

New Iberia Above-Ground Cemeteries

Most of us have passed some solemn time in a burial ground, but the cemeteries in your home town may look different than those in southern Louisiana. On the south side of the tracks in New Iberia, you may be able to see numerous white structures that sit above ground. These are all part of the New Iberia above-ground cemetery. Because of the high water table, towns in this region build above ground crypts to protect the remains of their loved ones from flooding.

Early settlers struggled with different techniques of burying their dead. The burial plots have to be shallow because if you dig too deep, water will begin to seep into the grave and cause flooding. The caskets would float up and come out of the ground! They tried filling the casket with rocks to weigh it down, and even drilled holes into the coffin to help drain rain water. However, these methods were no match for the intense rainy seasons that Louisiana encounters.

In 1789, the first above ground cemetery was built in New Orleans. At the time of its construction, Esteban Miro was governor, and his allegiance was to Spain, where above ground tombs were common. Because of Governor Miro's strong Spanish ties, this burial tradition spread throughout southern Louisiana. Today about 90% of New Orleans burials are above ground.

The walls of these cemeteries are made up of economical vaults that are stacked onto one another. Many tombs look like little houses with iron fences lining them, and because of this, the areas became known as the "cities of the dead". Whole families can be buried in the same tomb. A New Orleans ordinance states that as long as a person has been dead for at least two years, their remains can be moved to a burial bag at the back of the vault to make room for a new body. So what if that two year period isn't complete when another family member dies? Normally local

cemeteries will have temporary holding vaults for the newly deceased to be held until the time requirement is met.

Today, the act of burying above ground is more out of tradition than necessity. When southern Louisiana was colonized, one would hit water by digging just two to three feet into the ground. Due to intensive water use and draining of many wetlands, the water table has dropped to five or six feet below ground level. A major concern now is preservation of cemeteries which can be up to 250 years old! The Save Our Cemeteries organization works to preserve and restore historic cemeteries of Louisiana, and fosters public appreciation for the architectural and cultural value of the sites. If you would like to learn more, you can visit their website at www.saveourcemeteries.org

Source(s):

<http://www.experienceneworleans.com/deadcity.html>

<http://www.atneworleans.com/body/cemeteries.htm>

<http://www.saveourcemeteries.org/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Louis_Cemetery

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