A STREETCAR NAMED DEATH:  
PUBLIC MOURNING, FUNERAL DIRECTORS, AND  
THE MODERNIZATION OF THE NEW ORLEANIAN FUNERAL

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In memory of my father, Mark Anthony Pregeant, whose support and lifetime of hard work made this possible.
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I. Introduction and Historiography

In 2007, New Orleanian travel and food writer Errol Laborde observed a peculiar post-Katrina quandary. As businesses began to reopen in the badly flooded Mid-City neighborhood, Schoen’s Funeral Home, a 1930s Spanish style building belonging to one of the oldest funeral directors in the city, had reopened while Mandina’s, a New Orleans style Italian restaurant across the street, had not. Mourners, used to “cutting loose” in a traditional jazz funeral style with a po-boy after a wake at Schoen’s, were thus left in “grief without gravy.” Without the combination of proper respects and a proper po-boy, there was no “proper mourning.” In the neutral ground between Schoen’s and Mandina’s runs a streetcar line named “Cemeteries” that travels into the Central Business District on one end and a cluster of picturesque, historic cemeteries on the other. “The scene speaks for New Orleans,” Laborde explains, “as we continue to cross between grief and joy, while the streetcars, like our spirits, move in both directions.”

As a constant across generations, societies, and nationalities, death has no equal. “Yet death has its discontinuities as well,” Historian Drew Gilpin Faust explains. “Men and women approach death in ways shaped by history, by culture, by conditions that vary over time and across space.” Although Gilpin Faust is speaking of Americans during the Civil War, her insights are no less applicable to the coming of the “dying of death.”

Coined by historian James Farrell in *Inventing the American Way of Death*, this term

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refers to a process in which religious liberalism, urbanization, the enlightenment, and scientific naturalism of the mid to late 19th century “killed death”. While these explanations and the selected period have been complicated by subsequent scholarship, the “dying of death” continues to explain how American mourners moved away from sentimental death mores that domesticated the dead and encouraged public mourning to modern recognizable practices such as the funeral parlor and the private funeral.

The prevailing scholarly narrative is that the “dying of death” began in the Northeast before disseminating throughout the United States, eventually conquering the peculiarities of regional death customs to become a national phenomenon. This “American way of death” first spread in cities as shifting residential patterns, sanitation projects, and bureaucracy further fueled the movement. The South is often presented as a notable exception in this process, a “last frontier” to be conquered by the “dying of death.” Citing the region’s agricultural economy, relative isolation, low level of income, and traditional values, scholars identify the Civil War, World War I, or World War II as the turning point when the South encountered Northern death mores and was brought in line with the rest of the nation. This narrative ignores the peculiarities of locations’ interpretations of the “American way of death” and perpetuates a myth that the South was somehow separate from the rest of the nation.

New Orleans underscores many of these nuances and highlights the ongoing regionality involved in the “dying of death.” Although New Orleans was a polyglot urban center, it adhered to the stereotypically late implementation of the “dying of death,” with home funerals and processionary culture predominating into the 20th century. This delay was not simply because New Orleans is southern; nor was the city’s eventual
implementation of the movement solely tied to urbanization or wartime. The “dying of death” in New Orleans has roots in the Age of the Beautiful Death, when the city masterfully implemented sublime burial practices and boasted a well-respected class of funeral directors. However, New Orleans’ long battle with disease, attachment to home funerals, society culture, and penchant for processions created an incessant visibility of death that impeded the widespread popularity of the “American way of death.” At the turn of the 20th century, Progressive Era reforms ended a long battle with disease, necessitated undertakers, and eroded society culture. Near simultaneously, wealthy white Creoles began to turn against home funerals, society culture, and processions. These factors coupled with the growing professionalization of the city’s funeral directors, who undertook a campaign to modernize New Orleanian mourning rituals. Rather than top-down cultural dissemination, these pivotal factors led to a belated implementation of the “dying of death” which remains tinged with New Orleans’ long-lasting attachment to processions and its deep ties to the sentimental death mores of the 19th century.

