



# 'Cities of the dead' speak loudly of N.O. history

By Mark Lombard  
Clarion Herald

Cemeteries in New Orleans going back to just after the city's founding 300 years ago have carried clues about the society and the city's living and health conditions, and they have played an important role in its history.

When the French founded the city in 1718, burials occurred along the river bank, according to archdiocesan archivist Dr. Emilie Leumas.

Four years later, when the new town was laid out by Adrien de Pauger in 1722, a cemetery was designated just beyond the edge of the settlement along St. Peter Street, between the streets now known as Burgundy and North Rampart. The city itself in those early years extended only five blocks from the Mississippi River to Dauphine Street.

In an effort to fortify New Orleans after 1729, a ditch was dug along this street, Leumas said, which placed



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St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 is located on North Rampart Street in New Orleans near Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.

St. Peter Street Cemetery just outside the then-city limits, now a part of the current French Quarter. It was accessed by a winding road from the end of then-Orleans Street.

Unlike the cemeteries to follow, St. Peter's featured only below-ground burials in wooden caskets. Because it was set on a low and

swampy site, the area was surrounded by a wooden palisade and ditches, the earth from which was used to raise the level of land.

Under the direction of Capuchin Father Charles, rector of the Church of St. Louis (before it became the cathedral), a five-foot brick wall was built, with wealthier colonists paying for the bricks and mortar and poor-

er parishioners providing the labor. It was dedicated with great ceremony on All Saints' Day 1743. The brick wall served to keep wolves, coyotes and other animals from digging up the bodies, Leumas said.

For almost 70 years, the St. Peter Street Cemetery served the city. In looking at the sacramental registers from October 1733, Leumas noted there are burial records that demonstrate the diversity of this "city of the dead," which included French soldiers; an 11-year-old boy who died of smallpox; a young slave girl; a baptized Native American slave woman; a French woman; and a baby of a city councilor.

With the 1788 Good Friday fire, which destroyed 856 houses or roughly 80 percent of the expanding city, the overflowing of the Mississippi River and an outbreak of yellow fever that brought death to many residents, Spanish authorities ordered the cemetery closed for a time to future interments. The cemetery had to move, Leumas said, as "the city had come up around it," expanding two blocks farther from the river. Officials, she added, "didn't want a cemetery, because of disease, in the middle of the city. That, and it was getting full."

On Aug. 14, 1789, a royal decree was issued approving the construction of a new cemetery and decreeing that the old cemetery would be "used as a site for the construction of houses." This set off a church-state battle,

with Spanish authorities disregarding the objections of Auxiliary Bishop Cirilo de Barcelona, vicar for Louisiana, who was defending the rights of those buried and fighting those officials who "were reclaiming sacred ground to put houses."

The new cemetery – St. Louis No. 1 – was set beyond the city limits, and it was there that the practice of above-ground burials began. And while there were above-ground monuments in Europe, here the vaults were also above ground, with family tombs, at times, being used by more than one person.

Among those buried there are Etienne de Boré, wealthy pioneer of the sugar industry and first mayor of New Orleans; Homer Plessy, the plaintiff in the landmark 1896 Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court decision; and Benjamin Latrobe, architect of the U.S. Capitol and designer of the central tower of St. Louis Cathedral, who died of yellow fever while doing engineering for the city's waterworks.

From the late 18th century through the 1860s, New Orleans was stricken frequently by epidemic diseases, brought from trading ships from Mexico and the West Indies. In trying to deal with epidemics while being unaware of the role played by mosquitoes in marshy land in the spread of yellow fever, city officials passed an ordinance in 1821 that forbade placing the dead on view during

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## Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and the International Shrine of St. Jude

WELCOME TO NEW ORLEANS' OLDEST CHURCH BUILDING! ONCE A MORTUARY CHAPEL DURING THE YELLOW FEVER OUTBREAK, IT IS NOW OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE CHURCH AND THE SITE OF THE INTERNATIONAL SHRINE OF ST. JUDE. BUILT IN 1826 TO SERVE THE MANY WHO DIED DURING THE EPIDEMIC, IT LATER BECAME A SANCTUARY DURING THE CIVIL WAR. STAFFED BY THE OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE (OMI) SINCE 1918, IT IS A CENTER OF POPULAR DEVOTION AND DAILY PRAYER. THE SHRINE HONORS ST. JUDE THE APOSTLE, KNOWN AS THE PATRON SAINT OF IMPOSSIBLE CASES. AND HAS THE WORLD'S LARGEST STATUE OF ST. JUDE. (17 FEET TALL)

411 N. Rampart,  
(504) 525-1551

