

The Business of Dying:
The Adams Mausoleum at Woodlawn Cemetery



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Historic Preservation — Studio I

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The ways in which humans have mourned and cared for their dead over the course of time has evolved significantly in the last few centuries. Previously, with a focus on preservation through mummification or careful remote disposal for the purpose of disease mitigation, the management of corpses has since blossomed into an entire industry purported to handle, celebrate and adorn those who have passed on. The first funeral home in the United States was opened in 1756 and since then, has become the assumed method for managing and presenting our dead, post-hummus²⁴. Naturally, highly decorated cemeteries and architecturally lavish memorials followed closely in precession. Within this ecosystem, prominent social figures within society are afforded lush funeral celebrations at their departure. What is not guaranteed, is the continuum of their affixed legacy, or the longevity of surviving familial assets. In turn, the sustaining management of the space meant to commemorate their memory is often left in limbo. The Adams family mausoleum is just one of several examples of time-bound affluence and influence that has eroded with time and left a remarkable memorial to lay in wait for careful repair and maintenance²⁴.

Woodlawn represents one of the largest and grandest cemeteries with proximity to New York City. Within its grounds, several Mausoleums, many more than 100 years old, are displayed on grand lawns with ornate detailing meant to pay homage to the originality and significance of those persons that they house. In the case of the Adams mausoleum, its structure was erected to mourn the life of a father, Robert Franklin Adams, who passed away prematurely at the age of 50 in 1923². The mausoleum was purchased by his wife, Sarah Lena Adams, following his death¹. Given the size of the mausoleum and its capacity for 6 individuals, we can assume that the design decision made at his time of death was that the structure could house his wife and their descendants — two children and their partners.

Robert Franklin Adams was a third generation silk and textiles importer who earned a very successful living in New York City. He was married to Sarah Lena O'Brien at the age of 21 in 1894 — against the will of his mothers and three sisters. A feud between Robert's mother and his O'Brien in-laws on the O'Brien doorstep ahead of their wedding day was publicized in a New York newspaper. In this publication, it states that local police were dispatched to stand guard at the O'Brien house overnight following the feud, and Robert and Sarah were "hastily" married in the O'Brien parlor room the following day. At the time, the two families lived roughly 10 short blocks away from one another on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The newsworthiness of their matrimony and the feud that predated it exemplifies how highly regarded this pair had been, independently, prior to their union⁶.

MARRIED QUIETLY AND IN HASTE.

JOHN O'BRIEN SAYS THAT HIS NEW SON-IN-LAW, ROBERT F. ADAMS, HAD TO HURRY TO CHICAGO AND WANTED TO TAKE HIS BRIDE WITH HIM.

Just why the pretty daughter of John J. O'Brien the wealthy contractor and prominent Tammany politician, was married so hurriedly to Robert F. Adams, son of the rich silk importer of the same name, late on Tuesday afternoon, is what a good many people would like to find out. John O'Brien is best known as a member of the contracting firm of O'Brien & Clark, and as a friend of David B. Hill, and he lives in a handsome brownstone house at No. 110 West Eighty-first-st. Robert F. Adams, sr., does business at No. 16 Greene-st. and lives in fine style at No. 138 West Seventy-second-st.

Although the marriage took place on Tuesday afternoon it is safe to say that the bridegroom twenty-four hours before had been unaware of the happiness in store for him. He is twenty-one years old, while Miss Lena O'Brien, now Mrs. Adams, is a year younger. It is certain that for some time Mr. Adams had been extremely attentive to Miss Lena; it is also certain that the Adams family disliked the O'Briens and refused their consent to the engagement. On Monday night Mr. Adams called as usual upon Miss O'Brien, and, according to trustworthy testimony, had been there only two hours when about 10 o'clock a closed carriage drew up at the door, three women got out, hurried up the steps and rang the bell. They were Mrs. Adams and her daughters. An eye-witness of the affair described what followed. Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien came out into the hallway and confronted Mrs. Adams.

"What do you want here?" asked Mr. O'Brien. "I want to see my son," said Mrs. Adams. "He has left his home, and is here. I am determined to speak with him."

"You won't see him here; so get out. He doesn't want to see you," answered O'Brien.

