Above Ground

One of the first questions tourists ask when they come to New Orleans is:

“Why do they bury the dead here in above ground tombs?”

It has been a curiosity among visitors to the Crescent City for years.

Mayor Charles J. Leeds tomb in Cypress Grove Cemetery (rusted long ago) is constructed entirely of cast iron.

Mark Twain observed this phenomenon and described it in a letter to his friend, Annie Elizabeth Taylor, of Keokuk, Iowa. “My Dear Friend Annie,” wrote a 21-year-old “Sam. L. Clemens” on June 1, 1857, from New Orleans:
“Today I visited one of the cemeteries — a veritable little city, for they bury everybody above ground here. All round the sides of the inclosure, which is in the heart of the city, there extends a large vault, about twelve feet high, containing three or four tiers of holes or tombs (they put the coffins into these holes endways, and then close up the opening with brick), one above another, and looking like a long 3- or 4-story house. The graveyard is laid off in regular, straight streets, strewed with white shells, and the fine, tall marble tombs (numbers of them containing but one corpse) fronting them and looking like so many miniature dwelling houses. You can find wreaths of flowers and crosses, cups of water, mottoes, small statuettes, etc., hanging in front of nearly every tomb. I noticed one beautiful white marble tomb, with a white lace curtain in front of it, under which, on a little shelf, were vases of fresh flowers, several little statuettes, and cups of water, while on the ground under the shelf were little orange and magnolia trees. It looked so pretty. The inscription was in French—said the occupant was a girl of 17, and finished by a wish from the mother that the stranger would drop a tear there, and thus aid her whose sorrow was more than one could bear. They say that the flowers upon many of these tombs are replaced every day by fresh ones. These were fresh, and the poor girl had been dead five years. There’s depth of affection! On another was the inscription, “To My Dear Mother,” with fresh flowers. The lady was 62 years old when she died, and she had been dead seven years. I spent half an hour watching the chameleons — strange animals, to change their clothes so often! I found a dingy looking one, drove him on a black rag, and he turned black as ink — drove him under a fresh leaf, and he turned the brightest green color you ever saw.”

Mark Twain (by Ignace Spiridon) — and changeable friend
Twain repeated these remembrances later in *Life on the Mississippi*:

“They bury their dead in vaults, above the ground. These vaults have a resemblance to houses — sometimes to temples; are built of marble, generally; are architecturally graceful and shapely; they face the walks and driveways of the cemetery; and when one moves through the midst of a thousand or so of them and sees their white roofs and gables stretching into the distance on every hand, the phrase ‘city of the dead’ has all at once a meaning to him.”

He even recalled the “pretty little chameleons,” but proclaimed, “there is no architecture in New Orleans, except in the cemeteries.”

It’s interesting that Twain was fascinated by New Orleans’ clothes-changing lizards long before California jumping frogs, which he chronicled in “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” (published 1865), his first success as a writer.

Twain wasn’t the first to observe or remark about the city’s burial practices. Artist, author, inventor and lawyer John Hazlehurst Boneval Latrobe (1803 - 1891), the youngest son of celebrated architect Benjamin Latrobe, wrote c. 1834:

“We went to the Catholic burying ground. The tombs here are peculiar to the place.”

He continued, “No grave could be dug of the usual depth without coming to water, ... the coffin is laid upon the surface of the ground, and a strong structure of brick built around it. This is then plastered and whitewashed.”

Latrobe painted a beautiful watercolor back then that revealed the tombs of New Orleans to be limewashed in earthen colors, rather than the monochromatic whitewashed tombs of today.

Sir Charles Lyell (1797 – 1875), visiting New Orleans, wrote in 1849:

“The tombs in the cemeteries on the outskirts of the town are raised from the ground, in order that they may be above the swamps, and the coffins are placed in bins like those of a cellar.”
Sir Charles Lyell: “The tombs ... are raised from the ground ... above the swamps”

In the 1840s, Lyell (the foremost geologist of his day) travelled to the United States and Canada, and wrote two widely popular travelogues: *Travels in North America* (1845) and *A Second Visit to the United States* (1849).

With all the observations and comments through the years, it appears that the prevailing explanation is that New Orleans is below sea level, the coffins are wood and they’ll float up through the damp soil. This most prevailing explanation concerning the high water table (and being below sea level), while extremely reasonable to most people, may not be entirely true. It may be logical in part, but it is not the only reason for above ground burials.

