

GARDNER EARL MEMORIAL CHAPEL AND CREMATORIUM**Page 4**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

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Summary

The Gardner Earl Memorial Chapel and Crematorium is nationally significant as the most architecturally sophisticated of the early public crematoria in the United States. Built in 1888-89 by a wealthy Troy couple as a memorial to their only child, a son who was an early proponent of cremation, the project was freed from the usual constraints that limited the architectural development of crematoria in the early years such as the lack of public social support and the related lack of business capital. The result was a masterpiece of the type with interiors on a par with the best Late Victorian interiors realized in America. Resplendent in exotic and domestic marbles, carved stone and wood, and important works of stained glass by Tiffany and Maitland Armstrong, the luxurious rooms worked together to provide a ritual structure for the cremation process with an aim towards legitimizing it for a skeptical public. Only a few years after the building's opening, the addition of a new retort (cremation chamber) room that incorporated newly developed technology for kerosene-fed furnaces is a demonstration of the Victorian interest in and promise of science and technology. The Gardner Earl Memorial Chapel and Crematorium is the physical embodiment of many artistic and intellectual impulses defining the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**Exterior**

The Gardner Earl Memorial Chapel and Crematorium stands in Oakwood Cemetery (established 1848) on the western edge of a bluff nearly 300 feet above the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers. It fronts on a circular drive, which is framed by two ponds that are part of the historic cemetery landscape. The elegant building is a sophisticated assemblage of forms and volumes rendered in the Richardsonian Romanesque mode. It spreads for 146' along the ridge, extending from a 90'-0" high bell tower on the southern end to the chapel and other rooms arranged in multiple stories on the northern end; the two portions are linked by an open loggia. The building has a water table that steps back twice, underscoring the building's visual strength—it seems to rise out bluff as a natural extension of the bedrock on which the walls are founded.

The tower is a romantic confection with largely blank lower walls giving way to a variety of corbels, setbacks, spires, and perforations defined by delicately carved stone that contrasts with the heavy rustication.¹ The dominant pyramidal roof is articulated with crocketts and framed at its corners by three spires and a small, engaged tower that reaches to the ground; these four features are topped with conical roofs. Supported on squat polished granite columns, the round arches of the open loggia—three on the east (front) and two on the west—a character-defining element of the Richardsonian Romanesque, spring powerfully northward from the tower to meet a picturesque massing of dormers, towers, bays, and chimneys. The dormers each feature a round-headed window opening into the chapel proper, and the octagonal “crossing tower” and polygonal bay extending from the north wall mark the place of the chancel.² Although added just a few years after the building was completed, the 1892-93 retort room at its north end is a seamless addition. The word “CREMATORIUM,” incised in the stone panel situated between the windows located within a large arch in the north wall, unselfconsciously marks that room as the place where cremation occurs. A tall chimney of rusticated stone underscores the purpose and functional needs of the room below. A one-story, flat-roofed, concrete block addition extends outward at ground level on the west side of the building.

The dormers and gables are capped with ashlar-cut stone parapets with a crow-stepped design, which, like the stone framing the tower openings, provides pleasant relief from the rusticated stone elsewhere in the walls. The peaks of the gables, dormers, and pyramidal and conical roofs terminate in decorative pinnacles. The expanses

¹ The small windows in the tower contain window openings filled with simple, “work-a-day” glass by Tiffany.

² While spatially marking its location, the “crossing tower” does not actually open down to the chancel. It contains a room where families would wait after the service while the cremation was conducted.

GARDNER EARL MEMORIAL CHAPEL AND CREMATORIUM**Page 5**

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of smooth slate on the roof also create visual balance with the heavy rock-faced walls; a simple dentilled cornice marks the point where the roof and wall planes meet. Window openings without stained glass mostly contain double-hung windows, and the massive wooden doors feature ornate iron hardware.

Interior

The free composition and picturesque detailing of the exterior of the Gardner Earl Memorial Chapel and Crematorium seem comparatively sober when compared to the elaborate and luxurious interior spaces of the building.³

Loggia, Tower, and Bathroom (former Reception Room)

These spaces comprise the transition from exterior to interior of the building. The open loggia features granite floor slabs and a quarter-sawn oak ceiling carried on stone corbels. Pairs of bronze gates mark the entrance to the tower on the south and the chapel on the north. The tower is the building's visually dominant feature and was originally intended to be the urn repository for the Earls.⁴ An iron stair with marble treads extends upward to a landing where a ladder may be used to access a balcony embellished with a gargoyle and having sweeping views of the cemetery. Just before entering the chapel, on the left, is the door to a bathroom installed in the 1930s. The room formerly functioned as a reception room for guests and features a built-in marble desk, a built-in marble washbasin, and a small fireplace with a marble mantel and ornate iron surround. The walls are glazed brick and the ceiling of oak. The bathroom is located on the room's western end, separated by a marble stall wall.

