

# The Use of Egyptian Revival Architecture in American Cemeteries

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Photographs by the Author

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Most of those involved in gravestone studies have experienced Egyptian forms in art and architecture in cemeteries. A variety of Egyptian forms became popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in American cemeteries. The hypothesis of this paper is that the popularity of the Egyptian Revival motifs in cemeteries stemmed from Freemasonry, general knowledge by the American population of Egyptian motifs and the personalities of major opinion leaders within the world of cemeteries and cemetery design.

The architectural styles of ancient Egypt include features on memorials such as the pyramids in Giza and temples in Luxor. The major aspects of Egyptian Revival are:

1. The obelisk—the ray of the Egyptian sun-god.
2. The winged orb—representing the sun-god Ra flying across the sky.
3. The ankh—an Egyptian symbol of life
4. Pyramids—physical protection of one's remains
5. Sphinx—physical protector of one's remains
6. The portal—gateway to eternity
7. The mastaba—architectural style with walls slanting outward from top to bottom. This appears on side-hill tomb facades or on mausoleums.
8. The lotus flower (usually found as decorative elements or column capitals)—represents rebirth or regeneration.

The first Rural Cemetery to feature prominently the Egyptian Revival motif was Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts; the first Jewish cemetery to do so was the Old Jewish Cemetery (also known as the Colonial Jewish Cemetery or the Touro Cemetery) in Newport, Rhode Island.

## From Where Did the Knowledge of Egyptian Forms Come?

There was wide-spread knowledge of Egyptian forms among the Masons and they used them in their lodges and symbols. Promotion of the Egyptian Revival movement among Freemasons shows up as early as 1723 with the Masonic Constitution:

The Masonic Constitution of 1723 is a sort of Biblical paraphrase: it describes the outstanding architectural education that Israelites received during their residence in Egypt ...<sup>1</sup>

Knowledge of Egypt and its architectural forms became available to the general public following the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt.

The number of Egyptian-style rooms and monuments built by Europeans exploded with Napoleon's 1798 invasion of Egypt ...<sup>2</sup>

So, we have the ingredients for a fad:

1. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans were looking for new metaphors for their new nation. The War of 1812 was fresh in peoples' minds and was really the final break between the United States and Europe.
2. There was widespread interest in Egyptian forms among the population. While one of the paths of knowledge of Egyptian forms came through Europe, it was not European.
3. Many of the founding fathers of the United States were Masons: George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and James Monroe to name a few. Freemasonry was popular. So, when opinion leaders, who happened to be Masons promoted the forms, they had societal gravitas.

### The Leaders Who Promoted the Egyptian Revival Motif in Cemeteries

In the Mount Auburn community, some of the founders of the cemetery, including Henry Dearborn, had Masonic connections. Jacob Bigelow, who was a founder and eventually president of Mount Auburn Cemetery, was not a Mason but he was obviously influenced by the Egyptian Revival movement. It was he who designed and commissioned both the Egyptian Revival gates to Mount Auburn Cemetery and the Civil War monument, a Sphinx. When Bigelow spoke of Egyptian architecture, he said, "The early Egyptians built neither for beauty nor for use, but for eternity."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the largest clue that Egyptian Revival architecture in American cemeteries came specifically from the personalities who promoted them is as follows:

While Bigelow was arguably the most influential figure in legitimizing the use of the Egyptian Revival in American commemorative culture, his entranceway to Mount Auburn was not, however, the first monumental example to be built in the United States, Maximilian Godefroy, first introduced the Egyptian Revival ... in the designs of the carriage gate and several family monuments at Westminster Cemetery (1813-1815) in Baltimore, Maryland, as well as in the base of the Baltimore Battle Monument (1815-1825). .... Another major example of the Egyptian Revival, which predated the establishment of Mount Auburn Cemetery, was the execution of the Groton Monument (1826-30), a monumental obelisk dedicated to the Battle at Groton Heights in 1781 in Groton, Connecticut. However, while the designs by Godefroy and the Groton Monument achieved local fame in their respective towns, they did not evoke the kind of national—and even international—recognition as did Mount Auburn Cemetery and its Egyptian Revival gate. This was perhaps due in large part to the efforts made by Jacob Bigelow in the promotion of the new cemetery landscape as well as through the publication of his lectures on the arts and technology from antiquity.<sup>4</sup>

