

McAlpin Mausoleum

Introduction:

The McAlpin Mausoleum in Woodlawn Cemetery houses William Willet McAlpin and family. The mausoleum was commissioned by his wife shortly after his death in 1925, and was designed by mausoleum architects, Farrington Gould & Hoagland. The building is best understood through an examination of the personal and architectural climate in which it was designed and built.

Biography:

William Willet McAlpin was one of the six children of successful industrialist and real estate developer David McAlpin. William was born in 1858 and spent his childhood in Hanover, New Jersey.¹ In his early 20s he moved to New York and began his career working as a clerk in a leather store.² At 25 he married Mary Louise Close and they had three daughters and one son. Later in his career he transitioned into his father's tobacco manufacturing business.³

In addition to his commercial pursuits, William served as a director of the McAlpin Hotel. The land on which the hotel was constructed was owned by the trust David McAlpin had left to his children. Built in 1912 by William's brother, Edwin A. McAlpin, the hotel was the largest in the world at completion, staffing 1,500 employees and accommodating 2,500 guests (Figure 1). In addition to the hotel's central location at 34th Street and Broadway (with excellent

¹ Ancestry.com. 1870 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009. Images reproduced by FamilySearch.

² Ancestry.com and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 1880 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010. 1880 U.S. Census Index provided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

³ Ancestry.com. 1900 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004.

proximity to Penn Station), the hotel's amenities were unprecedented, ranging from Turkish baths to a hospital wing.⁴

Towards the end of his life William's financial inheritance and successful professional career provided for the construction of a large house at 11 East 90th Street, where he lived directly adjacent to his brother's residence at 9 East 90th Street. On September 26th, 1925 McAlpin passed away from heart disease at New York Presbyterian Hospital.⁵ A few months after William's passing, his wife commissioned the McAlpin mausoleum for their branch of the family, to be located in Woodlawn Cemetery.⁶

Building Site:

The McAlpin mausoleum is located on a corner plot a short distance from the Jerome Avenue Woodlawn entrance. As one approaches the mausoleum, one follows Filbert until rounding the corner onto Hickory Avenue, where the long vista reveals a first glimpse of the McAlpin Mausoleum. The building's front façade is angled slightly on its plot in such a way as to face outward towards approaching visitors. Yet, it is modestly sized in its landscape, and is consistent in both lot and size with the majority of surrounding mausoleums (See Figure 2).

As it is seen today, the mausoleum's plantings are extremely overgrown along three of the four sides of the building, nearly hiding the front façade entirely from view (Figure 3). The back façade, the only unobstructed view of the mausoleum, reveals a clearer image of the varied gradient of the plot, and the full depth of the plinth (Figure 4). In addition to the mausoleum itself, there is one visible grave on the plot directly to the Northwest of the mausoleum which

⁴ "Flock to Inspect the Biggest Hotel." *The New York Times*. 30 Dec. 1912: Web.

⁵ "William McAlpin Dies" *The New York Times*. 27 Sept. 1925, Obituary sec.: E7. Web.

⁶ "McAlpin Mausoleum." Woodlawn Cemetery Correspondence Archives, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, NY.

belongs to William McAlpin's son-in-law, Andrew Shiland (who died in 1963). The modest marker is now almost entirely masked by planting. Given the more refined landscaping of many of the surrounding mausoleums, which are consistent with photographs from the 1920s of other mausoleums designed and constructed by the same builders as the McAlpin mausoleum, it seems likely that the original landscape was intended to be similar; the landscaping could have been a simple lawn with a few plantings in order to continue the surrounding landscape.