While New Orleanian burial and mourning customs cannot be disconnected from their French, Afro, Caribbean, or European roots any more than they can their American influences, this study primarily examines how and when the prevailing scholarly narrative of the modernization of the American funeral industry functioned in the city. More specifically, it explores when funerals shifted from the home to the mortuary parlor, when the streets were no longer a locus of community mourning, and how funeral homes came to dominate the industry. The city’s journey from vibrant, visible community mourning to the modern New Orleanian style of the “American way of
death” not only complicates the timeline and rationale for the movement’s spread but also the assumption that the “dying of death” conquered regionality.

In “American Attitudes Toward Death,” historian Charles O. Jackson further explains the “dying of death” as a “major shift in attitudes toward death and the dead...which would segregate the dead from the living. This alienation would involve a minimizing of the social impact of death upon the community, and an abandonment of the earlier efforts to maintain a relationship with the dead and the dying. At length, death itself would become a taboo topic.”3 While scholarship surrounding this topic often borders on exaggeratory (Jackson’s statement that “death and sex have battled it out to be the number one unmentionable in America” comes to mind)4, these studies primarily seek to examine how the body was detached from its place within the home, public grieving became inappropriate, and the living became less comfortable around the dead. In this vein, many studies focus on the American funeral director, whose parlor replaced the home and professional services eliminated the need for direct involvement of family members in preparing the body.

There is robust scholarship on the “dying of death” in Western Europe, with most American studies centered on the Northeast. The exception to this is an occasional, often anthropological look at smaller rural communities or urban enclaves that are specifically studied because they buck the primary narrative, such as the New Orleans jazz funeral. What, however, happens to this narrative when it is transported to the American South as a whole? James Farrell’s Inventing, which remains a hallmark on the subject, simply says

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4 Ibid., X.
that the region was “20 to 30 years behind” because of familial ties, an agrarian slave-based economy rather than a free capitalist market, and a low level of income which hindered products and services associated with the dying of death.5 The South’s story, Farrell claims, primarily picks up in 1945 when wartime helped the South to accept industrial capitalism.6

There are smaller studies that reassert the region’s place within this narrative, highlighting how unique southern social relations and wartime experiences factored into this. These studies generally highlight when and how the South encountered northern mourning customs and identify similar trends in the region’s slow acceptance of the movement. Rather than identifying World War II as the primary catalyst in modernizing the area, most of these studies first identify the Civil War and then World War I as bringing the area’s economy and culture more in line with the rest of the nation.7

Historian Charles Wilson’s “The Southern Funeral Director: Managing Death in the New South” is a great example of the reassertion of the concept of “the South” in this literature. Tracing the mortician's rise, Wilson determines that while some funeral innovations made an impact in southern cities, the “American style” funeral did not take hold until well into the 20th century. Before this period, the region’s predominant Evangelical Protestant folk religion meant that funerals would have been sad, intensely emotional events. Wilson’s more focused study means that he can go beyond the

6 Ibid., 218.
generalized assertion that the South was “20 to 30 years behind” to acknowledge that “even when the American funeral industry conquered the South, it took on sectional dimensions that made the southern funeral director distinct from his colleagues elsewhere.” However, Wilson’s assertion remains that the industry was something other than the South; it was an alien in foreign lands, “a triumph of the American way of death over regional attitudes and customs.” While giving a more in-depth look at the South and its ability to mold customs to its needs, Wilson’s argument ultimately remains very similar to Farrell’s: that the South’s poverty, rurality, and Christianity required the introduction of northern influences to “catch up.”

