PIER'S A LA MODE

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Historians Need
No 'Brushing Up'

By PIE DUFORD

To ask Leonard Huber and Sam Wilson to "brush up on their New Orleans history" is, to slightly paraphrase Shakespeare, like gilding refined gold, painting the lily, throwing perfume on violets and smoothing the ice.

History is in the hands of pros when Huber and Wilson deal with it, so the letter from Gerald Tassin in last Sunday's View of Readers column is, to put it mildly, misplaced advice.

Tassin, referring to a story by Sandy Donnelly in The Times-Picayune on Nov. 13 in which both Huber and Wilson were quoted regarding the St. Peter Street Cemetery, wrote: "The impression given that the St. Peter Street Cemetery was the first one in New Orleans is not entirely accurate. Wilson, Huber & Co. had better brush up on their New Orleans history."

Summoning as evidence "an old Spanish document (dated 1800)," Tassin states that the "true first cemetery" was in "the city block bounded by Bienville, Chartres, Conti and Royal." This information Tassin gathered from "The New Orleans City Guide," compiled during WPA days by Lyle Saxton and Edward P. Dreyer and revised by Robert Tallant in 1932.

In urging Messrs. Wilson and Huber to brush up on their history, Tassin is seemingly unaware that in their monograph "The St. Louis Cemetery of New Orleans," published in 1985, Wilson and Huber took cognizance of the 1800 Spanish document and were well aware of its reference to a cemetery in the square bounded by Bienville, Chartres, Conti and Royal. Tassin is also unaware that the document to which he refers came more than 80 years after Bienville founded New Orleans and is contradicted by the evidence of early plans of the city.

No Evidence

There is no shred of evidence in any of the numerous French accounts and maps of the 1722, 1740 period of the existence of the cemetery on which Tassin, on the authority of the New Orleans City Guide, refers. And, on the contrary, New Orleans maps of 1725, 1728 and 1731 clearly show the cemetery being located in the square bounded by Rampart, St. Peter, Burgundy and Toulouse. Moreover, the Carlos Trudeau maps of 1798 and 1801 show the first New Orleans cemetery in that location and also St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, which had been established outside the city walls in 1783.

The square which Tassin asserts, on the authority of the New Orleans City Guide and the 1800 Spanish document to which he refers, was laid out in 1721 by Adrien de Pauger into building lots. A triple lot at the corner of Chartres and Bienville was owned by the Kolly-St. Rein Concession. This property and its large house was leased to the Ursuline nuns, who arrived in New Orleans in 1727. The Ursulines resided there until their first convent, on the same site as the still-standing second Ursuline Convent on Chartres, was completed. Following their custom, the Ursulines maintained a small burial plot on their property and that was the nearest in question came to being a cemetery. And, incidentally, this was later than the first New Orleans cemetery shown on maps as early as 1725.

The original list of properties and the plan of this square made between 1721 and 1734, which are now in the Library of Congress, make no mention of a cemetery in the entire square.

In his letter to Views of Readers, Tassin, again relying on the 1800 Spanish document, contends that a cemetery also existed on the site of the Cabildo. No other evidence supports that contention. From March, 1721, when Pauger laid out the present Vieux Carre, the site where the Cabildo stands was reserved for government use, a guard house having been built at the corner of St. Peter and Chartres in 1725 and a prison between it and the church in 1730. In the light of this evidence, one can only conclude that the writer of the Spanish document was mistaken or relied on hearsay information.

Miro Map

Tassin, in his letter, referred to "the map of New Orleans sent by Gov. Miro to the king of Spain," and continues the map shows the area destroyed by the fire of 1778, and on it, as bright as day, is a city square bounded by Royal, Hospital (now Gov. Nicholls), Bourbon and Barracks, and marked "Cimetiere," the French word for cemetery.

If Tassin has indeed discovered such a map, sent by Miro to Spain, showing the extent of the fire of 1778, he has uncovered a document for which historians have searched both here and in Spain for many years. Sam Wilson and Leonard Huber, who have both worked in the Spanish archives at Sevilla and Simancas, searched in vain for such a map. It is obvious, then, that Tassin's "map . . . sent by Gov. Miro to the king of Spain is nothing other than the oft-reproduced map, probably drawn in the 1870's or 1880's, purporting to show the area of New Orleans devastated by the fire. Without any authenticity whatsoever, this map was based only on descriptions of the fire.

As for the cemetery shown on this map, it was a small military cemetery at Barracks and Royal established after the barracks were moved to that location in the 1760's. Yet another small cemetery existed near the corner of Chartres and Hospital (now Gov. Nicholls) behind the Royal Hospital, the same being maintained by the Ursulines.

I trust I have demonstrated here, what their many valuable contributions to our regional history long ago demonstrated that Leonard Huber and Sam Wilson don't have "to brush up on their New Orleans history."