

Graveyard Concrete

Cement use in the historic cemeteries of the French Quarter

BY BILLIE G. SNELL AND DEBBY L. AMON



Fig. 1: A large mausoleum within St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 in New Orleans. Mausoleums are typically constructed for use by individual families and for members of organizations, such as the Grange

This article had initially been scheduled for the October 2005 issue, just prior to the ACI Fall 2005 Convention that was to take place in New Orleans, LA. In the wake of the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent relocation of the convention, the article was postponed. It is presented now in tribute to the historic legacy of New Orleans as the city's reconstruction continues.

Throughout our everyday lives, concrete surrounds us. We are born in concrete hospitals, attend concrete schools and churches, walk on concrete sidewalks, travel over concrete roads and bridges, and even reside in concrete homes. It really should be no surprise then, that in death, many families choose to have their loved ones interred in a concrete crypt or mausoleum (as shown in Fig. 1).

Although most concrete crypts and mausoleums are built in low-lying areas, where water could easily destroy a coffin, it's not entirely true for the city of New Orleans. Basically, the majority, if not all, of the crypts and mausoleums in the cemeteries of New Orleans were built along the lines of traditional European cemeteries and to represent the architecture of a French city. In fact, many visitors to New Orleans have stated that these cemeteries do look like a miniature city—a “city of the dead”¹ (Fig. 2 and 3).

Most of the crypts and mausoleums in New Orleans are constructed of brick covered with a cement plaster (see Fig. 4). Even when these crypts and mausoleums need repair work done, workers use a mixture of both lime and cement. This combination does not detract from the original structure.²

Venturing into any New Orleans cemetery is never quite complete unless one takes a walk down memory lane in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 to view the most well known of all crypts—that of Marie Laveau, the notorious Voodoo Queen. Marie was a famous practitioner of voodoo, a mystic cult with African origins. As shown in Fig. 5 and 6, her crypt is constructed of lime and cement stucco over brick. Located in the front of St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, this crypt is definitely one of the many examples of New Orleans' rich history.

Fig. 2: A typical New Orleans cemetery resembles a small city—a “city of the dead”



Fig. 3: Another view of a “city of the dead” within a New Orleans cemetery. A concrete pump is being used for the repair of a cemetery wall

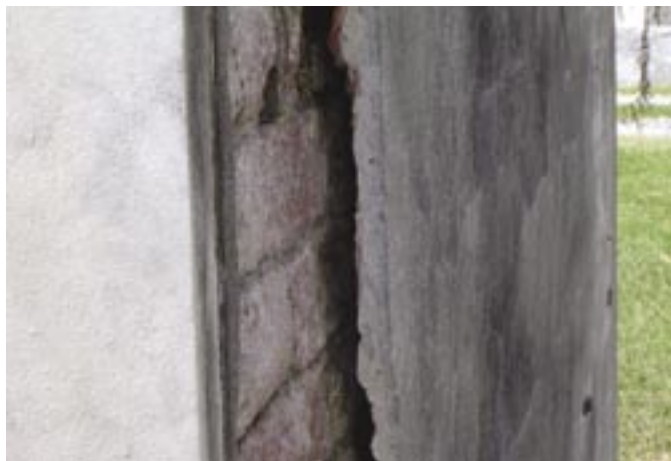


Fig. 4: This particular crypt shows the stucco of lime and cement over the brick structure



Fig. 5: This crypt also shows the stucco of lime and cement over the brick structure. Sometime in the 1960s, X marks or cross signs began showing up on crypts as part of supposed voodoo ritual. According to tradition, however, they have no connection to voodoo practice. Cemetery preservationists consider the marks acts of vandalism



Fig. 6: At the very front of St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 is located one of the most famous crypts, that of Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen. The X marks are clearly visible

References

1. Meyer, L., and Peters, J., “Tourism—A Conservation Tool for St. Louis Cemetery No. 1,” May 2001, 40 pp.
2. “Cemetery Preservation,” Save Our Cemeteries, Inc., Sept. 1989.

Selected for reader interest by the editors.



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