Facade:

The shape of the building is large, yet restrained. Resting upon a square plinth about 13'x13', the mass of the building is solidly grounded by its proportions and materiality. The thick plinth, building, and even the roof create a firmly grounded mass. The masonry facades consist of medium-sized granite blocks, with the heights of the blocks shortening as the building rises. On the front facade, the linear pattern of the masonry is only broken where the voussoirs splay above the carved frieze. Although the facade is symmetrical along the center axis, the main design principle of the facade is its centrality. The ornamentation of the facade is concentrated in the brass doors at the center of building, with a decorative carved frieze directly above. From here, the centrality is further accentuated by the radiating voussoirs and the narrowing layers of the roof structure. (Figures 5-6)

One enters the mausoleum by a single step onto the building's plinth, and opening a pair of bronze doors. The center panel of each door houses a lion's head doorknocker, an image and function that dates to Ancient Greece. Doorknockers were used in the practical sense of announcing one's arrival, and the lion's head/ lion form was associated with strength and

guardianship.⁷ Though a drastically different scale, precedents for the use of lions date to Ancient Mediterranean civilizations such as at the gates of Mycenae, where large lions were used to mark the city's entrance (Figure 6).⁸ Given the size and familiar imagery of the cast bronze doors, they are quite possibly a stock design. The other central ornament on the façade is a carved semi-circle frieze. The carving depicts a capped urn with an active flame, nestled among a mixture of vegetation and decorative ribbons. The urn with the flame, a common motif in cemetery architecture, is representative of eternal remembrance.

The top of the beginning begins with a cavetto, upon which rests the egg and dart molding, followed by a simple flat cornice with a single carved rectangular ornament (spanning the width of the building). The cornice is topped by a three tiered roof comprised of smaller and smaller layers in width, rising to a slight peak, a general form seen in mausoleum architecture in ancient Rome, notably at Pompeii (Figure 8).⁹

Interior:

In plan, the building is also organized around centrality. Upon entering the small room, the visitor's eye is drawn to the large stained-glass window on the far wall. The vibrantly colored window depicts a single female carrying a combination of a palm branch, a lamp, and a rose, with a ground plane comprised of a variety of plant forms, most notably lilies. Each of the four items holds symbolic meaning related to the afterlife, and, while they can be associated with religion, none of the four is connected to a singular religion alone. Palm leaves were a symbol of immortality in Ancient Egypt, and later adapted by many Greco-Roman cultures as an accessory

⁷ "The Evolution of the Door-Knocker," *The Art World* 3, no. 5 (1918): v, vii-viii.

⁸ Wiener, Malcolm. "Mycenae." *The Homer encyclopedia*. Wiley-Blackwell, 01 Jan 2011. 535-538.

⁹ "Street of the Tombs, Pompeii, Italy." *Color Photochrom*. Between ca. 1890 and ca. 1900. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>

to the goddess Nike, symbolic of victory. In Christianity the image had similarly powerful meaning as a form most often seen in connection with Palm Sunday, as the branches are said to have been part of the ceremony welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem, and an understanding of triumph.¹⁰ The symbolism of the rose has ancient roots in the Greco-Roman world, where in the myth of Aphrodite (Goddess of love) it is used as a symbol of love conquering death. In later Christianity, the rose takes on even further meaning as a symbol of Heaven and celestial bliss.¹¹ The lamp also holds meaning, most notably in Christianity, where light represents the physical manifestation of the divine presence.¹² The fourth item depicted in the window, a lily, is often used in relation to the Virgin Mary for her purity and reverence, concepts rooted in the ancient Greek understanding and symbolism of the flower.¹³

The remainder of the space is generally refined. The walls and floor are covered in a white marble. On either side of the window there are five stacked catacombs (4 above grade, 1 below), though only six of the ten spaces have been occupied. Each catacomb is denoted by a simple horizontal marble band dividing the layers, with two decorative bronze cast finials mounted onto the larger slab of each catacomb. Even the names on each catacomb are subtle; the occupants' names are written in recessed text that is carved into the stone.

¹⁰ "Palm." *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Michael Ferber. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. *Credo Reference*. Web. 15 Oct 2015.

¹¹ "Rose." *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Michael Ferber. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. *Credo Reference*. Web. 15 Oct 2015.