Let’s examine some of the evidence that is at odds with the established explanation. First of all, in the St. Peter Cemetery, the city’s first public burial site (opened in 1723), bounded by St. Peter, North Rampart, Toulouse and Burgundy streets, all of its burials were “in ground”. In fact, for the entire time the French ruled Louisiana and for some time during Spanish rule, bodies continued to be buried below ground. It wasn’t until the late 1780s that this practice was halted, not because of the high water table, hurricanes, flooding or any other similar reason.

The city was expanding, and the St. Peter Cemetery was filled to capacity. Excavations in 2010-2011 by a French Quarter resident installing a swimming pool resulted in the discovery of fifteen coffins from the city’s original graveyard. The cemetery ran out of room because “in ground” burials took up more real estate than the use of above ground tombs. After the great fire of 1788, which destroyed 78% of the buildings in the city (856 structures out of 1,100), Spanish Governor of Louisiana Esteban Miró and Intendant Martín Navarro took
immediate steps to help the homeless and hungry and to rebuild the city. While only one person died as a result of the fire, the city still needed a new cemetery. It was in 1789 that city officials established St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 outside the original city walls on the north side of Basin Street (although the street would obtain its name only after the digging of the Carondelet Canal’s turning basin).

City benefactor and father of the Baroness Pontalba, Don Andrés Almonester y Roxas rebuilt the cathedral as a gift to the city and financed many public buildings (including the Cabildo). Almost immediately after the fire, Bertrand Gravier and his wife, Marie, had a plan drawn up for the subdivision of their property (the historic Faubourg St. Mary, later known as the American Sector).

Also, Governor Miró, being a Spaniard, adopted the wall vault system that was the custom in Spain for those who wished to be buried above ground. The various types of other above ground tombs included wall vaults (multiple tiered compartments often called “ovens”), pediment tombs (with height greater than width, often topped by a pediment), platform tombs, parapet tombs, and numerous others.
These above ground tombs were designed to hold generations of a family or (in some cases) benevolent society members in the same tomb by means of sequential interment. A loved one would be placed in a coffin in one of the vaults. The opening was then sealed until the next death. According to *The New Orleans City Guide* (1938), compiled by the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration for the City of New Orleans:

“After a period of time prescribed by law, the tombs may be opened, the coffins broken and burned, and the remains deposited in the crypts. By this method a single tomb may serve the same family for generations.”

This process of interment economized the use of cemetery space. The decomposed remains were either moved to the rear section of the tomb or placed in the caveau, located below the upper compartment. This custom of multiple burial was familiar to persons of Spanish and French descent, but seemed strange to many Americans moving to or visiting the Crescent City.
Another reason for multiple burials in above ground vaults was that until recently the Catholic Church did not allow cremation.* A natural decomposition by heat would take place in these “ovens” during the hot summers in the city. After some time, these remnants of bones and wood were brushed to the back of the tomb where there is a space of a few inches. There they dropped below, and the tomb was ready to receive the next body.

If the incidence of bodies floating up above the ground were truly widespread, would there be “in ground” burials today? In the Holt Cemetery, a city-owned pauper’s cemetery, as well as others, people continue to be buried “in ground”. Jazz legend Buddy Bolden is buried there. And Jewish burials are still performed “in ground” in New Orleans. *The New Orleans City Guide* (1938) comments on these exceptions:

“There have always been certain exceptions to the practice of tomb burial. In the Hebrew cemeteries burial has always been in the ground, and only marble and granite slabs and monuments are seen. The Potter’s Field and Charity Hospital Cemetery, where the unclaimed or destitute poor are buried, present another and quite different appearance. The Charity Hospital Cemetery on Canal Street, for instance, has the appearance of a well-kept green lawn. Close examination, however, discloses the existence of small square stones in rows, flush with the ground and marked with numbers. These stones mark the graves of white persons at the Canal Street entrance and of Negroes at the Banks Street end. Only a few rows of stone markers are visible, since the entire cemetery has recently been raised
about three feet. Underneath the present surface are the forgotten graves of many thousands buried there since the cemetery was established in the 1830s.”

The above ground vaults in New Orleans, therefore, are used more due to custom (French and Spanish burial traditions) and economy (multiple burials in one place) than because of any water table concerns. And custom and economy can be forces just as powerful as nature.

* Church authorities banned cremation centuries ago because the ancient Roman practice of cremating the body was viewed as a rejection of the existence of an afterlife. In 1963, the Vatican lifted the cremation ban, and in 1997 the Holy See granted permission to its U.S. bishops to allow funeral Masses in the presence of cremated remains.

NED HÉMARD

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“Above Ground”
Ned Hémard
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