Grave matters

Where New Orleanians traditionally rest in peace comes to mind on All Saints’ Day

By LIZ SCOTT

New Orleans may never have been ready for a drive-in funeral service, as in California, but people here have had to pay their respects to the dead through viewing windows without ever leaving their cars. But burial customs come and go, even in New Orleans.

Back in the 1700s, not a lot of thought went into most everyday burial, says Mary Louise Christie, local historian and founder of New Orleans Cemetery Restoration.

“Burial grounds were very precarious,” she says. “Graves were often dug in streets or courtyards with some haste. The bones of the deceased were carried through the streets in coffins, and the coffin would be backed up against a tree or pole outside the house. The family would then place a blanket over the body and cover it with earth.”

In the 1800s, the state legislature passed a law that required all burials to be held in graveyards, but the law was never enforced. New Orleans was a busy city and people were too busy to worry about the dead.

In 1849, the first public cemetery, St. Joseph’s Cemetery, was established. It was the first place in the city where people could be buried in peace.

In the 1920s, the city began to build new cemeteries, and by the 1930s, there were more than 100 cemeteries in New Orleans.

Burial customs have changed over the years. In the 1950s, people began to use mausoleums and vaults instead of burying bodies in the ground. Today, people are more likely to choose cremation.

New Orleans is known for its unique burial practices, and the city’s cemeteries are a major tourist attraction.

Many of the city’s most famous cemeteries are located in the French Quarter, including St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 and St. Louis Cemetery No. 2.

In St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, you can see the graves of many of New Orleans’ most famous people, including Marie Laveau, the Voodoo queen, and the body of the unknown pirate Jean Lafitte.

In St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, you can see the graves of many of New Orleans’ most famous musicians, including New Orleans Jazz Museum founder Louis Armstrong.

New Orleans is a city with a rich history, and its cemeteries are a reminder of that past. They are a testament to the city’s unique character and culture.
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