The traditional explanations of deeper familial ties, religiosity, an agrarian economy, relative isolation, and a low level of income are more applicable in rural areas of the South and uphold scholarship that recognizes the role of urbanization in spreading modern death customs. Urbanization’s acceleration of secularism, specialized spaces, burgeoning wealth, and medical science made it more difficult and less appropriate for the ritual response of death to be in the home. The urban environment also encouraged bureaucratic solutions such as hospitals and professional undertakers which lessened the comfort between mourners and the dead. Medical science in the Progressive Era and urban sanitation projects also drastically lessened death rates. Further, the urban setting dismantled the close-knit community that was necessary for and created by older rituals of death and mourning.

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9 Ibid.
10 See Charles O Jackson’s “American Attitudes Toward Death” for a more in-depth look on the causation of this.
The selection of New Orleans for this study is thus to reassert and question the monolithic idea of “the South” in this literature and to purposefully look at a worldly urban center, which should in theory provide the perfect setting for the “dying of death.” This should not be interpreted in inverse, meaning that the microcosm of New Orleans should not be used to explain how death customs morphed in other parts of the American South, although aspects of the study may be applicable. Rather, the example of New Orleans is used to exemplify how broad rationale such as poverty and rurality do not suffice for the whole of this region; nor does urbanization or wartime alone explain the movement’s arrival in southern cities. This is not to dismantle the larger cultural shift of the “dying of death” but to complicate the narrative of top-down cultural assimilation. Modernized death customs, represented here primarily by private mourning practices and the rise of the funeral parlor, spread steadily, but unevenly, through the country, interacting with older mourning customs and transforming as it went. In this light, modern incarnations of the dying of death in individual locations can be seen as feats of local culture rather than triumphs over regionality.

The deep and prolific mythos of New Orleanian exceptionalism should also be acknowledged, especially as this study seeks to purposefully place the city in the context of the American south. Nicknames such as “the northernmost Caribbean city,” or Louisiana’s continuing use of Napoleonic law are but two small examples of the city’s unique circumstances. Despite its cultural, racial, economic, and topographic influences (of which it should be noted, most, if not all, locations possess), the city was deeply connected to the rest of the nation and the American South throughout the 19th century. Notably, New Orleans was intrinsically linked to the agrarian slave-based economy,
shared similar racial biases that were strengthened after Reconstruction, maintained stronger family ties, and upheld a deep religiosity that categorize the American south.
II. Brief History and Social Relations

New Orleans’ geographic location between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain made it both appealing to European powers and led to a centuries long battle with health, sewage, and drainage. This key site meant that New Orleans was connected to both the American hinterland and the Caribbean, a prime location for commerce that eventually transformed the city into a cosmopolitan hub. However, this geographic location also meant that New Orleans was extremely vulnerable to flooding and disease, a problem that would continue to rear its head in the cemeteries and the populace throughout the 19th century. New Orleans’ early history as a French colony is marked by disease, flood, economic failure, and squabbling, with the population rarely above a few thousand. In the 1790s, New Orleans’ economy finally began to benefit from its location, and it became a key port for cotton, sugar, and enslaved peoples. While this would eventually lead to the city’s development as a bustling international city, New Orleans still only had a small population of 8,056 at the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.¹¹

After the Louisiana Purchase, New Orleans swiftly transformed from a small colonial town to a wealthy polyglot metropolitan area. Geographer Richard Campanella estimates that by 1840 New Orleans was the fourth point of commerce in the world, exceeded only by London, Liverpool, and New York.¹² As a swiftly growing port city, there was a

¹¹ See Richard Campanella’s Bienville’s Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans for an in-depth discussion of this formation.
¹² Richard Campanella, Bienville’s Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans (Lafayette, Louisiana: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2008), 33.
constant influx of new faces, languages, and cultures; only thirty-seven years after the Louisiana Purchase, the population had grown to over a hundred thousand, the third largest city in the nation. By the mid-19th century, the city boasted citizens from France, Spain, Africa, England, Germany, Ireland, Greece, Switzerland, Portugal, Italy, Cuba, the Philippines, Mexico, Croatia, China, and more. An anonymous source writing as A Resident in 1849 explained, “a portrait of the city of New Orleans, is a living picture of the world, and in particular, it differs from every other city; for here the world is concentrated, in a living spectacle of almost every nation, kindred and tongue.” In 1851, an almost equal number of immigrants arrived in New Orleans as Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore combined, highlighting the fact that New Orleans was amongst the most outward-facing, diverse American cities at the time.

