THE HARKNESS MAUSOLEUM
A History

Text by Kevin Adkisson • Photographs by John Lei
Edited by Paul W. Engel

The Commonwealth Fund
The Edward S. and Mary S. Harkness Mausoleum rises gently from a rocky and wooded knoll at The Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, New York. It is not the cemetery’s largest or costliest monument. Rather, it stands out for its beauty and dignity as a memorial to two quiet yet highly influential philanthropists of the early 20th century. This understated memorial was cited as a key element in the designation of the cemetery as a National Historic Landmark in 2011. The same year, the trustees of the mausoleum, The Commonwealth Fund, recognized the need for its restoration, and the Fund’s Board of Directors approved a grant for this purpose. Completed in 2012, the restoration insured the longevity of this treasure and inspired the restoration of other mausoleums in the cemetery.

Begun in 1924, the mausoleum is the result of a long and loyal relationship between Edward (1874–1940) and Mary (1874–1950) Harkness and their architect, James Gamble Rogers (1867–1947), in collaboration with the landscape designer Beatrix Farrand, and accomplished artisans including Samuel Yellin, Owen Bonawit, Lee Lawrie, and George Davidson. The mausoleum, built at the midpoint of the Harknesses’ nearly 40-year friendship with Rogers, was a small but important project encapsulating their fruitful professional and personal relationship. Rogers’s first commission for the Harknesses, in 1908, was their home at One East 75th Street; his last, completed in 1946 (well after Edward’s death), was a rural public health clinic in Gallatin, Tennessee, financed by The Commonwealth Fund.

The Harknesses and James Gamble Rogers: A Prolific Partnership

Edward Stephen Harkness, the youngest son of oil mogul Stephen V. Harkness and his wife Anna, was a professional philanthropist who distributed his inherited wealth with such largesse that the causes he backed—principally health care—were not just supported but transformed by his generosity. Edward was educated at the St. Paul’s School in New Hampshire before graduating from Yale in 1897.

In 1904, Edward married Mary Stillman, daughter of influential attorney Thomas Stillman and his wife Elizabeth. Both Edward’s and Mary’s families valued social responsibility. Throughout their lives they supported a variety of causes, including health care, children’s welfare, and higher education for women and minorities. The majority of the Harknesses’ donations were made through The Commonwealth Fund, established in 1918 by Edward’s mother, Anna Harkness, with the mandate to “do something for the welfare of mankind.” Edward served as the president of the Fund from its founding until his death, shaping it into a dynamic and socially minded foundation.
It is unclear how Rogers (Yale 1889) and Harkness (Yale 1897) first crossed paths. They might have met at Yale through mutual friends, such as Sam Fisher, Harkness’s longtime financial adviser and early board member of The Commonwealth Fund; Fisher was in the Scroll and Key society with Rogers at Yale in 1889. Or it might have been at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, where both men were active members. More important than the circumstances of their meeting is the product of their collaboration.

During four decades of work, Rogers’ most monumental commission from the Harkness family was the Harkness Memorial Quadrangle at Yale. Funded by Anna Harkness in memory of Edward’s brother Charles, the project would have a substantial impact on the design of the mausoleum. The Memorial Quadrangle occupies a full city block bordering Yale’s historic campus. A series of five courtyards defined by romantic and richly ornamented gothic towers and cloisters serve as student housing, and at the Quadrangle’s heart rises the 216-foot Harkness Tower. The major architectural journals and critics praised the complex as a masterpiece; Architectural Record featured the building.

The story of the Memorial Quadrangle explains the design of the mausoleum: Rogers chose to build his patron’s memorial in the same architectural language as their greatest creation together.

Woodlawn: One of America’s Most Important Garden Cemeteries

The design of The Woodlawn Cemetery reflects the rural cemetery movement that began in the 1830s after rising urban land values and outbreaks of disease caused popular condemnation of inner-city burials. This created the need for a cemetery to the north of Manhattan, and, in 1863, Woodlawn opened in the Bronx.

Woodlawn’s design merged the rural cemetery typology with the developing landscape-lawn style, which was more manicured and calculated than the Victorian excess of its predecessors. Woodlawn prohibited hedges and fences along lot lines and demanded design excellence for monuments erected in the cemetery, leading to an entirely cohesive landscape.

