



Receiving Tomb

History

Constructed in 1890, the Receiving Tomb was funded by Freeman Shedd in memory of his son who died of meningitis as a young boy. The inscription on the entrance to the Tomb states, "Erected to the memory of Eli Hoyt Shedd, son of Freeman B and Amy F Shedd. Died Jan 24, 1885, age 8 yrs, 9 mos, 14 days."

In an age before backhoes and jackhammers, graves were not dug in the winter due to the depth of the frost. Instead, the remains of those who had died were stored in a "receiving tomb" until the spring thaw allowed new graves to be dug. This receiving tomb has a total of 36 compartments for caskets arranged perpendicular to the center aisle.

Freeman Ballard Shedd was born in Lowell, fought in the Civil War, and made his fortune in partnership with his close friend Eli Hoyt selling Hoyt's German Cologne. Shedd named his son after his friend.

Art and Architecture

The Receiving Tomb was designed in the Egyptian Revival Style and constructed in 1890 by Lowell-born architect Frederick Stickney. This architect also designed the cemetery's Talbot Memorial Chapel, the Cemetery's first office at the Lawrence St. entrance, and the City of Lowell's library. Stickney is buried in the Cemetery on Tennyson Avenue, near the Theodore Edson Parker Mausoleum.

The Egyptian Revival architecture is the easiest architectural style to identify due to our familiarity with pyramids. The style brings associations of gloom, solemnity, the finality of death, and an idea of eternity. Almost every Egyptian Revival tomb is adorned with the imagery used here: a pair of vulture wings (symbolizing protection and maternal care) sprouting from a circle (symbolizing the sun) and flanked by twin cobras (symbolizing death). Above the tomb entry and circling the entire tomb, is an architectural element called a cavetto cornice (flared with curve).

Another hallmark of Egyptian Revival architecture is the tapered entry and grand stairway. Since Egyptian architecture doesn't use arches or columns, its dimensions are quite massive. To provide strength, the walls of the Egyptian temple-style mausoleums taper in at about 70 degrees. There is a bronze plaque decorated with three lotus blossoms on the wall of the mausoleum. Banded reeds act as a framing device. The lotus flower closes its petals at night and opens them in the morning: a symbol for life after death. Small lotus leaves can also be seen as a decoration on the Shedd mausoleum. The matching plaque on the opposite wall was stolen many years ago.

Originally, a pair of bronze sphinxes guarded the entry to the tomb. Unfortunately, one was stolen many years ago; the other was moved inside for safe keeping. The Sphinx is a fabulous creature with the body of a lion and the head of a king. The Lowell Cemetery's sphinx weighs 120 pounds and is a copy of one in the Louvre Museum. Its precise details and polished surface demonstrate great craftsmanship. The recumbent animal, with tense body and outstretched claws, gives the impression of being ready to leap.