

Local Perspective

This ill-fated tomb was party central for a generation of Northern Virginia teens

By [John Kelly](#)

“Death to all who enter the crypt.”

That warning — daubed by a knucklehead unable to correctly spell the word “crypt” — once greeted anyone who dared invade the Remey family mausoleum behind Pohick Church in Fairfax County, Va.

But it wasn’t death that awaited them. It was debauchery and destruction.

Beginning in the 1950s and continuing into the 1980s, the mausoleum was a magnet for Northern Virginia high schoolers bent on mischief.

The man who designed and built the crypt was **Charles Mason Remey**, a wealthy architect. Among Remey’s fondest boyhood memories was visiting a burial vault on his grandfather’s Iowa farm. When he was 8, Remey gathered bricks and stones and built a miniature tomb in the corner of his garden.

“Indeed,” he later wrote, “it was an unusual interest for a small boy to be entertaining.”

Remey could trace his family to Colonial times. His father had been a rear admiral in the Navy. His grandfather had been chief justice of the Iowa Supreme Court. Determined to celebrate his accomplished ancestors, Remey bought five acres of land behind the Episcopal church in Lorton and designed a massive mausoleum he dubbed the “Remeum.”

Construction began in 1939. Remey commissioned art to fill the tomb’s multiple vaults and chambers. **Felix de Weldon**, sculptor of the Marine Corps Memorial, created limestone bas reliefs depicting scenes from American history. Electric lights set in alabaster sconces provided illumination.

Remey relocated his relatives’ remains from around the country. That included his late wife, **Gertrude Heim**. She’d died in 1932 after just a year of marriage, shooting herself — twice — in their Massachusetts Avenue NW mansion. Remey self-published a brief book on the mausoleum and placed copies in libraries around the world.

“I think he wanted to ensure his family history and his family legacy,” said **Brody Levesque**, a writer who became entranced by Remey’s tale after reading an extensive [thread about the tomb on the Fairfax Underground website](#). He’s working on a book on the subject.

Remey spent a fortune on the family mausoleum. At the same time he was overseeing its construction, he was becoming [increasingly prominent, and controversial, in the Baha’i faith](#). He designed Baha’i houses of worship

around the world and involved himself in the faith's internecine politics.

Alas, set as it was in the woods far behind the church, and lacking a caretaker, the Remeum proved irresistible to vandals. In 1956, eight Fairfax County teens were fined after punching through a brick wall to enter the crypt. They claimed to have been inspired by a history lesson on Egyptian tombs.

They may have been the first vandals, but they weren't the last. By the 1960s, the church had had enough. Pohick leaders moved to nullify the contract with Remey.

By then, the architect had settled permanently in Italy, and his affairs were being handled by a brother-in-law who brokered a deal to relocate the bodies and seal the entrance to the Remeum with a double row of cinder blocks.

But juvenile delinquents are nothing if not persistent. Peruse the thread on Fairfax Underground, and you will get a sense of the role the Remeum once played in the lives of reprobate high schoolers. There are photos of teens partying amid the detritus of the tomb, walls covered in graffiti ("Death to all who enter the cyrpt," "Judas Priest"), [statues that have been beheaded](#), the floor strewn with beer cans.

Levesque said that in 1983 fill was trucked from construction at a nearby water treatment plant and deposited atop the mausoleum. He suspects that any surviving statuary was simply pushed deeper into the sepulcher, then entombed, creating a modern-day Pompeii.

Remey died in Italy in 1974. He was 99.

At least one sculpture destined for the Remeum never made it: a Renaissance-style sarcophagus intended to hold the remains of Remey's grandmother **Eliza Smith Howland Remey** (1814-1872).

Remey apparently never paid for it, and it languished at the **Raffaello Romanelli** studio in Florence. [As I recounted in yesterday's column](#), it was purchased in 2001 by Colorado tech entrepreneur **Terry Johnson** and his wife, **Edeltraud**. In 2017, Edeltraud gave it to her neighbor, [a sculptor named Claire McArdle](#).

With her eyes closed and her hands resting on her chest, Eliza looks at peace. It's a serenity denied the other stone residents of the Remeum.


McArdle wonders whether any members of the Remey family, or perhaps a museum on the East Coast, might want Eliza.

"I just feel obliged to see if she can rest somewhere," she said.

Twitter: [@johnkelly](#)

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John Kelly

John Kelly writes John Kelly's Washington, a daily look at Washington's less-famous side. Born in Washington, John started at The Post in 1989 as deputy editor in the Weekend section. Follow 

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