A distinctive aspect of Woodlawn’s landscape-lawn era was the extensive use of circular lots. The largest and most desirable circular plots were bordered by pedestrian pathways and provided an ideal setting where each large mausoleum could preside over an ample area.

Many of Woodlawn’s memorials took the form of mausoleums, which experienced an immense resurgence in popularity during the economic boom of the late 19th century through the 1920s. From neoclassical to Gothic, Romanesque to Egyptian Revival, mausoleum architecture attempted to reflect the wealth, status, and perceived character of the deceased within. By 1914, mortuary architecture was characterized in American Architect by “every form of sculptural vulgarity” where “unaffected reverence has...been smothered by more or less vulgar ostentation.”
The Harkness Mausoleum: Uniquely Understated

It was in this climate of funerary architectural excess and ostentation that Edward and Mary Harkness set out to erect their own mausoleum. In 1921, when Edward and Mary were just 47 years old, they purchased a prominent lot in Woodlawn on the main road close to the Jerome Avenue entrance. Two years later, they asked Rogers to design the mausoleum.

Rogers was less than pleased with the lot the Harknesses had chosen, but nevertheless developed a study (since lost) for a mausoleum there. He sent the design to Mrs. Harkness on August 22, 1923, stating that the design he proposed “could be made an impressive memorial, but I do not think that it would be the kind of thing you would like.” Rogers knew perfectly well that the reserved couple was not interested in the gaudy, lavish funerary style of the day, and he continued in his letter that “studying the possibilities of your circular lot I concluded that anything you put on, no matter how well designed or carefully studied out, would be after all the work was done, just another one of those many mausoleums crowded together...another of] those little white boxes that all look pretty nearly alike no matter how much money and effort is spent.”

Over the course of three trips to Woodlawn, Rogers staked out a new site for the Harknesses on a “plot that would count for more and the building for less.” Much as he had done in 1908 with Harkness House, a relatively modest home among the showboat mansions of Fifth Avenue, Rogers designed a mausoleum that stood out from its peers not through excess, but rather through the subtle deployment of quality in design and materials.

The site Rogers suggested was unique. It is a slightly asymmetric, egg-shaped lot at the crest of a hill, covered in wild growth with dramatic outcroppings of Fordham gneiss, billion-year-old layered rock unique to the region. Removed from the flamboyant mausoleums of the main road, Rogers described his vision for a serene garden gravesite in a letter to Mary Harkness: he “could think of nothing more reposeful than a perfect circle of green grass surrounded by a wall.” Rogers suggested a low, flowing composition across the site left intact with its rock outcroppings and natural plantings. Rogers’ proposed circular garden would be a forecourt to a small chapel with two sarcophagi. He suggested that the wall or chapel be built not in “the awfully smooth and finished way of all the monuments now in the cemetery,” but in “the very lightest colors of the yellows” used at Yale in the Memorial Quadrangle. The Gothic style, Rogers believed, would make the mausoleum “more cheerful and human,” and it would also be a fitting tribute to Edward’s Yale philanthropy.

After Mary Harkness visited the proposed new lot, she immediately wrote to Rogers agreeing to both the new location and the design idea. Edward was harder to convince, wary as he was of spending any more money on a monument to himself than necessary. But he agreed with Rogers’ evaluation of the merits of the new lot over the old and, after Rogers reduced the scale of his initial design, agreed to the lot swap and the overall concept of the mausoleum.

The Grounds: Simple and Intimate

Before construction began, Beatrix Farrand (1872–1959), a close friend of the Harknesses and one of the finest landscape architects in America, was made landscape gardener (a term she preferred) of the plot.

Beatrix and the Harknesses first met in late 1918 through her husband Max, who had recently been appointed as The Commonwealth Fund’s first director of educational fellowships. The Harknesses, impressed by Farrand’s lyrical descriptions of flowerers in soft drifts of color, invited her to consult on the gardens of Eolia, the Harkness estate west of New London, Connecticut. She would go on to redesign most of Eolia’s grounds and the gardens of two other Harkness residences. Farrand’s signature aesthetic was a carefully decreasing formality of the landscape away from the central building or object. Rogers was well aware that Farrand was the only person the Harknesses wanted working on the gardens of their mausoleum.