Pushing past her and going to the door, he called a policeman who was in the street.

"Throw these people out," said O'Brien, pointing to Mrs. Adams and her daughters.

The policeman knew that the man before him was powerful in Tammany Hall, was a close friend of Police Commissioner Sheehan, and that his refusal to obey orders would probably expose him to severe punishment on a trivial pretext or to transference. But he remembered his manhood.

"You surely do not expect me to lay violent hands upon these ladies," he said, with a look of contempt and disgust. Then turning to Mrs. Adams he asked for an explanation of the situation and received it "How old is your son, madam?" he then asked.

"Twenty-one years," replied Mrs. Adams.

"Then, unless he cares to leave this house of his own free will and go home with you, I am afraid that I can do nothing," answered the patrolman.

Mrs. Adams, with a sigh, turned to go, but, stopping short and addressing Mrs. O'Brien, made a remark about a member of the O'Brien family.

"It's false!" exclaimed the O'Briens in chorus. "It's true!" returned Mrs. Adams, holding up the portrait of a child.

All this time young Mr. Adams had remained in the rear parlor, making no effort to protect his mother and sisters from indignity. Half an hour later two policemen took up their station at the door, and in the morning were relieved by two more, who remained there until 6 o'clock. During Tuesday morning bustle and excitement pervaded the household. Young Adams had remained there during the night and that day. No one was allowed to pass in or out of the house without a written order from Mr. O'Brien.

Just before 4 o'clock the Rev. Henry Chamberlain, pastor of St. Matthew's Protestant Episcopal Church, entered the house, and there in the parlor found Mr. Adams and the prospective bride awaiting him. The O'Briens stood around and in a few minutes Miss O'Brien had become Mrs. Adams. Both of the young people were apparently happy. Mrs. Adams and her daughters, however, were not so happy. The ceremony was still in progress, but admission to the house was refused to them.

"The marriage of my daughter," said Mrs. O'Brien last night, "was quietly performed because it is Lent and Holy Week, and because Mr. Adams is in Lent and Holy Week, and because Mr. Adams was obliged to hasten to Chicago on business of an important character. He desired to have the ceremony performed at once, so that he could take money performed at once, so that he could take his bride with him on his trip, and under the circumstances I consented. The engagement of my daughter and Mr. Adams was announced months ago, and the wedding was set down for Wednesday next week at St. Matthew's Church. The bride was attended by a maid of honor, and Mr. Adams had a best man. The names of these persons I do not care to mention to you. Almost immediately after the ceremony Mr. and Mrs. Adams started for the Grand Central station, to take the 6 o'clock train for Chicago. I went to the station with them and attended to the checking of their baggage."

Mr. and Mrs. Adams, when they return, will make their home with Mr. O'Brien.

The O'Brien family earned their wealth from Sarah's father, John O'Brien's contracting business in which he was a joint partner, O'Brien & Clark contracting and co. John's father, and

Sarah's grandfather, Jeremiah O'Brien was an Irish immigrant who worked as a shoemaker according to his latest census submission, suggesting the surplus of family wealth likely came later and from John's contracting business. John's family lived at 110 West 81st street in what was described at the time as a "handsome" brownstone. Beyond working on a number of large development projects throughout New York city through this entity, this business was notoriously known for suing upon project completion to maximize the earnings available to exploit from said projects due to various contractual violations²¹. There are several well documented cases brought by O'Brien & Clark throughout the years; the majority of those that were publicized were seemingly unsuccessful. Despite this, the O'briens assumedly earned a very lucrative living. Having a home on the Upper West Side and close ties with the local police departments per their unusual request for an overnight stoop watch by two patrolling officers ahead of their daughters and son in law's matrimony, John O'Brien was well known and remained familiar with those of legal influencer —both law enforcing and judicial — during his lifetime⁵.