Chapel

The chapel is accessed via bronze gates. The sumptuous room is divided into three parts: the nave, the chancel, and the altar. The nave has an oak ceiling with decorative trusses. The floors are bluestone slabs and the walls are wainscoted up to the sill line with pink-red Champlain marble and black marble below; brown sandstone comprises the rest of the walls. The east and west nave walls each contain two large, round-headed Tiffany stained-glass windows with non-figural compositions depicting the seasons. Each window is set off by low engaged columns that support the rafter ends. A "rose" window is set high into the rear (south) wall. This window is also from the Tiffany Studios and contains a substantial amount of "jewel" glass. The window accentuates the three-sided marble tomb below containing the cremated remains of the Earl family. The tomb is opulently rendered in Siena and other marbles, and Mexican onyx. The oak pews, lectern, and other chapel furniture are original to the room. A massive sandstone arch carries an ornately carved foliate frieze that encompasses the capitals of similarly carved columns marks the transition from the nave to the chancel. A marble niche in the wall on the east of this arch contains a bronze bust of Gardner Earl by Charles Calverly. The elaborate bronze radiator covers throughout the chapel and reception room were designed and executed by P. Guerin of New York.

The chancel is raised two steps up from the nave and features an elaborate marble mosaic floor. The sandstone frieze continues into the space, dividing the smooth sandstone walls from the quarter-sawn oak, barrel-vaulted and coffered ceiling. Elaborately carved oak choir stalls are situated along the east and west walls. Raised up three steps from the chancel is an altar of Siena marble and white onyx situated in a three-sided apse and set off by a simply rendered sandstone arch. Each side of the apse contains one Tiffany window bearing the figure of an angel and Christ in the center window; all have images of the Sea of Galilee in the background. There is an additional, small Tiffany window in the passageway between the nave and the reception room.

³ Details about the materials and interior features, drawn from Mesick Cohen Wilson Baker Architects, *Gardner Earl Memorial Chapel and Crematorium: A Conditions Survey*, Albany, New York, 2002; and Frederick S. Hills, *The Gardner Earl Memorial Chapel and Crematorium, Oakwood Cemetery, Troy, N.Y.* (Albany, NY, 1902).

⁴ *Gardner Earl Memorial Chapel and Crematorium: A Conditions Survey*, Albany, New York, 2002, 15.

GARDNER EARL MEMORIAL CHAPEL AND CREMATORIUM**Page 6**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Reception Room

As originally completed in 1889, this room was the simply finished retort room and contained two cremation chambers heated by wood-fired furnaces in the basement. In 1892-93, facility superintendent James Inglis added a new retort room to the north of this room that contained two cremation chambers heated by a kerosene-fired system, which he pioneered as a more efficient means of cremation. By 1899, the original retort room was repurposed as the stunning and lavish reception room, which provided a transition space between the ceremonial ritual in the chapel and the cremation in the new retort room. The once-utilitarian space was transformed into fantastical and significant Late Victorian public room. The steeply pitched roof of the new retort room allowed the ceiling to be substantially raised. The new cove ceiling features mosaic tile having figural, abstract, and floral motifs and its centerpiece is a 13'-0", stained-glass laylight. The walls are wainscoted with 3'-6"-high slabs of pink African marble with bases and caps of green Japanese marble. The same pink African marble is used for the jambs and arches. Above the wainscoting, the walls are sheathed with Siena marble, whose relative plainness is offset by seventeen columns rendered in rare Brazilian green onyx that set off arches in the room containing window and door openings, and marble mosaics. These columns were carved from a single block imported from London by James Batterson, the owner of a large Hartford, Connecticut stone carving and brokering business. The green onyx is also used for the panels set in the custom bronze doors that give access to the new retort room.

The sumptuousness of the room is further enhanced by two massive stained-glass windows, each measuring 11' x 8', set in the south and west walls. Important American stained-glass artist Maitland Armstrong designed the windows, which depict St. Paul preaching in Athens and King Solomon receiving the Queen of Sheba. They are signed and dated "1899," which indicates that the renovation was likely complete in that year. The room also contains carved oak settees and an ornate wood catafalque on rollers, which provided an appropriate conveyance for the body from the chapel to the reception room for cremation. The opulence and beauty of the art and architecture throughout the chapel and reception room were consciously intended to create a sense of sacredness, beauty, ritual, and repose for the cremation process, and, more pragmatically, to convince visitors to consider the legitimacy and possibility of cremation.

Retort Room and Basement

While containing the mechanical elements of the cremation process, the new retort room is still nicely finished. The walls are ivory glazed brick with a blue Meander-key frieze in blue along the top. The floor is made up of bluestone slabs with 12" baseboards of pink Tennessee marble. The rounded-headed double hung windows have sills and arches rendered in the same pink marble. The two retorts extend into the center of the room from the south wall and flank a chimneystack. They are utilitarian with the iron plates riveted together, and doors at either end. Iron stairs descend from this room into the basement where there is a small work room with a boiler and closet containing remains in urns not picked up by family members. Off this space is a large workroom with the main boiler and two other work/utility rooms. A dirt-floored storage space extends under the sanctuary and loggia.

Office and Waiting Rooms

On the east side of the chancel is an office where the body would have been received via stairs and an exterior door north of the loggia. This area was also the space intended for the clergy to prepare for services. The walls are unglazed yellow brick and the floor sheathed in marble. The room also contains an enclosed flight of stairs leading to the second floor room where family members would wait while the body was cremated. This room contains a dry sink and accoutrements for washing. The walls and ceilings are finished in varnished pine as are the built-in cabinets and other furniture. Another enclosed staircase accesses the upper room occupying the whole of the octagonal tower visible on the exterior of the building. The ceiling and walls are also sheathed