast corner)