The use of Egyptian Revival architecture in the Jewish architecture develops concurrently with its presence in American Jewish Cemeteries in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and following. It was first used in a Jewish cemetery in the 1840s, largely through noted Jewish philanthropist, Judah Touro.<sup>5</sup>

Judah Touro was a member of the Masons. There is even an obelisk for his father, Rabbi Isaac Touro, in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Newport. The cenotaph includes an icon of the Masonic "square and compass."<sup>6</sup>

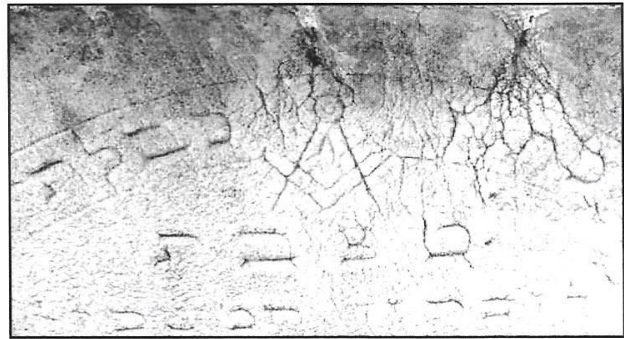


Fig. 1. Rabbi Isaac Touro's cenotaph, Newport, Rhode Island.

The evidence for Judah Touro being an opinion leader in the Egyptian Revival movement in the Jewish world is circumstantial.<sup>7</sup> To date, there have been no extensive writings uncovered in Judah Touro's papers, the way there was with Dearborn and Bigelow. However, Touro's Masonic connections indicate exposure to Egyptian forms; and his involvement with the Bunker Hill Monument, an obelisk; his involvement with the Mikveh Israel (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) Shul (fundraising in 1823 and 1824 with dedication in 1825);<sup>8</sup> the gate and fence to the Newport, Rhode Island Cemetery; and his personal choice for an obelisk as his marker<sup>9</sup> display a consistent affinity for Egyptian Revival.

There is a connection between Judah Touro and Jacob Bigelow in that they both worked to complete the Bunker Hill Monument (an obelisk, started in 1825 and finished in 1843). It is not clear whether the rise of Egyptian Revival Architecture in the American Jewish world came from Europe, copying of American Masonry, a combination of them, or just the personal tastes of individual influential people,



especially Judah Touro. One can also argue that Jewish culture in America often copied the forms of the greater society and therefore, was adopted in Jewish cemeteries from its use in American cemeteries.<sup>10</sup>

At the time when Egyptian Revival forms became common in secular, Protestant and Jewish cemeteries, the key individuals and opinion leaders were Masons. While they made not have made their decisions based on Freemasonry, they must have been familiar with the forms.

### Examples of Egyptian Revival Architecture in Cemeteries



Fig. 2. Gates to the Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

To the left and just to the right of the main gate are obelisks. Just under the center of the main gate is the winged orb.



Fig. 3. Gates to the Touro Cemetery (Jewish), Newport, Rhode Island.

We see the same features on the Touro Cemetery in Newport (Fig. 3): to the left and to the right of the main gate are obelisks. Under the center of the main gate is the winged orb. Nothing in the fence shown above has Jewish symbolism associated with it. It was installed in 1843 under the direction of Isaiah Rogers of Boston. Rogers was familiar with the Mount

Auburn Cemetery. Based on the gates of Mount Auburn Cemetery, Rogers designed the gates to Boston's Old Granary Burying Grounds in 1840. His 1843 design for the Newport Cemetery is almost identical to that of the Granary,<sup>11</sup> which is shown below.<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4. Gates to the Granary Cemetery, Boston.