¹² "Light and Darkness." *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Michael Ferber. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. *Credo Reference*. Web. 15 Oct 2015.

¹³ "Lily." *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Michael Ferber. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. *Credo Reference*. Web. 15 Oct 2015.

Design Precedents:

Precedents for the design of the McAlpin mausoleum are a combination of referenced Classical symbolism and contemporary architectural style. The mausoleum was designed and built by mausoleum builder and architects Farrington Gould & Hoagland. According to the company's 1927 catalog, they had constructed hundreds of mausoleums, including 77 in Woodlawn Cemetery.¹⁴ Although similarities between design elements in the McAlpin mausoleum and many of the firm's other projects can be drawn, these comparisons only serve to further underscore the McAlpin mausoleum as a refined and austere structure (Figure 9). Given the McAlpin family's known affluence from the tobacco and real estate industries, the building's modest presence and austerity are clearly intentional, and point towards a larger governing style:

While the Classical elements in the building serve to solidify the building's function as a mausoleum, the austerity of the ornamentation (and the choice to subtly reference the Classical world), the construction, and the materiality are indicative of the time in which it was built (late 1920s). The use of common architectural elements like egg and dart moldings- that directly cite Classical architecture- were consistently used throughout the early 20th century, though much more selectively than in the past, and allowing for the use of individual elements rather than the entire Order in a given structure. Solid, monumental masses were also an appealing form in architecture of this period, using heavy, grounded forms to underscore importance or power of the structure, often achieved through masonry construction (often of this medium size) blocks,

¹⁴ "Farrington Gould and Hoagland, Incorporated: memorial designers and builders: mausoleums, monuments, statuary." New York: Farrington Gould & Hoagland, Inc., 1927. Avery Classics Collection, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, NY.

and careful, calculated workmanship.¹⁵ Examples of this style can be seen in the work of McKim, Mead & White, who, catering to a similarly affluent clientele in the same early 20th century time period and location, employed many of these refined styles. Most notably, the use of masonry blocks rising nearly straight from the building's base, while citing assorted Classical and Renaissance styles in details and decorations to achieve sophistication and refinement (Figures 10-11).

Conclusion:

Within the field of early 20th century architecture, the McAlpin mausoleum is emblematic of its time. The decorative elements chosen highlight symbols of divinity and the afterlife which remain timeless for their consistency across Western cultures and religions. Yet, the austerity of the overall structure organizes these elements into a confident and polished building that at once stands out for its attractive and refined design, while also understanding and contributing to the existing landscape in which it was built.

¹⁵ Greenberg, Allan, and Michael George. *The Architecture of McKim, Mead, and White: 1879-1915*. Lanham: Taylor Trade Pub, 2013.

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- Ancestry.com. 1900 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004.
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- The Evolution of the Door-Knocker," *The Art World* 3, no. 5 (1918): v, vii-viii.
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- "William McAlpin Dies" *The New York Times*. 27 Sept. 1925, Obituary sec.: E7. Web.

Figures

Figure 1: "McAlpin Hotel File,"Corsa Hotel Printed Collection,
New York Historical Society Library, New York, NY.



