Digging up the Truth
The History of the De Jongh Family Monument

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There is a great deal of religious symbolism on monuments in cemeteries all over the world. The inscriptions and designs of monuments reveal the beliefs and ideals of the dead and their families. My investigation of the De Jongh family took place in the Mount Hope Cemetery in Rochester, New York. The De Jongh’s monument made note of the family’s ancestry, while the inscriptions and motifs captured the most important sentiments in their lives.

Mount Hope Cemetery was dedicated on October 3, 1838 as the first municipal Victorian cemetery in the United States. It was modeled after Pere Lachaise, the first major rural cemetery, located in France, and Mount Auburn Cemetery, the first major rural cemetery in the United States, founded in 1831 near Boston. Today, Mt. Hope cemetery sprawls over 196 acres of rolling hills containing over 350,000 graves. Mt. Hope opened at a time when cemeteries served as public areas where people could go to experience the freshness of nature. Visitors who walk the hills and valleys of Mt. Hope will encounter large plots associated with churches and synagogues, and individual stones with religious symbolism.

The religious symbolism depicted in grave markers is hardly surprising, for throughout history, death has been connected to religion. Religious beliefs may give people a sense of power over death, as they offer explanations for this unknown, unavoidable, and often terrifying end to life. Quite simply, religion gives meaning to death. Thus, grave markers often have inscriptions and designs that connect the person to a god or a religious ideal, from which one can learn a great deal about the dead.

The De Jongh family monument served as an excellent research subject of an average Rochesterian living in the 19th century. My investigation began with a basic analysis of the monument. Henry De Jongh was born in Holland on February 10, 1816 and died in Rochester, NY on March 25, 1896. He shares a four-sided monument with his first wife, Johanna Lantsink and their daughter, Miss R. B. De Jongh. Nearby, in front of the monument, are three small markers, which read, “Mother,” “Father,” and “Reinira.” The De Jongh monument is located in range 1 on Second Avenue between Elm and Evergreen Avenues. The monument was erected in 1885 after the death of Johanna on September 26, 1884. The year 1885 is cast in large print on one side of the memorial. Miss R. B. De Jongh followed her mother in death on June 27, 1890. Although there is no specific reference to Reinira De Jongh as the daughter of Henry and Johanna, she probably would not be buried with Henry and Johanna if this were not the case. If she were married, according to custom, she would have been buried with her husband’s family, but the prefix “miss” indicates that she was most likely never married.

The De Jongh monument has many inscriptions that provide details of the family’s past. Henry’s tablet reads: “Henry De Jongh, Born in Holland, Feb. 10, 1816, DIED Mar. 25, 1896; ‘My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” Below this, Johanna’s tablet reads: “Johanna Lantsink, wife of, Henry De Jongh, Died Sept. 26, 1884 Aged 68 years, ‘Christ my only hope.’” The adjacent side has an imprint of an anchor and chain, below which is the date 1885 and a garland. The lettering at the base of this side reads: “Monumental Bronze Co. Bridgeport Connecticut.” This indicates who constructed and designed the marker. The next adjacent side has a flower bouquet and DE JONGH in large letters underneath. The final side reads: “In loving memory of Miss R. B. De Jongh, Born Holland, May 18, 1840, Died June 27, 1890.” Reinira’s inscription “in loving memory” shows an example of the shift that occurred during the 19th century toward a more free expression of sentiment. A century earlier, her inscription may have read, “Here lies the bones of Miss R. B. De Jongh.” The Mt. Hope Cemetery records show that she was buried on July 1, 1890 at the age of 50.

The dates and inscriptions indicate that the De Jongh family emigrated from Holland some time after their daughter was born in 1840. It is unclear what brought this family to Rochester, but New York has always been richly populated with Dutch. In fact, the Dutch were among the first Europeans to arrive in the Hudson River from Europe in 1609. Perhaps family drew them here, or perhaps they were interested in a new industrially booming American city. Whichever the case, the De Jongh family remained in Rochester until their deaths in the late 19th century.

The Mt. Hope Cemetery records show that all three members of the De Jongh fam-
ily died of natural causes. Henry died of “Valv Disease Heart”, Johanna of “disease of the liver”, and Reinira died of asthenia or debility, an abnormal bodily weakness or feebleness accompanied by a decay of strength. The De Jonghs probably all died at home without visiting a hospital, since the Rochester City Hospital’s death records indicate only 8 deaths in 1896. Despite the fact that the industrial revolution caused a population boom from 60,000 to 160,000 between 1864 and 1900, acceptance of public medical care was gradual, as germ theory was new, and sterilization was not practiced regularly. People therefore relied on general practitioners, physicians of various levels of training who made house calls, and their faith in God to keep them healthy.