Egyptian Revival architecture was also common on mausoleums and side-hill tombs. It appears on the two photos below, one from Mount Auburn, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Fig. 5) and the other from a Jewish cemetery, Walnut Hills, Cincinnati, Ohio. (Fig. 6) Both show Egyptian Revival themes that are not inherently Christian and not Jewish—and yet the Christians and Jews interred chose the Egyptian sun-god as the only decoration on their markers.

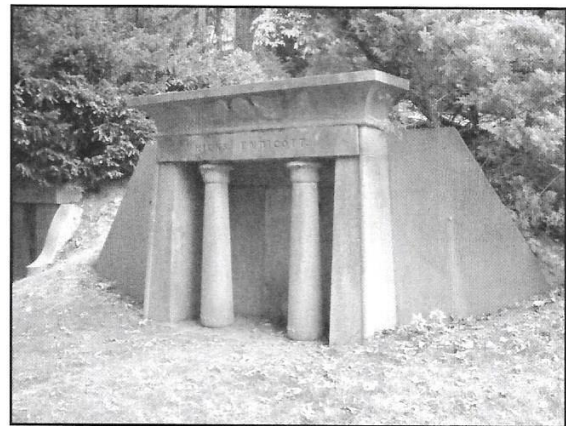


Fig. 5. Endicott/Hicks Mausoleum, Mount Auburn, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



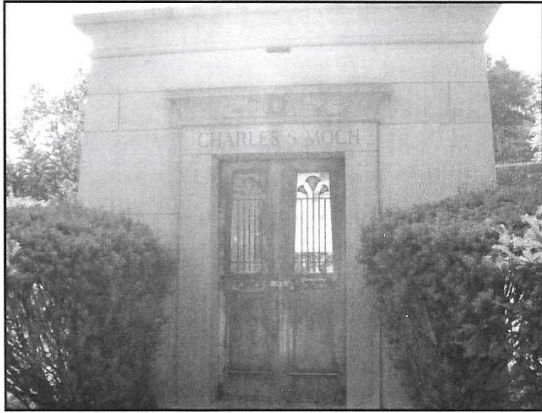


Fig. 6. Koch Mausoleum. Walnut Hills, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Figure 7 depicts a window of a mausoleum in the Jewish Cemetery, Salem Hills, Brooklyn, New York. It is the only window in the mausoleum. It includes the falcon, a bird god of ancient Egypt, the ankh and the lotuses, but nothing of Jewish content.

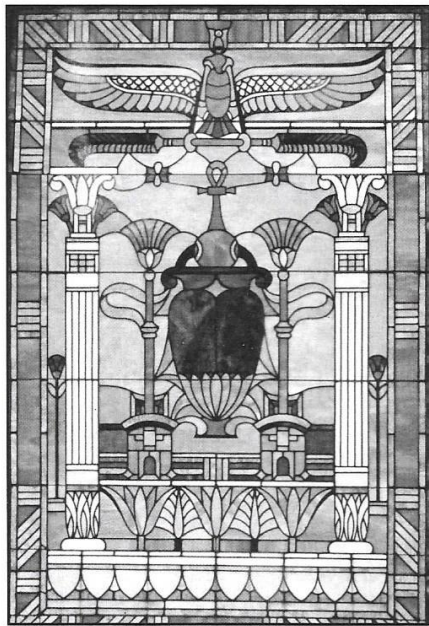


Fig. 7. Salem Fields (Jewish) Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York.<sup>13</sup>

#### Religious Pushback

To many, Egyptian religious symbolism seems out of place or inappropriate in a cemetery of any western religion, particularly a Jewish cemetery. Religious Jews, twice a day in their services remember the Exodus from Egypt. There is a fascinating irony in

the choice of Egyptian architecture and Egyptian symbolism despite its popularity in the culture of the day.