This period of immense growth shifted the social relations of the early colonial city and thus the European customs of its most prominent citizens. Before the Louisiana Purchase, the population of the settlement was primarily white Europeans (mostly French and Spanish), native peoples, and free and enslaved blacks. These populations were governed by a tripartite racial caste system. At the top were the city’s white residents with white Creoles (meaning native born in this period regardless of color) above more recent white immigrants. In the middle were free people of color, the highest rung of which was an elite class called the *gens de couleur libres*, who had been freed for

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13 Ibid., 27–30.
multiple generations, were generally highly educated, and followed European religious and linguistic traditions. Enslaved peoples inhabited the lowest rung of this system. Unlike the rest of the United States, who followed a bipartite racial system, the system in New Orleans has been established by French laws which had numerous means of manumission and grew the free black population of the city to the largest in the nation. Much to the horror of American newcomers, this meant a level of permissiveness amongst whites and blacks that was reflected in the city’s social scene and its burial customs.

Benjamin Henry Latrobe, after being asked to describe the state of New Orleanian society to a friend in 1819 in turn asked, “What is the shape of a cloud? The state of society at any time here is puzzling. There are, in fact, three societies here—first the French, second the American, and third the mixed. The French side is not exactly what it was at the change of government, and the American is not strictly what it is in the Atlantic cities.”¹⁷ This reiterates the city’s tripartite racial caste system and hints at a social shift that began with the Louisiana Purchase, strengthened throughout the 19th century, and crystalized during Reconstruction. The city’s Creoles began to split into two groups, as whites tried to distance themselves from the gens de couleur libres. This is primarily due to the implementation of a bipartite racial system and waves of newly emancipated peoples who flooded the city looking for better living conditions. White Creoles thus claimed the identity for themselves as they strove to be seen as separate

from what they perceived to be their inferior counterparts, which directly led to the anglicization of the city’s burial customs.

In the mid-19th century, white Creoles were battling waves of wealthy, Anglo-American immigrants as well as groups from Ireland, Germany, and Central Europe. The battle between the *gens de couleur libres*, white Creoles, and Anglo immigrants reached a head in 1836 when the city split into three municipalities, delineating the city governmentally and spatially along these three demographics. An Anglo immigrant forebodingly explained:

They [the Creoles] are strongly attached to the footsteps and ways of their fathers, and are exceedingly cautious in preserving their identity, and consequently do not desire to become familiar with the manners and custom of the ‘Goths and Vandalls,’ who have come down upon them from the north....[the Creoles] are gradually yielding and giving way to the superior energy and force of character and adaptation to business of those who surround them...hence, the Creole reads in the future his destiny, and is compelled to reflect that what he now looks upon as Vandalism, will ere long crush everything of his name and character in the dust.

Writing during the three municipalities, this resident highlights an ongoing cultural battle between the city’s oldest residents, consciously trying to hang onto their European identity, and the new Anglo forces that slowly began to outnumber them. When the white, immigrant-heavy suburb of Lafayette was incorporated into the city in 1852, the three municipalities reformed with political power in its American sections. Among other things, this meant that many of the legal and social protections for free blacks were revoked, English became the primary language, and wealth pooled in American hands.

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upriver from Canal Street. These new social relations further crystallized during Reconstruction when Union occupation and emancipation heightened racial tensions and stronger economic ties to northerners pushed the once proud white Creoles closer to their Protestant, Anglo neighbors. Among these cultural changes were burial and mourning customs, as white Creoles chose to align themselves with American customs as opposed to the “ethnic” rituals of African Americans and more recent European immigrants, such as the jazz funeral or the home wake.