Figure 2A) Site Context Plan

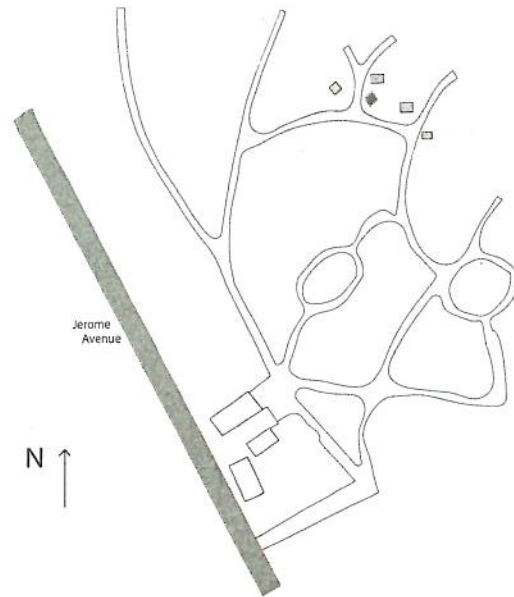
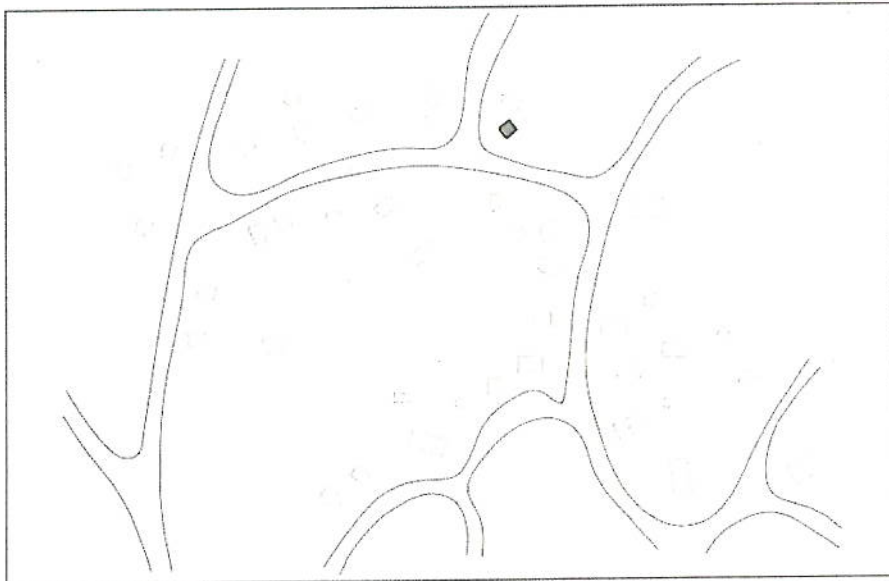


Figure 2B) Comparison of mausoleum footprint size in immediate area



2C) Diagram of (angled) orientation for mausoleum as opposed to aligning with boundary lines

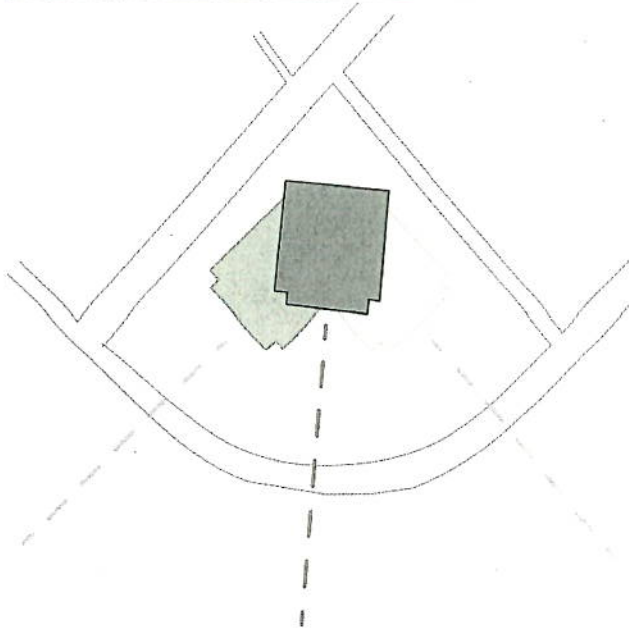


Figure 3: McAlpin Mausoleum, Woodlawn Cemetery. Front Façade Photograph, October 2015.



Figure 4: McAlpin Mausoleum, Woodlawn Cemetery. Back Façade Photograph, October 2015.

