Dedications in Marble & Granite

Cemetery Captures History and Legend in Art

Masonic Cemetery with its 7,000 extravagant tombs and park-like grounds is one of the most spectacular of the "Cities of the Dead," although it's not as old as the Catholic cemeteries in nearby New Orleans.

But even by New Orleans standards, where funeral cortege processions are a daily occurrence, tombs are hallowed ground. "The very stones that mark the graves are a reminder of the past," said photographer Jackson Hill, who documented the cemetery. "For the rich it was a way to build monuments to themselves, a way to ensure they would leave something more than a vague memory behind."

Added to the National Register of Historic Places in May 1992, Masonic Cemetery has 2,243 structures — 97 percent of its monuments, tombs and buildings — that are of historic interest. That's an unusually high percentage for a cemetery still in use, according to Donna Frickey, state coordinator for the Register.

There are approximately two burial sites a day at the cemetery now, officials said. Unlike the area's other historic cemeteries which are tightly packed with tombs, Masonic was designed to achieve an uncrowded, pastoral effect.

Built on an old racetrack, the 120-year-old cemetery became the fashionable place to be buried. Nine Louisiana governors, seven mayors, four chief justices of the State Supreme Court, more than 50 Mardi Gras kings and several Confederate generals are interred there. Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, was originally buried in Masonic Cemetery.

A young woman, one hand extended to the bronze doorway, the other holding a bouquet of flowers, stands beside the tomb of Judge Arlington, one of the most widely known madams of New Orleans' red-light district, Storyville.

Local legend has it the statue represents Arlington trying unsuccessfully to return to her parents' home after her notorious career — or perhaps it's one of the young women she employed servicing her gaudy brothel.

The cemetery offers tours for three free self-guided tours — "Great Families and caretakers of Commerce," "Soldiers, Veterans, Pioneers, Rebels," and "Heritage Trails."

On another tomb, the statue of a grieving woman sits outside the mausoleum of gambler "Never-Smile" Harrington. The New Orleans card player, noted for his poker face and his big winnings, was gunned down after a night at the tables. His widow designed her large tomb with its stained glass windows and marble sides in.

Outside one small granite tomb a large white dog lies on the sidewalk. A big mar- blized statue of the statue's eyes down its chest. The dog is said to have followed its master's coffin to the tomb and refused to leave until it was buried. — the statue was placed at the door to commemorate the dog's devotion.

Photographs by Terri H. Fensel

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