While Robert Franklin Adams' inherited his family's garment business, he was still very involved in the process of growing that business in the bustling late 19th century of New York City. Despite limited details being available about his material ancestry, his paternal lineage consists of native New Yorkers, dating as far back as the early 1800s. He shared a name with his father and both his grand and great-grand partners were named William Adams. At the time of his marriage, Robert Franklin's place of business was located at 16 Greene Street and his home was at 158 West 72nd Street. Following their impromptu marriage in Sarah's family's parlor, Robert and Sarah immediately left for a business trip to Chicago following their marriage ceremony so that Robert could tend to work matters with her company. Four years later, his work

would be relocated to 16 Walker Street. Despite his family being in the garment business for several generations, Robert's namesake business dating back to 1829⁷, Adams Manufacturing Co. was formally reincorporated under Robert Franklin Adams name in 1902 per local New York newspapers. In that same year, his business moved to 106 Grand Street at the corner of Mercer Street. Final documented locations for the business were at 31 East 32nd Street in 1929, what is now known as the garment district, which is where many garment businesses moved in wake of financial turmoil to evade rising rents in southern Manhattan in pursuit of more affordable office locations⁸. At the time of his death he held a home in New York at 8 East 78th Street as well as in Connecticut where he was located when he passed away. Per available advertisements, the business specialized in silks and decorative textiles for adornments on hats. Despite both being in their early twenties, Robert's urgency and persistence for both work and marriage seemed to pay off well for at least his immediate family. Ironically, Robert Franklyn Adams was also a graduate of Columbia University, in 1891⁸.

Adams Company Moves

Cotton Textile Concern in New Offices in 34th Street

The Adams Manufacturing Company, Inc., yesterday announced their removal to new quarters on the fifteenth floor of the Nelson Tower, Thirty-fourth Street and Seventh Avenue, which they will occupy as their New York offices and stock rooms. The old offices of the company were at 31 and 33 East Thirty-second Street.

Established in 1829, the Adams Manufacturing Company, Inc., specialize in cotton textiles, with mills at Shelton and Putnam, Conn. The company is controlled, operated and managed by Robert J. Adams, treasurer, a descendant in the fourth generation of the original founders.

Robert and Sarah went on to have two children of their own — Edith Lucile and Robert John. The men of the family were well known socialites — Robert Franklin for his experience with sports betting and attending sports events, and Robert John for hosting lavish parties¹⁴. After his father's passing, Robert John stepped in quickly to take over the family business and also, upheld the families name and social status . Robert John had already married at the time of his father's passing and was raising two children with his wife, Marguerite Adelaide Skirvin Tyson. Unfortunately, Robert John also met a premature death, a mere 15 years later after his father's, in

1938 at the age of 42 years old⁸. At this time, the family business had grown to host a plant in Connecticut where Robert Franklin had residential ties at his passing. Shortly before Robert John's death, this location was set to be liquidated at an auction, suggesting financial or business troubles — at the very least, a downsizing — that preceded his death. Leaving behind his wife and three young children, Marguerite soon remarried another prominent New Yorker and at least two of her children publicly took their new step-father's last name. His widow's remarriage would leave Robert John's partner's space in the Adams mausoleum unclaimed and the involvement of the management of the space by his former wife and their children undetermined. As his children were younger and the majority accepted their step father's surname, their funeral arrangements would presumably coincide with their mother and latest father's plans for burial as opposed to their former father. As of today, none of Robert John's deceased children have entered the mausoleum as their final place of rest. As for his sister Eucile, she married twice before also passing away prematurely at the age of 63 in 1958. Her second and widowed husband passed away only one year later and was buried separately, despite requests from her daughter to have them buried together in one of the vacancies for Adams' descendant partners at Woodlawn²².



Edith Lucile Adams Robinson-Duff
May 14th, 1895 - August 9th, 1958
Aged 63 years



Robert John Adams
August 5th 1896 - December 30th 1938
Aged 42 years

MRS. RACHEL BELL ADAMS.

Mrs. Rachel Bell Adams, wife of the late Robert Adams, died yesterday at the Hotel Gramatan, Bronxville, where she was spending the summer. She was seventy-nine years old. The funeral will be held at the home of her son, Robert Franklin Adams, at No. 3 East 76th street, New York. Mrs. Adams leaves two daughters and her son, who is treasurer and director of the Adams Manufacturing Company, of No. 106 Grand street.

Robert Franklin Adams.
New York Times (1923-); May 24, 1923; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. 19

Robert Franklin Adams.