Faith played an important part in the lives of the De Jonghs. The De Jongh family belonged to the United Presbyterian Church on Allen Street in downtown Rochester, where Henry’s funeral was held on March 28, 1896. The epitaphs on the De Jonghs’ monument further indicate their faith in Christ. Until the 19th century, most grave stones and monuments did not have epitaphs, but in the 19th and 20th centuries it became increasingly more common for families or the deceased themselves to pick epitaphs prior to death. As evidence of their faith, both Henry’s and Johanna’s epitaphs refer to Christ as a savior. In fact, Henry’s epitaph, “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness” was taken from The Solid Rock, a hymn written by Edward Mote of England in 1834:

My hope is built on nothing less Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness I dare not trust the sweetest frame, But whole lean on Jesus’ name

On Christ the solid rock I stand; All other ground is sinking sand, All other ground is sinking sand

When Darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace. In every high and stormy gale, My anchor holds within the veil.

His oath, his covenant, his blood Supports me in the whelming flood. When all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay.

When He shall come with trumpet sound, O may I then in him be found! Dressed in his righteousness alone, Faultless to stand before the throne.

The first verse of this hymn which appears as Henry’s epitaph echoes Thessalonians 4:16, “For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” Henry’s epitaph and this verse both imply transcendence to heaven through belief in Christ. The epitaph suggests that Henry hoped that he would go to heaven because Jesus served as the sacrificial lamb and died for the sins of humanity. Henry is righteous because he has faith and thus will ascend to heaven. This symbolizes the idea of an immortal soul that leaves the body; death is not an ending of spirit, merely of body. Jung, a prominent Swiss psychoanalyst, defines this “psychically hopeful and enriching” belief in spiritual transcendence as a personal myth. Christ serves as an immortal archetype, an “instinctual structure worthy of one’s faith.” Henry has faith that Christ will lead him into an unknown, unimaginable place.

The Christian belief in continuity of soul after the death of the physical body gives people an explanation of the unknown and peace of mind regarding death. People create symbolic perceptions of connections with religious archetypes to transcend the idea of annihilation. Robert Jay Lifton, a professor of psychiatry who studies human actions to cope with extreme situations, refers to this phenomenon as theological or religious transcendence. It is the “release of the profane burdens of life into a higher plane of existence.” Henry is no longer responsible for good and bad, right and wrong. Henry is beyond that and connected to heaven through Jesus; his connection to Christianity will assure him a place in with God. This ideal allows Christians such as Henry De Jongh an alternative perspective on death—they have the power to model their behavior after Jesus and follow him to heaven to see the glory of God.

Lakoff and Turner studied the metaphors human minds use to form an understanding of the world. They would apply the life
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is a journey metaphor to Henry’s epitaph. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God offers us alternative paths of good and evil throughout life. Death hangs over our heads to remind us of the importance of choosing the good path. Jesus serves as a guide, and only he can save us in the end of our physical life. Henry’s epitaph is an elaboration of Johanna’s which reads, “Christ my only hope.” The analysis of Henry’s epitaph applies to Johanna’s epitaph as well. She believes in a spiritual afterlife; she will get to heaven because of Jesus’ sacrifice.

Johanna’s shortened epitaph and her tablet’s position below Henry’s is suggestive of the role women played in the late 1800s. The husband was the head of the household and the wife subservient to him. Even in death, women were buried with their husbands, and their inscriptions nearly always read their married names and the names of their husbands. Their inscriptions were often smaller than those of their husbands and usually read “wife of” implying an identity depending on marriage.

Two sides of the De Jongh monument contain symbolic images instead of words. The anchor and chain is the largest of the two and could have several meanings. It could mean that the deceased worked at sea, but Henry was a landlord and the owner of a Sash and Blind Company in Rochester, so the anchor did not necessarily relate to his profession. In Christianity, however, the anchor is a symbol of hope. Given the De Jongh’s epitaphs, it is more likely that the anchor was chosen for the monument for its symbolism of hope. The anchor is even mentioned in verse 11 of *The Solid Rock*, which likens the “steadfast anchor of the soul” to faith in Christ. In Christian settings, the anchor is also a disguised cross and a symbol for Christ who prevents the deceased from drifting off and becoming lost. An anchor with a broken chain also represents the cessation of life, and while it is difficult to determine if the chain is broken on the De Jongh monument, the interpretations seem to match the epitaphs.