And so Rogers and Farrand set out to erect a mausoleum to honor their longtime patrons and friends. Marc Eidlitz and Son, the same contractor that built the Harkness Memorial Tower, was hired to build the mausoleum. Some of the same artisans from the Harkness Tower also worked on the mausoleum.

The mausoleum was completed in 1925, true to Rogers’ and Farrand’s original concept. The overall effect was that of an antique chapel in a forest clearing.
The Harknesses were pleased with the completed memorial, and they continued to expand and improve the grounds and building over the next 15 years. They extended their property 15 feet to the north upon Rogers's urging. He felt that they were "a little bit short of space in the rear." Farrand relentlessly added trees and plantings. In 1932 the mausoleum was extended 10 feet to the north. Deftly executed, the extension blends seamlessly with the original building and is undetectable as an addition.

Today, as in 1925, the approach leads over the crest of the hill among the rock outcrops and low-growing evergreens. The path then bends toward the low curving wall, and two steps in a half circle lead to a handsome teak and iron gate. The gate, with its protective lintel and slate roof above, holds the only clue to the identity of those within: a keyhole in the shape of an "H," with no exterior display of the Harkness name. The metal banding on the gate is ornamented with a band of oak leaves, an ancient symbol of strength, honor, and virtue, and a symbol in funerary architecture of the power of the Christian faith. Directly opposite the gate, across the circular garden, is the mausoleum chapel.

While from outside of the complex the wall appears to be quite low, Rogers depressed the interior of the garden so that, once inside, the world of the cemetery is left behind. Farrand enhanced this architectural move with dense shrubs around the inside of the garden wall that blend with the dark trees in the immediate distance, causing the garden to feel intensely private and protected. The overall design reflects a relationship between gate, garden, and building employed in 1906 by Sir Edwin Lutyens at Heywood Gardens, outside of London. It is Rogers' intimate use of scale and siting within the cemetery that advances his design beyond an erudite copy of the British precedent.

The Chapel: Rich with Carefully Chosen Details

The chapel is a simple building, with Mankota stone walls and a gabled slate roof. Rogers specified the stonework to have sand-rubbed and irregular edges, to simulate an antique effect. The chapel’s garden-facing facade is divided into quarters, with two slightly projecting buttresses on the outside and the center dedicated to the entrance and sculpture group above. The grouping that replaced the inscription features 18 mourning figures, nine on each side processing toward the center niche. Rendered in profile and wearing classical dress, the figures carry packages, gifts, and other accoutrements; all hang their heads in bereavement. The central niche is empty and has tracery at its top culminating in two large stylized flowers, suggesting new life after death. The niche terminates below in a shield set over an open scroll. This mix of stylistic influences—classical figures on a Gothic building—reflects the often-inventive nature of the collaboration between Rogers and the sculptor, Lee Lawrie (1877–1963). Lawrie, best remembered for his late-1930s art moderne work, such as Atlas (1937) at New York’s Rockefeller Center, began his career in architectural sculpture working in traditional styles.

Below the facade sculpture group is the entrance to the chapel set deep within a low obtuse angle arch, its flared impost brushing the top of the Greek letters alpha and omega, again carved in raised relief by Lawrie. The alpha is raised above two oak leaves and an acorn, while the omega is filled with a flower in bloom. Rogers exaggerated the depth of the archway through repeating, deeply incised archivolts or ribs in diminishing scales. Interestingly, Lawrie rejects the
standard practice of Gothic–style archway design by terminating the archivolts into large curving walls without any column capitals or chamfering (beveling). The overall effect of the solid, flat facade with its deeply set curving entrance is one of forced perspective, which greatly increases the perceived scale of what is actually a fairly diminutive opening. This spatial effect is most pronounced when viewed from the opposite side of the garden at the entrance gate, where the entire complex appears more expansive than it actually is.

The chapel is entered by opening a metal gate set within the archway that features the ancient symbol of the Tree of Life rendered across a simple grid of thick, patterned crossbars. The gate immediately beckons to be felt, turned, and twisted, a result of the dynamism of the curvaceous tree spread across the regular grid—a signature effect of the master metalsmith Samuel Yellin (1885–1940) of Philadelphia. Yellin practiced a method he called “sketching at the anvil,” believing that “much more could be done with the hammer that cannot be shown on paper.” While iron was the most common product of the Yellin studio, he used Monel metal, a more durable alloy of nickel and copper, at the mausoleum. His masterful work, first seen on the exterior gate and continuing inside, provides a lace-like divide between the garden and the chapel in the Tree of Life gate.