The French’s selection of New Orleans’ key geographic location laid the groundwork for its later struggles with disease but also made it a thriving cosmopolitan city. The city blossomed into a polyglot hub that vied New York City, Baltimore, Chicago, and Boston for economic prominence and international influence. The vast concentration of wealth, diverse population, and European influence balk the traditional explanations that the South lagged behind its Northern neighbors because the region was less wealthy and more insulated. Further, New Orleans’ economic growth following the Louisiana Purchase made the city a key American port with deep ties to the rest of the nation and the South. However, this growth also shook the foundation of the early settlement as Anglo influence gradually transformed the city’s old Creole culture. As New Orleans reached its most populous, diverse, and wealthy, the city entered an era scholars call the Age of the Beautiful Death. The deep establishment of sentimental death mores that were sweeping the country and the world at this time showcase the cosmopolitan tastes of the population, wealth in the city, and a wide awareness of modern burial customs.

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20 Richard Campanella, “Culture Wars, Ethnic Rivalry, and New Orleans’ Messy Municipality Era.”
III. The Age of The Beautiful Death

Before the “dying of death” came an era that scholars call the Age of the Beautiful Death; alternatively, this period can be called the good death or the domestication, sentimentalization, or beautification of death. Between the mid-18th-mid 19th centuries, this movement significantly increased the role of the dead in the world of the living by romanticizing the dead body and minimizing the macabre in mourning practices, funeral elegies, epitaphs, and cemetery design. These practices precipitated a complex system of funerary behavior, formal displays of grief, and supporting paraphernalia, which all paved the way for the development of the professional funeral industry. The Age of the Beautiful Death also completely reimagined European and American burial grounds into contemplative, rural areas meant to inspire sublimity, peace, and contemplation.

The pageantry of the New Orleanian funeral industry can in part be traced to the city’s deep European cultural connection. During the early to mid-19th century, European customs reached a height of decadence and splendor. Funerals were conducted with immense pomp and grandeur, even driving some families to bankruptcy. Commemorative ribbons, programs, bookmarks, black edged envelopes, and memorial cards were considered necessary aspects of a funeral, intended for both function and display. This

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put reminders of death everywhere: in the home, newspapers, books, churches, parlors, and even in the mourning clothes of strangers on the street.\textsuperscript{22}

New Orleanian funeral directors in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century excelled in this type of mourning regalia. An 1840 receipt for the funeral of Louise Celeste Coralie Mayronne, a member of a wealthy white Creole family, typifies the funeral ephemera of this period. This bill includes 50 invitations, gloves for men and women, crepe scarves, hat pins, stationary, paper candlestick decorations, 54 candles, a hearse with six plumes, and opening and closing the family tomb. Totaling $83, her funeral bill is higher than others but follows the same trends: the popularity of invitations, a hearse, and ephemera.\textsuperscript{23} Further, the preprinted formula of the bills highlights the well-established industry and its popularity. These bills showcase the wide range of professional and upscale services offered by undertakers (calling themselves funeral directors on some of these bills), at least two decades before embalming had become mainstream. This is notable in literature concerning the South, which often presents pre-Civil War (and thus pre-embalming) undertakers as marginal individuals whose primary services were washing and dressing the body.

Funeral invitations are a notable inclusion on almost all funeral bills from this period and underscore the ongoing presence of death in the home as well as the extent of public mourning in New Orleans.\textsuperscript{24} Funeral invitations could be mailed cards, death notices, or newspaper advertisements. Mailed invitations were sent to close friends and family to

\textsuperscript{22} In addition to the above, Stevens Curl James' \textit{The Victorian Celebration of Death} gives a vivid account of this in England.

\textsuperscript{23} “Millaudon and Gardanne Families Papers,” 1816-1902, MSS 770, Historic New Orleans Collection.