Below the anchor and chain is the date the monument was erected, 1885, beneath which is a wreath. A wreath symbolizes victory; Christians are victorious in death when they reach heaven, following in Jesus’ footsteps. The adjacent side of the monument displays a bouquet of flowers. On American tombstones, flowers often symbolize the hope for the spirit’s regeneration beyond the grave. The flowers can also be understood as a depiction of the *people are plants* metaphor. That is, people are the flowers or fruit of a plant that flourishes and then withers. As such, flowers symbolize the frailty of life; yet, they may rise again in spring, just as believers may be resurrected after death.

A geometric sun sits at the top of each side of the monument. This image is significant physically and metaphorically. The pictures on the sides of the monument reflect on death, while the sun, a classic symbol of American funerary art, announces a renewal of life. There is a movement up from the physically decaying dead body to the ethereal soul transcending toward the sun to heaven. The soul will physically depart the body beneath the monument and rise to heaven to follow Jesus and sit with God. The crossing over occurs at the tip of the monument with a cinerary urn, whose ashes are symbolic. “The [symbolic] ashes contained within the urn signify penitence, death of the body and its return to dust in the final resting place.” The soul is going to heaven while the body is returning to the earth from which it was made.

The ornamental motifs on the De Jongh monument coincide with the inscriptions. In some cases, particularly on New England grave stones of the 17th and 18th centuries, motifs and inscriptions had no relation because the stone carver would often carve what he felt was popular at the time. However, this monument was neither carved, nor made from stone, but was cast in metal by Monumental Bronze Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut whose name is printed in clear letters at the base of one side. The Monumental Bronze Company originated in Connecticut and expanded throughout the United States, opening businesses in Des Moines, Ontario, and Chicago. These subsidiaries had their own names and inscribed them on the grave markers that they produced. Traveling salesmen carried catalogs with images resembling popular styles in marble and granite. Companies would encourage customers such as the De Jonghs to browse their catalogs and choose exactly which designs and decorations they wanted on their memorials.

The metal used by the Monumental Bronze Company to make the markers was zinc, popularly referred to as “white
These monuments were hollow in the middle, and turned a blue-gray color when exposed to air. White bronze was cheaper than the more common medium of granite or marble and held up better to weathering than marble, though no one knew this in the late 1800’s. In addition, the tablets on the side of the monument were easily removable and names could be added when additional family members died.

It is unclear why Henry De Jongh purchased the cheaper, white bronze, material for the construction of his monument. He seemed to be fairly well off when he died, eleven years after the monument was erected. He possibly made most of his money in real estate as the city boom continued, for he died with $5,000 in personal property and an estimated $12,000 in real estate. Henry may have been drawn to the large size of the marker he could purchase for a relatively small amount fee. Whatever the case, it was not common to buy such a memorial, as they were becoming increasingly unpopular.

However, the removable tablets did prove to be beneficial, as Henry had to bury first his wife and then a daughter.

Henry, Johanna, and Reinira were not the only members of the De Jongh family in Rochester. Henry was survived by two sons and a daughter from his first marriage, and a second wife. There was room for all to be inscribed on the monument, but no additional family members were added. The second wife, according to custom, should have been buried in the plot with Henry, but there was a dispute between her and the De Jongh children after Henry’s death. The dispute over property and money left in the will resulted in Henry’s second wife, Magdalena De Jongh, giving up her portion of the inheritance and moving in with her cousin in Gates, NY. Magdalena was probably buried apart from Henry because of the poor relationship she had with his children. In addition, she was left with little money to make the necessary burial arrangements.

The story of the De Jongh family and their memorial is fairly typical of life in Rochester in the late 1800’s. The De Jonghs emigrated from Holland at a time when business was flourishing and the population was growing during the industrial boom. The De Jonghs integrated themselves into society, belonged to a church, and owned a small business. As immigrants, they remained connected to their cultural and religious roots, while adopting the language and lifestyle of America. The De Jongh monument in Mt. Hope Cemetery stands as a symbol of their values and religious beliefs.

Hannah Newborn completed her degree in Religion in May 2003. Her research stemmed from an assignment in Professor Emil Homerin’s Speaking Stones class. In addition to religion, Hannah has completed the Pre-Medical requirements and plans to attend medical school. She hopes to integrate her understanding of religion and its effects on people with medicine.