The interior of the chapel is divided into two spaces, the original square nave, and the chancel extension to the rear, added in 1932. A large cross vault covers the nave. The chancel, with its barrel-vaulted ceiling, houses the tombs of Edward and Mary Harkness beneath its floor. This two-part chapel design was executed in 1932, when the Harknesses’ decision to be entombed under the chapel floor rather than in raised sarcophagi necessitated a 10-foot extension to the north side of the existing chapel.

The interior walls of the chapel are Mankota stone, smoother than the exterior walls, striated by hand in alternating patterns. The walls are 20 inches thick: 12-inch exterior walls, a four-inch air space, and four-inch interior walls.

The larger of the two spaces, the original room of the chapel, is where the living may pay their respects to the dead. Two paneled teak benches, whose arms are supported by angels, provide a place of rest for visitors. Behind the benches are windows framed with low pointed arches; carved within the spandrels—the spaces between the arches and the glass—are four birds. The windows themselves feature biblical scenes reflecting 1 John 5:11: “And this is the record, that God hath given to us Eternal Life and this Life is in his Son.” (These windows date much later than the 1925 construction and are discussed in greater detail below.)

In each corner of the room, columns support the vaulted ceiling. The column capital in the southwestern corner features a stylized thistle, symbolizing Edward’s Scottish heritage, while an English rose for Mary ornaments the southeastern capital. On the northern capitals, Lawrie continues the funerary procession introduced on the facade with male figures on the northwestern column linked by a thick garland, and on the opposite side, women and children solemnly process. Lawrie renders each of these capitals in an early medieval style, with intentionally mismatched moldings and dense, curvaceous foliage surrounding the figures.

The ceiling above features a five-pointed cross-vault infilled with irregular brick webbing and punctuated with decorative ceiling tondo (circular elements) at the intersections of the stone ribs. The tondo, again carved by Lawrie, use labeled allegorical figures to represent the couple’s virtues: Liberty and Justice sits in the
center with scales and a sword in one hand, books on her lap, and an oak leaf band
surrounding her; Prudence kneels with a lamp and caduceus; Humility bows
toward a bird and flower blossoms; Courage holds a whip and stares at an open-
jawed serpent; and an elderly Generosity presents a young man with a fine box.

It is significant that these virtues are within the locked mausoleum and not on the
façade, where the public could view the allegorical grouping. Apparently, Edward’s
humility extended into death.

The center tondo conceals perforations in the ceiling vault that act in concert with
the open metal work of the Tree of Life gate and the stone tracery in the exterior
niche above the entrance to allow fresh air to circulate naturally through the chapel.

The vaulting is complemented by painting done by the muralist George Davidson
(1889–1965). Since the 1920s, Davidson had taught mural painting at the Cooper
Union and at Yale, and it was at Yale that he first worked with Rogers’s office. For
the mausoleum, Davidson’s work is subdued and relies on contrasting colors, pat-
tern, and planned imperfection. In the main vault, he bordered the stone ribs with
a chevron pattern in gold and dark green. Across the brick webbing, he added gold
sun or wheel crosses, a common ceiling decoration in the medieval churches of
northern Europe. Davidson completed the chancel ceiling painting in 1937. The nave
ceiling was likely painted earlier, in 1925, since it shows more signs of wear than the
chancel ceiling.

Set within the basalt stone floor is a cast bronze sculpture by Lawrie that features
24 figures, representing the hours in a day, set within a circular border. Hourglasses
mark each quarter, for the four seasons. The allegorical figures, again clothed in
classical garb, depict the life cycle from youth to wisdom and into the afterlife,
marked by the shifting sands of the hourglass.