Robert Franklin Adams, Vice President of the Adams Manufacturing Company, died suddenly yesterday at his home in Greenwich, Conn. Mr. Adams was born in New York fifty years ago. He was graduated from Columbia University in 1891. He was a member of the University, Lotos and New York Yacht Clubs and the Automobile Club of America. His New York home was at 640 Park Avenue. He leaves a widow, who was Miss S. Lona O'Brien.

Prior to Robert John Adam's death, seismic shifts in the economy in the United States, largely driven by the great depression, significantly impacted the Adams and similar families legacy and wealth long term. Rising costs of labor forced production for textiles to be outsourced internationally to mitigate costs. Merely 40 years later, in the 80s and 90s, textiles consumed in the United States would no longer efficiently be produced or sold by U.S. manufacturers. Ten years prior to his death, Robert John Adams cited Sherman Antitrust laws as being a driving force for diminishing profits for industry businesses who had previously found ways to increase

profit in lieu of rising manufacturing costs⁶. These continued governance and economic shifts, paired with the untimely departures of the Adams heirs earlier in their lives, likely contributed to a halted discontinuation of the family business and minimal records of operation following Robert John Adam's death²⁴.

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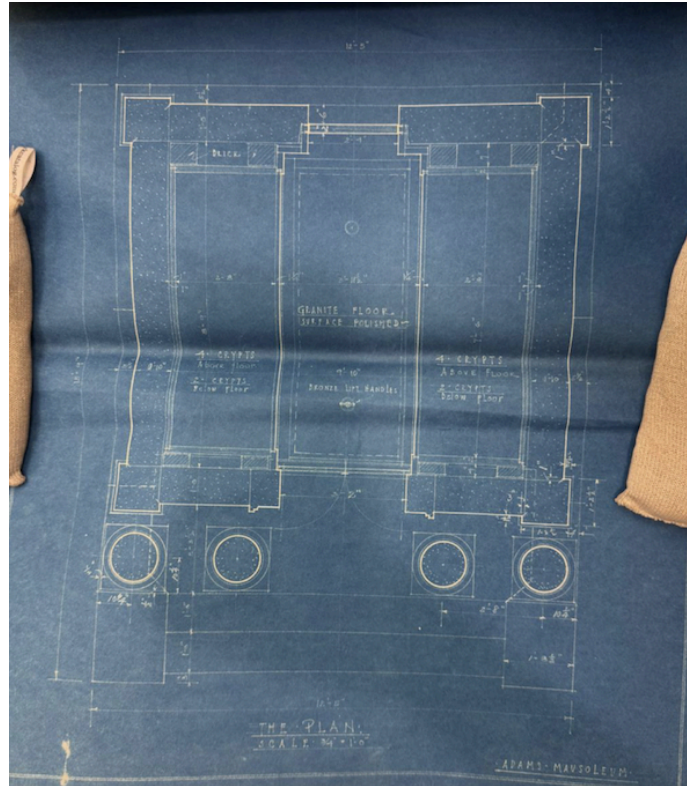
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During this, older cemeteries with robust mausoleum populations were met with increasing challenges for maintaining more significant memorial structures well after their hosted parties had passed²⁵. Most of the persons who commissioned these memorials have since departed and have joined their preceding members within their memorials. Maintenance needs are likely addressed for more dated spaces on an as-needed basis. This presented a larger and

more significant challenge for cemeteries and descendants of these properties alike — how to preserve and maintain these structures for the sake of honoring those they commemorate and for ensuring the collective cemetery spaces aren't left to waste.

In the case of the Adams mausoleum, the intent of the structure and subsequent investments made to the cemetery for ongoing maintenance was to ensure the building was maintained and preserved to the best of its ability. Separately, the available spaces were likely intended to house the Adams descendants and their spouses. Due to several untimely and premature deaths, remarriage, and unanticipated neglect, the building has been undermaintained for what appears to be a significant period of time.

Speaking to the planned construction of the space itself, the mausoleum was designed by Presbrey-Leland Co and built to stand at a 12'5" width, a 15'9" length and at a height of 14'10." Its foundation was made of Atlas Portland non-staining cement with the exact mixture being 1 part cement, 3 parts sand and 5 parts crushed stone²². Measurements to ensure waterproofing and watertight compartments on the interior of the mausoleum were taken in its construction. The structural materials of the mausoleum are fine-grained Barre granite. Each piece was lifted and set into place while dry to ensure ideal fit. The mortar for the setting beds of each piece of stone were White Atlas non-staining cement mixed with one to two parts sharp crystal sand and water for ideal consistency depending on the placement — thicker for layering granite slabs and thinner at jointed corners²².



