Old Cemetery Getting New Look
Lafayette Is Historic Burial Site

By PIE DUFORT

One of the historic landmarks of New Orleans, the Lafayette Cemetery on Washington ave., dates from a time when it wasn't in New Orleans.

That was in 1833 when the Garden District was part of the village of Lafayette, which ran from the upper line of the city, Felicity st. to the present Toledano st.

Americans who came to New Orleans to make their fortune—and usually did—established themselves in the city's suburbs when they found no property available in the old French city. And so it was that the American section came into being above Canal st. and spilled over into the nearby village of Lafayette.

According to Leonard V. Huber, local historian-collector, who is an authority on old New Orleans cemeteries, the Lafayette Cemetery No. 1, as it is called, complemented and succeeded the Girod St. Cemetery as a place of burial in the American quarter.

In 1967, one of the interesting parts of the Lafayette Cemetery—the vaults along the Washington ave. wall were about to be demolished and replaced with a chain link fence. This "improvement," together with drainage and pavement, was to be made with money from a city bond issue that was authorized in 1966.

Vaults Unique

When the Garden District Association learned in May, 1967 of the plan to remove the vaults, the destruction of which might ultimately lead to the disappearance of the cemetery itself, it appointed a committee headed by Mrs. John Manard, to confer with city officials about rehabilitating and preserving the old cemetery.

Mayor Schiro named a committee of Mrs. Manard, chairman, Mrs. Wayne G. Borah, Samuel Wilson, Nigel E. Raftery and Huber. The latter described the campaign that followed:

"The committee held several meetings with Frank C. Fromhertz, engineer in charge of the project, and the latter rejected all bids taken for demolition of the vaults and worked out plans with the committee to save and restore the vaults.

"Our system of vault burial is employed in no other American city. These vaults were constructed of brick in 1850's and 60's, and contained the remains of Irish and German immigrants who settled in Lafayette in the mid-19th century. Through long neglect, veritable forests of bushes and trees have rooted on the roofs, the vaults eventually began to be forced apart.

"It was because of the neglect and deterioration that the decision was originally made to tear the wall, with its vaults, down. Mrs. Manard's committee felt the vaults should be preserved and that the trees...

LAFFAYETTE CEMETERY AS IT APPEARED IN 1861

Burial vaults were constructed of brick in 1850's, '60's.

From the collection of Leonard V. Huber.

LAFAYETTE CEMETERY

Mr. Huber said that in order to get bids for restoring the vaults, a pilot study was decided upon. A city appropriation of $5,000 permitted restoration of 28 vaults, which operation provided basis for specifications on which bids for the full restoration may be made. Mrs. Manard worked tirelessly at the task. Her committee had the cemetery records microfilmed and old books repaired.

With city labor, trees and vines were removed from the old tombs, some 350 of which were cleared of growing encumbrances. Grass and weeds were removed and slabs were salvaged from destruction to be preserved.

"Under Mrs. Manard's direction, the historic old cemetery is getting a 'new look,'" Mr. Huber told me. "The committee is seeking the names of owners of some of the tombs to inform them of necessary repairs. Another New Orleans landmark, is being saved, when it might have gone the way of the Girod St. Cemetery, which had to be demolished in 1957 because of sheer neglect.

Many old New Orleans families have tombs in the Lafayette Cemetery. Gen. Henry W. Allen, Civil War governor of Louisiana, was interred there before final burial on the Old Capitol grounds in Baton Rouge. So was Confederate Gen. John B. Hood, before his remains were moved to Metairie Cemetery. Another Louisiana Confederate General Harry T. Hays, is buried there and so are Samuel J. Peters, pre-Civil War merchant and developer of the American section of the city, and John Turpin, architect and associate of James Gallier in designing and building the original St. Charles Hotel.

From the collection of Leonard V. Huber.