The Tombs: A Resting Place of Airy, Simple Beauty

The chancel, a step up from the nave and completed in 1932, is dedicated to the
tombs of Edward and Mary. For the addition, Lawrie was called back to complete
additional sculptural work; Yellin fabricated a low screen and gate, two vases, and a
mazer, or drinking vessel (since lost); and Rogers designed an altar to stretch across
the rear wall. Workmen from Eidlitz Contractors labeled and removed the stones
from the entire northern wall of the structure, poured a new foundation abutting
the original, and reconstructed the wall (moldings, ornament, and all) 10 feet back.

Edward’s and Mary’s remains lie beneath enormous slabs of black basalt. By plac-
ing the bodies below the floor of the chapel, Rogers opens up the space, providing a
light and airy quality quite uncharacteristic of funerary architecture. The tombs are
inscribed with bronze letters. Edward’s features a quote from William Wordsworth:
“Thy Zeal shall find repose at length firm Friend of humankind.” Mary’s is inscribed
with Matthew 5:8: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

Above the graves, the ceiling is made of a pointed and ribbed barrel vault. Stone trac-
ery weaves between ribs, and this in turn features additional painting by Davidson.
Here, he carries out a more elaborate design of diaperwork in gold paint, with small
floral ornaments between the vaults. Only the first three feet of these vaults date to
the 1924 construction, as the rear 10 feet were designed to mirror the original.

On the north wall, behind the tombs, is a shallow altar designed by Rogers, with
a single ribbon of Latin text carved by Lawrie and taken from Virgil’s Aeneid. The
inscription reads: Macte nova virtute sic itur ad astra, or “Go forth with renewed
effort: thus is the path to the stars.” Above the altar, a central stained-glass
window depicts the four major prophets of the Old Testament (Isaiah, Jeremiah,
Ezekiel, and Daniel) around a stone cross, painted gold.

Flanking the altar are two angels recessed in corner niches. On the left, the figure
studies an hourglass in his right hand and a scroll in his left. The angel opposite
clings to a draped urn, an ancient representation of the body’s return to dust and
the soul’s ascent to heaven. These two sculptures reflect a shift in Lawrie’s aesthetic
from his early historicist work toward the art deco language of the 1930s. The angels’
modernity is even more striking when paired with the windows of the chapel.

The stained glass windows that cast a warm glow through-
out the interior were the last design change of the
mausoleum and were installed in the late spring of 1940, just
months after Edward’s death. G. Owen Bonawit (1891–1975)
was contracted to develop 20 new panels to be set within
the nine windows of the chapel. Bonawit had installed chi-
noiserie glass panels in the Harkness House music room in
1921, so it is possible that Mary knew Bonawit personally.
Bonawit, regarded as a master of secular stained glass, produced windows within the medieval glass tradition, opposite the more popular art glass of Louis Comfort Tiffany and John LaFarge. While he did produce ecclesiastical window designs throughout his glassworking career, Bonawit was described by a critic as “dealing in modern manners and subjects, and avoiding church contracts as he would the deadly tarantula”—making his windows for the chapel unique among his body of work. Bonawit believed that “you cannot copy a medieval window, but you can be inspired by one,” and much of his work borrows not only from medieval precedent in glass but also from medieval textile designs and illuminated manuscripts.

For the mausoleum’s new windows, Bonawit employed a visually heavy mosaic style using imported color glass from England, France, and Belgium, countries with manufacturers proficient in the glassmaking of that era. After the glass was given a patina wash to simulate age, it was assembled into compositions of deep blues, reds, and yellows with accents of purple and green. These mosaic pieces were then painted in Bonawit’s signature stickwork method with medieval styling: dark outlines, wide eyes, and a riotous use of color blur the figure and field within the windows.

Honoring the Harknesses’ Legacy

With the installation of the stained glass windows in 1940, work on the mausoleum under Rogers was complete. Mary was interred in June 1950, and while the maintenance of the gravesite continued in the hands of Woodlawn Cemetery under an endowment established in 1933, the oversight of the mausoleum passed to The Commonwealth Fund. The Fund maintains its link to the Harknesses through their financial legacy and home (now the Fund’s headquarters), and directly to the mausoleum, as the foundation’s treasurer serves as the trustee of the gravesite.

