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Gravely Endangered Cemeteries ***Educating the Living to Care for the Dead***

Story by Jennifer Farwell / Oct. 26, 2007

We see them all around us: mournful and sometimes macabre resting places for our long-departed. In churchyards and on country byways, their tilted, missing headstones resemble the ill-kept teeth of an ancient crone. At Arlington, grave markers stand in line up and down the hillsides, eerily reflecting the fallen comrades who lie beneath them.

In larger cities, cemeteries are often outdoor museums, as the passion of the living for their dead expresses itself through memorial art and architecture of extraordinary beauty. Some of these plots were founded during the "rural cemetery" movement of the 1800s, which encouraged the use of gardens and artwork to make cemeteries places of tranquil reflection for the living. (The first and perhaps greatest example of this approach is Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Mass.)

Large cemeteries with extravagant features can face enormous conservation challenges, even during periods of relative economic stability. When economic and cultural problems unite against them, the results can be disastrous.

"Many historic cemeteries are city-, church-, or family-owned," says Walter Gallas, director of the National Trust's New Orleans Field Office. In some cases, the cost of upkeep is too high. In others, the people and the leadership do not see them as something that needs support. It's terribly unfortunate, because they are part of what defines us."

All in the Family

One problem for historic cemeteries is that they were originally excluded from protection by language in the National Register of Historic Places Criteria for Evaluation unless they had specific, unique characteristics. In 1986, Congress amended that language to place greater emphasis on cemeteries and graveyards. Even so, today many historic cemeteries are not listed on the National Register. In New Orleans, the city with perhaps the greatest challenge regarding its historic burial places, only five of the city's 42 historic, above-ground cemeteries have National Register status.

However, a far greater threat, according to Louise Fergusson Saenz, executive director of New Orleans' nonprofit preservation and advocacy group Save Our Cemeteries (SOS), is lack of education about how historic cemeteries operate. "The way that tombs were set up, the title to a tomb was sold to a family, which is allowed to perpetually use that tomb but is also responsible for its upkeep. It was not the job of the cemetery operator to maintain them, so as families die out and move away, there is abandonment and neglect."

In many historic cities, All Saints' Day, Nov. 1, was traditionally not only a day of remembrance, but a day of maintenance, when families came out and cleaned up their tombs. Today, that tradition has largely fallen by the wayside. Saenz's group attempts one major restoration project each year, and she says it always has an educational component, teaching owners and others the proper techniques for conserving these treasures.

Heather Knight, a New Orleans-based architectural conservator who has a passion for cemetery preservation, says that working on tomb conservation can be very rewarding, as it helps maintain the thread of history through time. "You can read all about Tom Sawyer's account of whitewash, but unless your grandparents taught you that treatment because you lived on a farm, you probably won't know what it is. Or maybe, because you were lucky enough for this tradition to be passed down on All Saints' Day, you won't have to just read about it in a book."

Monuments In Peril

In New Orleans, which millions of tourists visit each year, many to see its "Cities of the Dead," historic cemeteries are in such peril that the majority of SOS projects focus not on restoration but simply stabilization.

"It makes sense, given the volume of the tombs and budgetary constraints," says Saenz. "If we focused only preservation or restoration, we could only afford to work on a few tombs, and we wouldn't make much of an impact." (New Orleans has an uncounted number of tombs – somewhere in the "tens of thousands" Saenz says, and SOS operates on a budget of under \$250,000 per year.)

Their greatest successes, she says, have come through work with nonprofits such as the World Monuments Fund (WMF), an international preservation organization that partnered with the National Trust last year to perform restoration work in the Gulf Coast. The WMF, which in 1996 named New Orleans' Lafayette #1 cemetery to its List of 100 Most Endangered Sites, targeted that cemetery during the 2006 restoration efforts. SOS also finds strong support from charity groups like Tourism Cares, which provides grants, hospitality students, and tourism professionals to help restore historic and cultural icons.

Ironically, Lafayette #1 is located in the Garden District, one of New Orleans' most prestigious neighborhoods, surrounded by expensive, historic homes and flanked by Commander's Palace, one of the world's most noted restaurants. Yet because so many of the families buried there are gone or unreachable, deterioration continues.

A City Steps Up

Other historic cemeteries fare better, but the task is still daunting. In Savannah, Ga., home to Bonaventure Cemetery made famous by "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil," the city maintains its five historic cemeteries. According to Jerry Flemming, director of cemeteries for the City of Savannah, perpetual care (where the cemetery operator handles maintenance for a fee) has only been a requirement for the past 20 years or so, which means most of Savannah's historic tombs have also been affected by the death and disappearance of family owners.

"As far back as 1850 there is documentation of dilapidated monuments and exposed remains," says Flemming. "The earliest cemetery conservation group—the Old Cemetery Association—formed in 1868." In an effort to preserve its memorial history, Flemming says, the city assumes virtual ownership and maintenance of any grave where a family cannot be located for more than 70 years.

In 1985, the city started an active cemetery conservation program, and its staff is trained in conservation. Working with a conservation budget of \$200,000, his three-person crew handles about 40 complex ornamental and structural projects per year, such as rebuilding bronze sculptures and performing historic masonry repair using lime mortar mix. Even so, Flemming says, "we have enough conservation work to last 1,000 years."

A Rising Tide

At Atlanta's Oakland Cemetery, a 48-acre public park and rural cemetery, Executive Director David Moore says restoration efforts have "really taken wings" over the past 20 years as Atlanta - and particularly the historic, southeastern part of the city surrounding Oakland - has seen a rewarding and extensive urban revitalization. Like many historic cemeteries, Oakland (c. 1850) was not designed with perpetual care. However, fundraising efforts of the Historic Oakland Foundation, support from the city (including an exclusive right to conduct tours – something not in place in New Orleans), and considerable public support have elevated budgetary goals to the millions, rather than the thousands. To complete the task of restoring Oakland "to be again the treasure that it can be," the foundation hopes to raise \$15 million for restoration, plus a \$10 million endowment for maintenance.

"The restoration and beautification and promotion of these places is imperative," Flemming says, "not only to capture and preserve the past, but also to put it into perspective for the future."

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