

# Preserving New Orleans' Cities of the Dead

## Focus: St. Louis Cemetery No. 1

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No. 396 Old St. Louis Cemetery Date: ca: 1875  
By George François Mugnier  
Source: New Orleans Public Library Collection



Same view of Alley 9L  
By Joseph P. Mattera, 2001.

New Orleans' historic cemeteries have long fascinated visitors to the city since the early nineteenth century. Today, after years of abandonment and neglect, they are currently experiencing renewed popularity through heritage tourism. Yet, despite this revived interest, issues of poor maintenance and repair, and opportunistic vandalism continue to pose serious threats to these culturally unique, yet fragile sites. A new approach to their preservation is currently underway through a collaborative effort by the Departments of Historic Preservation and Landscape Architecture from the Graduate School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania led by professors Frank Matero and Dana Tomlin, and the School of Architecture/Preservation Studies, Tulane University led by Eugene Cizek. Funded by a grant from the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation, Office of Cultural Development and The Samuel H. Kress Foundation, and in collaboration with Save Our Cemeteries, Inc. and the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the project is focused on St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, the city's oldest extant cemetery, founded in 1789. This site, along with St. Louis Cemetery No. 2, are rare cultural landscapes of combined European, African and Native American traditions containing an important collection of family and society tombs. In 1975, these cemeteries were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of their national and local historical significance. In 2001, St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 was nominated to the Save America's Treasures (SAT) program and has recently received unprecedented funding to begin preservation work.

The current program is focused on developing a model conservation plan beginning with the documentation, recording and analysis of the cemetery and its urban context over time. This has been realized through comprehensive survey and mapping of the site and its urban context, measured drawings of selected tombs, and the development of practical guidelines and standards for the conservation and maintenance of the tombs and tombscapes. Central to the project has been the utilization of digital technologies, with an extensive database tied to a Geographic Information System (GIS) as descriptive, analytical and communication tools to better map, analyze and ultimately manage this and similar sites throughout the city and state. This represents the first large-scale application of such powerful tools to the conservation and management of historic burial grounds and cemeteries.



Through the project, practical technical solutions to the increasing material problems of tomb masonry and metalwork have also been developed and implemented. Material analyses were conducted at the Architectural Conservation Laboratory at the University of Pennsylvania, and important technical data have been generated on the use and performance of hydraulic lime mortars and stuccos as compatible repair and replacement materials for the existing tombs. Procedures were tested last year through the conservation and repair of three selected tombs in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 funded by Save Our Cemeteries, Inc. and the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

The current Save America’s Treasures program has three major objectives:

- To stabilize those tombs in a critical emergency condition
- To complete a model restoration of a typical tombscape of 30 tombs of diverse style and type
- To provide local training for specialists in masonry preservation

<b>Bergamini Tomb, #12</b> <b>Top: Before, Bottom: After.</b>	<b>Esteve Tomb, #13</b> <b>Top: Before, Bottom: After.</b>	<b>Perrault Tomb, #351</b> <b>Top: Before, Bottom: After.</b>
		
		
<p><i>Pilot Approach – preservation. The deterioration has been stabilized, yet the tomb appears much as it did before treatment.</i></p>	<p><i>Pilot Approach – conservation and partial restoration. Base, niche and tablet conserved, top two steps were partially rebuilt.</i></p>	<p><i>Pilot Approach - conservation and partial restoration. Tablet and structure conserved, while much of the stucco was replicated.</i></p>

The SAT project is under the direction of Frank Matero, University of Pennsylvania, Ann Masson, Assistant Director, and Dorothy Krotzer, supervising conservator. The SAT project team includes Laura Ewen, Lindsay Hannah, Heather Knight, and Sophie Middlebrook, conservation assistants; Pietro Mangarella and Kecia Fong, conservators; Royal Osborne, mason; Anthony Henderson, Patricia Hulin, and Jim Jenkins, artisans; Laurence Saltzman, documentary photographer, with Architectural Conservation Laboratory support by Judy Peters.

### **Emergency Stabilization**

The emergency stabilization component of the SAT program addresses those tombs in the poorest condition in the hopes of stopping further deterioration until additional preservation funds become available. Thirty-five tombs have been identified for emergency stabilization based on the earlier survey. Most emergency work includes the repair and closure of open roofs. This work requires both traditional masonry techniques and specialized preservation knowledge.

Typical emergency stabilization work includes cleaning the debris and vegetation from tomb roofs and relaying and replacing bricks in a soft traditional lime mortar as originally constructed. All tombs are carefully studied and documented prior to stabilization and occasionally construction details are changed for better durability.



*Fong and Mangarella stabilizing the Malard Tomb.*



*Laura Ewen stabilizing an emergency tomb.*



*Heather Knight grouting brickwork.*



*Dorothy Krotzer waxing metalwork.*

## **The Future**

Approximately forty tombs of architectural and cultural significance in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 have been identified as requiring urgent preservation work. Time is running out for these tombs unless dedicated funds are obtained to undertake the careful conservation work needed. Funds are being generated from family owners, local fundraising organizations, corporations and government and private funding programs and an Adopt-a-Tomb program will be unveiled in October, 2002. Additionally, a heritage education program developed by Tulane University with the Joseph A. Craig Elementary School continues to engage local school children from the adjacent neighborhood.

By coordinating the knowledge and skills of many specialists to develop and implement a conservation plan for St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, this multi-faceted project provides an alternative approach to the long-term preservation and care of a very unique and important American place. The results of all phases of the project may be accessed through the project's website [www.noladeadspace.org](http://www.noladeadspace.org), the Save Our Cemeteries, Inc. website [www.saveourcemeteries.org](http://www.saveourcemeteries.org), and publications in *Preservation in Print*, a journal published in New Orleans, Louisiana.