It was under this mandate that The Commonwealth Fund set out in 2011 to restore the aging mausoleum. Beyond obvious deterioration brought on by time and weather, the chapel faced major structural problems. The 1932 expansion meant that the chapel was built on two separate foundations, with different rates of settling and shifting over time having caused a continuous crack, visible to the naked eye, around the entire structure. Additionally, Farrand’s lush plantings threatened the integrity of the building: roots below the chapel were causing additional movement, and vines on the stone walls were eating away at the mortar. The mature white pines planted up against the chapel in 1925 were beginning to collapse and fall on the roof, breaking the slate, compromising the waterproofing, and weakening the roof structure. A tornado in 2010 accelerated the collapse of trees on the roof and caused serious damage.

Over eight months in 2011 and 2012, contractors worked to restore and preserve the mausoleum. Studying original plans and correspondence, the restoration team aimed to bring the site back to its 1940 appearance and, most important, preserve the structure for future generations. Experts from the New York Botanical Garden were consulted on new plantings in the spirit of Farrand’s original plan that would be less destructive to the building. Walls were cleaned of calcification and repointed, the foundation was repaired and stabilized with new drainage, and a contemporary waterproof membrane was installed beneath a restored slate roof. In preserving a historic structure within a designated National Historic Landmark, the Fund’s diligent work at the mausoleum continues the Harknesses’ legacy of reviving public spaces.

The Harkness mausoleum stands as a lasting memorial to Edward and Mary Harkness, their selflessness and humility, their generous philanthropy through The Commonwealth Fund, and their dedication to the betterment of humankind.
Notes


4 http://www.commonwealthfund.org/about-us.


6 Rogers designed a parish house in 1925 for a Fifth Avenue Presbyterian minister, the Reverend Henry Sloane Coffin, who was Rogers’ roommate at Yale.


11 The first plot was Lot 15064, sections 147/148. Woodlawn Cemetery Record of Endowment (Aug. 4, 1933). Rockefeller Archive (Sleepy Hollow, N.Y.), Commonwealth Fund Archives 1918–1988, series 19, subseries 1, box 14, folders 145–146.


15 Rockefeller Archive (Sleepy Hollow, N.Y.), Commonwealth Fund Archives 1918–1988, series 19, subseries 1, box 14, folder 145, p. 2.

16 Rockefeller Archive (Sleepy Hollow, N.Y.), Commonwealth Fund Archives 1918–1988, series 19, subseries 1, box 14, folder 145, p. 2.


19 J. B. Tankard, Beatrix Farrand: Private Gardens: Public Landscapes (New York: Monacelli Press, 2009), pp. 125–26, 130, 132. Foliola was left to the State of Connecticut at Mary’s death in 1950. The site was divided into a camp for handicapped groups and a state park for recreational activities. Many of Farrand’s gardens were restored in the late 1990s and are open to the public.


21 L. Weaver, Lutyens Houses and Gardens (London: Country Life; New York: Charles Scribners’s Sons, 1921).


23 Rockefeller Archive (Sleepy Hollow, N.Y.), Commonwealth Fund Archives 1918–1988, series 19, subseries 1, box 14, folder 146, p. 1.


26 Virgil, Aeneid, 9–641.


31 The four windows on each side of the mausoleum, with a total of eight openings, contain two subjects in each, for a total of 16 subjects. The subjects are, from left to right when standing in the mausoleum facing north: The translation of Enoch, Gen. 4:17; Elijah raises the Widow’s son Zarephath, 1 Kings 17:14–16; Elijah taken up by a Chariot of Fire, 2 Kings 17:14–16; Elisha raises the Shunamite’s son, II Kings 4:32–37; Christ raises the Widow’s son at Nain, Luke 7:11–17; Jairus’ daughter raised to life at Capernaum, Matt. 9:18–26; The Transfiguration, Matt. 17:1–13; The Raising of Lazarus at Bethany, John 11:1–46; The Resurrection at Jerusalem, Matt. 28:2–4; The Women at the Sepulchre, Matt. 28:5–8; Christ appears to Mary Magdalene, Mark 16:9–11; The Journey to Emmaus, Mark 16:12–13; Christ appears to the Apostles, John 20:24–29; The Ascension at Bethany, Luke 24:50–53; John and the Seven Candlesticks, Revelation 1:10–18; Christ Enthroned (Continued Life), Revelation 21:1–27.

32 The Commonwealth Fund, Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors, July 12, 2011.