The entire interior, with exception of the floor and trim surrounding the doorway, were made of marble — either from Tennessee or Rutland Vermont per the documentation — and highly polished. As visible when visiting the interior mausoleum, there are at least 6 available crypts above ground. Per historic documents, there were planned to be additional crypts situated below floor level²². The double entryway door was made of bronze and proportionately frames the stained-glass fixture at the back of the mausoleum. Inside the mausoleum, there is room for approximately 2 persons to stand inside comfortably at one time. There is a narrow and short corridor that quickly meets the rear of the building at less than 9 feet deep, stained-glass wall of the mausoleum with 3 crypts lining both the left and right sidewalls that span the full floor to ceiling area in height. At the rear, there is a pedestal and vase that would have likely held flowers left by visitors at an earlier date.



Original Photography By Jessica Seib²³



Original Photography By Jessica Seib²³

As of today, the Adams mausoleum is experiencing significant decay, particularly on the interior. There is mold and potentially biological growth within the interior of the mausoleum, pooling primarily on Robert F. Adams crypt on the bottom right of the mausoleum, as well as on the floors and walls surrounding the door and window. It's unclear if there is an exterior leak that is allowing for moisture to pool on the interior. The lopsidedness of the mold and other biological growth suggests that there is a compromised structural or roof degradation that is contributing to the advanced state of deterioration on the interior. Externally, the mausoleum is in fairly decent condition with minimal signs of wear, and only very minimal signs of age on the

granite. The interior conditions are barring very minor – two inch or smaller — chips in material on the exterior facade with otherwise appear largely intact with minimal visible damage or wear.



Original Photography By Jessica Seib²³



Original Photography By Jessica Seib²³



Original Photography By Jessica Seib²³

Historical documentation of the management exchanges between Sarah L Adams initially at her commissioning, through to the management by her daughter, Eucile's, descendants, suggest a significant change in appreciation and importance of the mausoleum to various family members over time. Sarah once paid several thousand dollars to ensure ongoing maintenance for the building over time that was assumedly spent or expired. Per documented written communication by Woodlawn cemetery, Eucile's descendants have requested to have additional family members buried in the space without success, and more recently, even requested to sell the mausoleum. It appears that the documented and rightful heirs were not those that had requested this adjustment, and therefore, their request for sale was not honored. Eucile's brother,

Robert John Adam's, surviving wife and estate maintain the rights to the mausoleum despite remarrying. Based on the available communications, the future of familial involvement in the pursuit of maintaining this structure may prove to be limiting²².

In this instance, a mausoleum with an intent for permanence and recognition, something to be inherited and passed down as a proper place for resting and honoring those who have passed, has met an unfortunate end in caretaking limbo. A family which was once wealthy and had resources eventually became less so, and much less interested in maintaining this space as a final home for their preceding family members. Its existence and current state introduces the question of reasonable sustainability with such choices and what can be done to prevent similar “permanent” investments to fall to dilapidation long after their commissioners have passed.

Recommendations for the rehabilitation of this space would be to treat the interior mold and biological growth, along with the removal of any animal or insect visitors from the apparent openings, treating and resealing any areas allowing for leakage and routinely cleaning the interior space as needed. Additionally, an exploration of revised involvement of the family members — i.e. if ownership can be reviewed for the purposes of accommodate prior requests and encourage continued and long term involvement of surviving family members *or* to support a sale that would allow new occupants and their surviving executors to acquire and maintain the mausoleum in its current and future states. While likely far from its original intent, the property in which those buried here have found themselves remains a site that requires ongoing time, investment and management well beyond their deaths. Impossible foresight would have been necessary to ensure this space was maintained infinitely beyond its first few decades of existence. Maybe there are actually three things in life that are guaranteed — death, taxes, and

the never ending transfer of property rights. A more peaceful perspective is knowing that the grass will still need to be cut long after we're due to leave.

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