Joseph Story, United States Supreme Court justice from 1811 to 1845 and a founder of Mount Auburn, spoke at the dedication of the cemetery in 1831. After discussing the ways of the aboriginal Germans, the Egyptians, the Hebrews,<sup>14</sup> the Asians, the Greeks, the Romans and Moslems,<sup>15</sup> he goes on to say, "Why should not Christians imitate such examples? They have far nobler motives to cultivate moral sentiments and sensibilities; to make cheerful pathways to the grave; to combine with deep meditations on human mortality the sublime consolations of religion." He too apparently recognizes the problem of Egyptian Revival architecture and Egyptian symbolism, but also argues for its appropriateness. When Story passes, he is buried in Mount Auburn.

His marker, shown in Figure 8, reflects his total embrace of Egyptian Revival architecture. The obelisk is clear, but not as clear is the winged orb of the Egyptian sun-god on all 4-sides of the pedestal.



Fig. 8. Marker for Joseph Story, Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Some say that Egyptian Revival symbolism, including the obelisk and the winged orb of the sun-god have been redefined, analogous to the way some Christians have adapted both the ankh and Celtic Cross as Christian symbols. (It should be noted that the Washington Monument originally included the winged orb of the sun-god which was removed in 1884,<sup>16</sup> likely reflecting that its presence exceeded the limits of acceptance by the greater American religious communities.)

#### The Evidence from what is Absent

While we see the Egyptian Revival architecture in non-denominational, Protestant and Jewish cemeteries, we might ask, "What about Catholic cemeteries?" To the extent that Egyptian Revival themes appear in Catholic cemeteries, it is generally just the obelisk which usually includes a cross, the sacred heart or other characteristic Catholic icons. Also, the arrival of this form is generally much later than its appearance in non-denominational, Protestant and Jewish cemeteries.

There are a number of logical answers. First, "Freemasonry is incompatible with the Catholic faith."<sup>17</sup> There may have been less familiarity with the Egyptian theme among Catholics. Second, there were no personages with the gravitas of Bigelow or Touro to promote the Egyptian Revival theme. And last, there is a central authority within the Catholic Church which is not the case in either the Protestant denominations or Judaism. The church controlled its cemeteries.

#### Summary and Conclusions

Egyptian Revival Architecture in cemeteries, both religious and non-religious, was a fad begun in American life in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Starting in 1831, it quickly found its way into cemeteries. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Egyptian Revival themes had transitioned from common to rare. Its popularity in rural cemeteries was heavily influenced by personages such as Jacob Bigelow and in Jewish cemeteries by Judah Touro.

#### Acknowledgements

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#### Notes

1. Diana Muir Appelbaum, "Jewish Identity and Egyptian Revival Architecture." *Journal of Jewish Identities* 5:2 (2012) 7.
2. Op cit. Appelbaum, 6.
3. *Ancient Architecture. North American Review* 88:183 (April 1859) 343.
4. Joy M. Giguere, "The Dead Shall Be Raised:" *The Egyptian Revival and 19<sup>th</sup> Century American Commemorative Culture*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Maine (August 2009) 88-89.
5. Leon Huhner, *Life of Judah Touro, 1775-1854*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946).  
A more recent publication about Touro includes: Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Touro Monument Controversy: Aniconism vs. Anti-Idolatry in a mid-19th Century American Jewish Religious Dispute." *Between Jewish Tradition and Modernity: Rethinking an Old Opposition, Essays in Honor of David Ellenson*, eds. Michael A. Meyer and David N. Myers. (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2014) 80-95.
6. The author is assuming that Judah Touro designed both his own monument and this cenotaph. This follows the Jewish tradition that the son designs the tombstone of a parent.
7. Personal communication from Dr. Jonathan Sarna, 2017
8. Bertram W. Korn, "A Reappraisal of Judah Touro," *The Jewish Quarterly*, 45:4 (April 1955), 568-81.