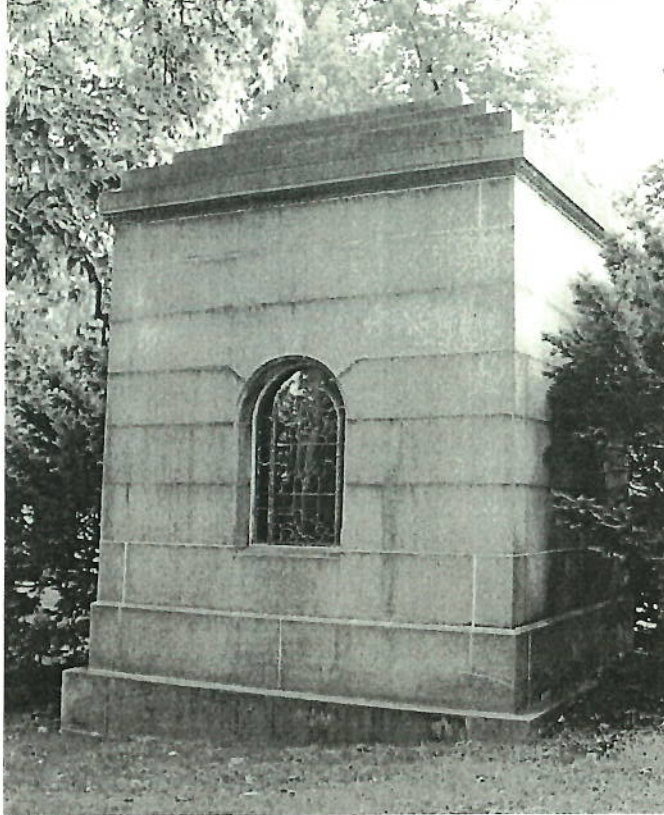


Figure 5: Diagram Examining Plan and Façade Proportions and Symmetry

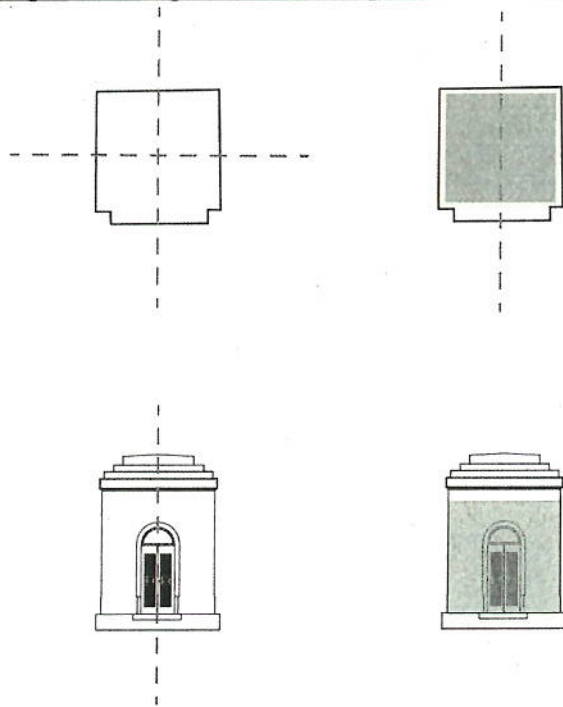


Figure 6: Diagram Examining the Centrality of the Facade

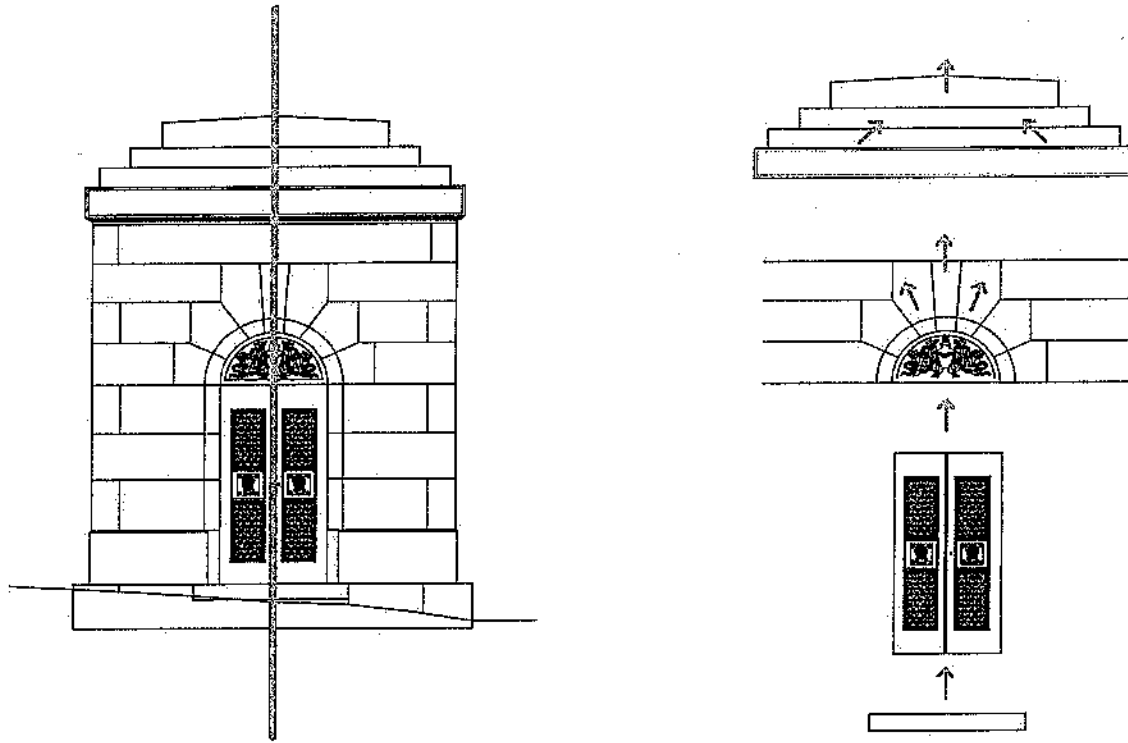


Figure 7: Mycenae Lion's Gate

Wiener, Malcolm. "Mycenae." *The Homer Encyclopedia*. Wiley-Blackwell, 01 Jan 2011. 535-538.



Figure 8: Pompeii Tombs

“Street of the Tombs, Pompeii, Italy.” Color Photochrom. Between ca. 1890 and ca. 1900. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/pp.print>

