On Campus

Cemetery Archive in Final Resting Place

Fall 2006

Several years ago, Charles Warren ’80APP, a historical preservationist, was studying a monument designed by the architecture firm Carrère & Hastings at the Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx. When he asked the Friends of the Woodlawn Cemetery for records relating to it, not only did they say yes, but told him that, in fact, they had 140 years of archives and didn’t know what to do with them. Warren referred the Friends to Columbia’s Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library — resulting in the library’s acquisition this summer of architectural sketches, blueprints, correspondence, maintenance records, photographs, and other documents dating back to the cemetery’s inception in 1863. It is the library’s largest single acquisition yet.

“The Woodlawn Cemetery Archive documents the development of one of the greatest of all American cemeteries,” said Gerald Beasley, director of the Avery Library, the largest architecture library in the United States. “It is also a fundamental part of New York’s collective memory, and, as such, complements one of Avery’s established collection strengths. This gift adds an invaluable resource for the national and international communities of architects, planners, historians, and preservationists that our drawings and archives collections are primarily designed to serve.”

Among the luminaries buried within Woodlawn’s 400 acres are Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Coleman Hawkins, W. C. Handy, Milt Jackson, Herman Melville, Joseph Pulitzer, Fiorello La Guardia, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Woolworths, and the Juilliards.

“Woodlawn has been a careful guardian of its archive, and it’s exceptional because it’s much more architectural than other cemeteries,” said Beasley. Woodlawn has 1300 private family mausoleums, a result of the cemetery’s “landscape-lawn plan,” which was established by the cemetery’s trustees shortly after it was founded. The

plan encouraged families to build monuments and private mausoleums, many of which are designed by prominent architects and designers including John Russell Pope, James Gamble Rogers, and McKim, Mead & White.

It will take approximately five years to catalogue all the documents — in plenty of time for Woodlawn's 150th anniversary in 2013. "By donating a major portion of our archives to Columbia, we have found a way to preserve Woodlawn's valuable records for generations to come," said Jonathan Butler, chair of the board of trustees of the cemetery.



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >