The Death and Life of Historic Cemeteries

Tourists, their AAA tourguide books in hand, wander through the Lafayette cemetery. They snap pictures of the tombs of Civil War generals they never heard of and point to the fine details of artwork: the delicate wrought iron, the carved figures and the "immortelles"

By ERROL LABORDE

Zulime Whitney Summers had the right idea. In 1923, so the epitaph reads, she visited and helped restore Myra Clark Gaines' tomb, on which the inscription announcing that visitation would be chiseled. Thus Zulime's name (she was Gaines' granddaughter) was forever recorded among the others in an historic cemetery without her having to go through the trouble of dying for the privilege.

Myra Clark Gaines, on the other hand, paid the price, although her name would have lived on anyway as the woman who holds the American jurisprudence record for continuing law suits. Her battle for the rights to all of the local lands which she claimed to have inherited lasted 65 years. But for eternity's sake she needed no more than the few square feet near the back of the cemetery.

ALL SAINTS' EVE

These are the days when New Orleans pays closer attention to its cemeteries. The October winds push the fallen leaves along the cemetery paths as though they are preparing the way for the month's end and the arrival of All Saints' Day when the marble villages will suddenly be brightened by chrysanthemums.

These paths will be traveled by mourners and the curious, a few of whom have discovered that some of the city's cemeteries are more than being just final resting places, museums of history, art and design and examples of sorts of a silent urban renewal.

"Look what I found this morning," Eli Carr, a casstaker at St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 exclaimed. The cemetery is the city's oldest continuing burial ground, containing some of the most aged of epitaphs as well as an occasional new one. That morning, while preparing for a funeral at the site of what is now the St. Vincent De Paul Society vault, Carr had discovered an antique milk bottle in which the crystals were now reflecting patches of blue. Thomas Emer-
son, the former coordinator for the Historic New Orleans Collection's historic cemetery archivist project, dated the bottle as being from the late 19th century. Why a milk bottle in a cemetery? As a flower vase of course. Those who care for cemeteries know that vases come in all types, such as the weathered thermos bottle that houses faded plastic flowers in front of one tomb.

LOCKS OF HAIR
A container guarding Marie Laveau's vault contains a different type of offering. Instead of flowers there are small bags, each packed with locks of hair, and written intentions dedicated to the voodoo queen, whose remains allegedly rest there. Red X's, made from the dust of a chunk of cemetery brick, are scratched across the face of the Laveau tomb, the work of worshippers and, perhaps, a few tourists with a yearning for an experience to tell the folks back home.

Some voodoo purists argue, however, that the remains of the real Laveau rest instead at St. Louis Cemetery No. 2 in a small corner plot far less conspicuous than the larger structure at No. 1. It is not so inconspicuous, though, as to be hidden from hardcore ritualists, who have scratched their brick chalk X's there too.

Perhaps the voodoo faithful have asked their queen for protection because "fear" is a word that comes to mind when speaking of St. Louis No. 2. It is a fear not of the dead but of the living, particularly those among mortals who vandalize cemeteries and who lurk behind tombs waiting to snatch purses or cameras from the unsuspecting.

This fear is there but not loathing, because No. 2 is too important to surrender to thugs. Signs on the outside proclaim a restoration project, for which the funding is now 90 percent complete, to restore the wall vaults that line the cemetery—a cemetery which is divided into three separate squares along North Claiborne Avenue, each of which houses the ghosts of local lore. At the Borelli tomb, for instance, the marble is carved to creatively depict the details of the steamboat explosion that sent the occupant to his grave.

HIGH RENT DISTRICT
Nearby, in the exact center of the cemetery's middle square, is a path which was best known between 1840 and 1860 as "Priest's Alley," the fashionable place of the day for those with means to share forever with the proper company. The grand baroque vaults carry some names most prominent to the time of Rodgley, Cabler, Francois Xavier Martin. In their day they may have been the type to be tapped for a contribution for public projects or to be heartened by the sight of the bricklayers shoring up the past.

In this day, however, much of such tapping is being done by organizations such as Save Our Cemeteries, the group which this year celebrated its tenth anniversary of trying to do just what its name says.

Have you talked to Mary Louise Christoffen yet? It is the common question when those in the cemetery preservation establishment are interviewed. If the dead could draw a patron saint from among the living it would probably be Christoffen, who has fought many of the battles for both Save Our Cemeteries and the St. Louis Restoration Committee. "It has been a long ten years," she reports of Save Our Cemeteries' efforts, "but some progress has been made. If people would only realize that as one cemetery is saved it's like a snowball and others are saved. There are 31 historic cemeteries here, all worthy of being preserved."

What causes cemeteries to deteriorate is the same thing that causes them to exist—death. The early burial sites did not have perpetual care plans so the responsibility for upkeep was left to the families. But many of the old vaults are now the properties of families for which there are no longer any heirs, hence no upkeep.

BUSINESS IMAGE
Cemetery activists would like to see activity in the old grave sites again, since many of the old vaults are now empty or no longer cared for. The Catholic Archdiocese of New Orleans, which owns the St. Louis Cemeteries, has perpetual care plans, the profits from which could help maintain the cemeteries, but image counts in the funeral business as much as in any other—and the image of disrepair is keeping business away. Save Our Cemeteries is also lobbying for some special considerations for St. Louis No. 2. The group would like to see a guard house placed there and drainage improvements as well as dramatic lighting. Christoffen argues that with the right treatment the old cemeteries could even become a major tourist attraction. The lighting, she adds, is a practice already established in Mexico.

HISTORIC ACTIVISM
Saving cemeteries has been at times a lonesome effort, though not one without support. The Archdiocese has been central to the effort, both as the source of and solution to some of the problems. Then there has been the support of groups such as the Bricklayers Union, which is providing the labor for the wall vault restoration, and the Historic New Orleans Collection, which oversaw the massive archival project under which every burial site in the old cemeteries was photographed, the names catalogued and the heirs traced. Those efforts were bolstered by two publications which stand today as the definitive histories on local cemeteries: the New Orleans Architecture series volume on the Cemeteries published by the Friends of the Cabildo (authored by Christoffen, Leonard Huber and Peggy McDowell) and Henri Gandolfo's "Memorial Cemetery: A Historical Memoir." When histories are written, preservation seems more certain.

Such efforts at preservation, incidentally, are not unique to recent years. In 1923 a local group calling itself the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Tombs began the project of chronicling the historically important vaults. The Works Progress Administration, during the 1930s, made record of all the tomb inscriptions. And in 1969 neighbors in the vicinity of the uptown Lafayette No. 1 cemetery successfully fought the city's hastily plan to tear down the cemetery's wall vaults, surround the place with a chain-link fence and pave the walkways. Today Lafayette No. 1, along with St. Louis 1 and 2 and Odd Fellows Rest, are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

MAGNOLIA PATHS
If there were a National Register of Pastoral Places, Lafayette No. 1 could qualify for that too. Magnolia trees line the main paths for what once was the city cemetery for the municipality of Lafayette back when the municipality existed. The cemetery contains splendid vaults, including those for both the Chalmette and Jefferson Fire Companies. There are inscriptions that tell of the horror of yellow fever and that suggest futility, such as that on the vault for the Society for the Relief of Destitute Orphan Boys. Sad stories are chiseled in marble to be recalled forever: William F. Klein, an iron worker, lost his life in a Chalmette refinery accident in 1907. There is pride too, such as the signature of tomb maker P.H. Monseaux chiseled on the edge of some slabs. Every art has its stars,

Society vault in St. Louis No. 1 — the New Orleans Italian Benevolent Society tomb

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and Monseaux’s tomb, St. Louis No. 1. Tourists, their AAA tour guide books in hand, wander through the Lafayette cemetery, which is located across the street from the Civil War monuments. The story of the tombs of Civil War generals they never heard of and point to the fine details of artwork: the delicate wrought iron, the carved figures and the “Immortelles” — individualized, wreath-shaped pieces of adornment attached to tombs as symbolic memorials. The wind was restless and the tall air came from France and was practiced with fervor by French Quarter artisans in the latter 19th century — a practice that even predates the cynicism of Mark Twain, who wrote:

“The Immortelle requires no attention; you just hang it up, and there you are; just leave it alone, it will take care of your grief for you and keep it in mind better than you can.”

There’s another person wandering in Lafayette No. 1 this day. She is not carrying a guidebook but her arm is full. A bag lady quietly makes her way, moving from tomb to tomb on a mission that meant no harm but that seemed uncertain. One suspects that bag ladies, or their historical counterparts, have always been on hand at urban cemeteries, perhaps confusing them as places for lost souls. They might have been nearby when the St. Peter Cemetery, the city’s first, opened in the 1720s, and they may have wept when it closed in favor of the new St. Louis Cemetery, dedicated on what was then the edge of town. As that edge moved farther from the nucleus so did the cemeteries. And with progress, burial grounds became rights of way. Most of the Protestant sector of the St. Louis cemetery was moved to the new Gerard cemetery to make way for the laying of Treme Street. Eventually the Gerard cemetery would become the site for a warehouse and then a domed stadium. Some places, however, such as Lafayette No. 1, survived the crush of time, providing a suitable pastime and a place for visitors to spend a sunny afternoon.

But in New Orleans, sunny afternoons carry a limited guarantee, as was true this October day when the sky was suddenly gray, the wind was howling, and the ground was damp. It was a turn of weather befitting both the season and the place and causing the visitors to scamper away. That there was something worth visiting at all, however, was a sign of progress, for the past must be allowed to rest not only in peace — but with dignity.

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