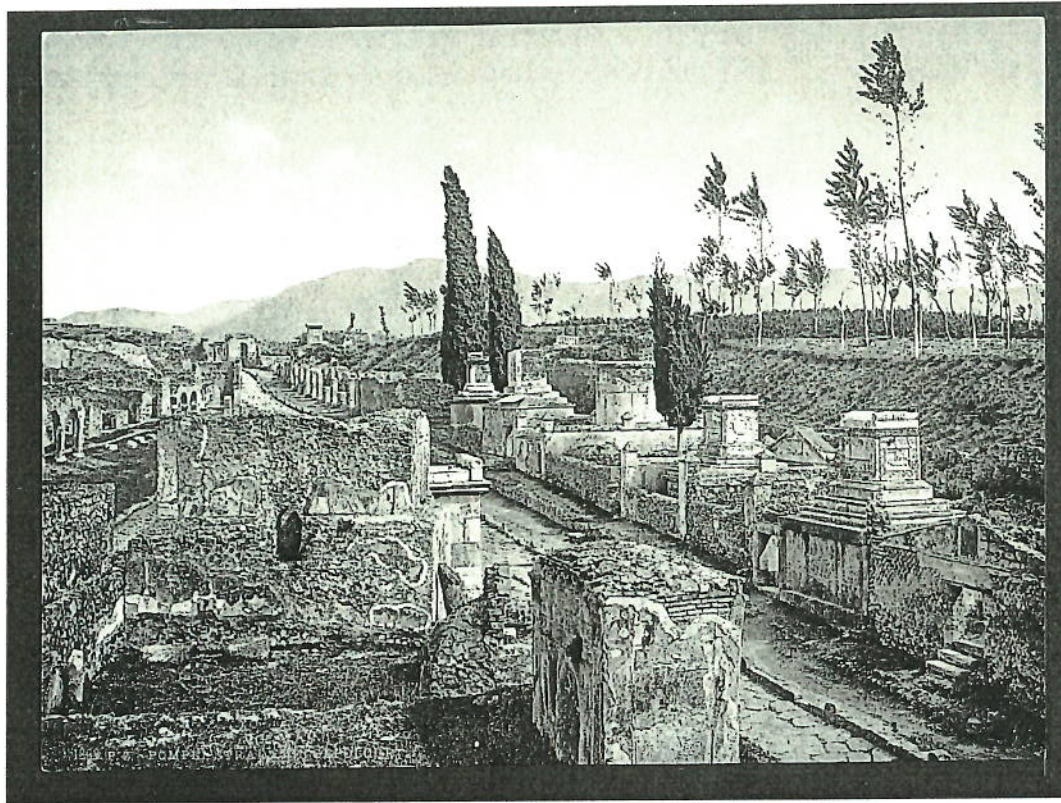
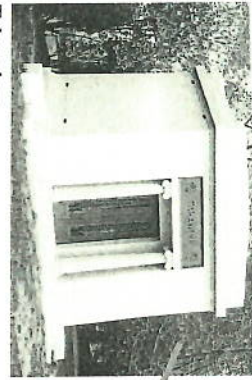


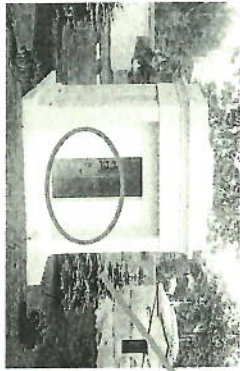
Figure 9: Farrington Gould & Hoagland Mausoleums



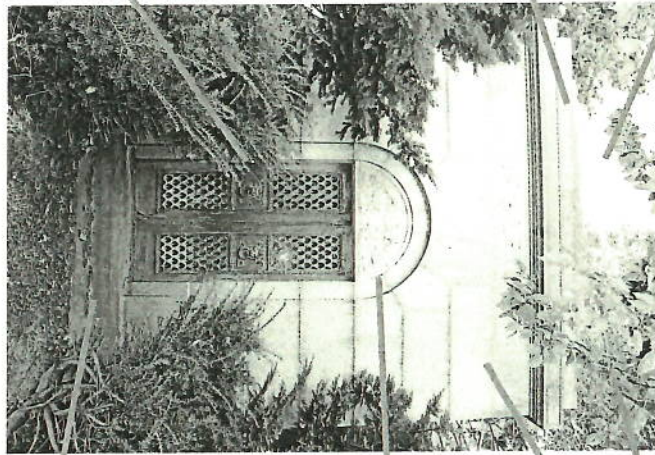
Takamine
Cornice and Moldings



Haberstroh
Roof Pitch and Plinth



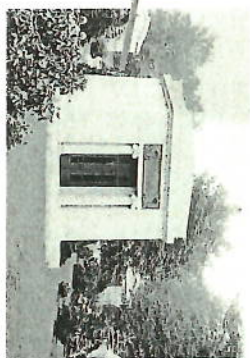
Summerfield
Lion's Head Door-Knockers



Nauss
Stained Glass Recessed and masonry



Carscallen Family,
Arched Decorative Carving



Ottcarunk
Approach and Base

Figure 10A) Metropolitan Club New York, Designed by McKim, Mead & White, Built in 1893. Shutterstock.com



Figure 10B) Hamilton Grange Branch, New York Public Library, Designed by McKim, Mead & White, Built in 1905. Shutterstock.com