\textsuperscript{24} This is determined from funeral bills found in family papers from 1830-1900.
inform them of the death, invite them to the funeral, and be kept as a type of sentimental token. Death notices, or what historian Leonard Huber called, “typical New Orleans black bordered street corner death notices,” included the name of the deceased, their age, place of origin, length of residency in New Orleans, and funeral details. These notices would be tacked on buildings or lamp posts near the home of the deceased to announce the death and to invite acquaintances to the funeral. Newspaper advertisements would generally announce the death to the public, often inviting them to the funeral at the deceased’s home. All three invitations not only notified the public of the death, but also created large scale funeral culture and visual reminders in the streets.

In addition to their practicality, invitations were crucial pieces of memorabilia. "It’s All the Fashion," a running segment in The Daily Picayune, explains, “It’s all the fashion to keep in some nook of the drawing room, as well as on the library table, an elegant little memoranda book, where it is convenient for the use of the visitor as well as the inmates of the house.” These were thick, leather-bound photographic albums, featuring both family photographs and funeral invitations slotted into the pages. Some pages also have newspaper funeral advertisements cut and pasted into the margins. Regalia such as this not only ensured that the loved one was remembered but also continued to domesticate death, a trend that was reinforced by the popularity of displaying the dead in the home.

New Orleans’ many societies furthered the visibility of death in the 19th century as well as built community bonds that were reiterated with each funeral cortège and

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There were local chapters of national organizations such as the Masons, Odd Fellows, and Knights Templar as well as labor organizations who provided medical and labor related services to their members. One of the most notable labor organizations, the Firemen’s Charitable and Benevolent Association, grew to include some of the city’s most prominent citizens who eventually even opened their own cemetery. The benevolent society was perhaps the most prolific type of New Orleanian association; it could be organized by ethnicity, religion, neighborhood, etc. and was a hybrid insurance/social clubs whose mutual dues provided doctor’s care, sickness and disability insurance, death benefits to survivors, and funeral and burial arrangements. These societies both mitigated high burial costs and widened the use of mourning regalia. While below ground burial did occur in New Orleans, bodies were often uprooted by floods, and that fate was considered undignified, reserved mostly for the poor in Potter’s Fields. This meant that tomb costs were higher than elsewhere, and societies built grand communal tombs to house their members. Society’s mutual dues and emphasis on burial rites also meant that the elaborate funeral industry was relevant to lower classes. Grand society processions had strict rules for proper mourning dress and regalia, creating large pools of citizens who bought mourning items such as commemorative ribbons and society wreaths from the city’s funeral directors.

This visible, celebratory, and domesticated mourning was occurring in a period when the “dying of death” began to take root in progressive northern cities. Farrell identifies early threads of the movement in an 1817 literary digest that evokes “modern” customs at a funeral where there is no crepe, no weeping, no black dresses, and people “go right on

27 Leslie Gale Parr, “Sundays in the Streets”.
with life” leaving a brightness of spirit in the home rather than the lingering associations of death.28 The absence of death in the home is one of the first traces of the “dying of death”, as mourning became more regulated to a specific space and was viewed with more measured, private emotions. In addition to the regalia in the home and society processions on the streets, New Orleans cemetery designs were an ongoing visual reminder of death and a tangible connection to the city’s worldly tastes.

The oldest cemeteries in New Orleans were near the back of town, between the urban core and the dreaded backswamp, where the land petered off into festering water and thick reeds. In 1819, the architect Benjamin Latrobe explained that the open graves in St. Louis No.1 were filled with water before being fully dug. “Thus,” he explains, “All persons here who are interred in the earth are buried in water.” In between the graves were crawfish, thought to eat the decaying bodies of those who were buried in the cemetery. “How inconsistent with the delicate enthusiasm of a husband respecting the body of his wife and child,” Latrobe remarks in horror, “does it not seem to put it into a hole full of stagnant water about three feet deep, to be there devoured by crawfish, as is done unavoidably in New Orleans.”29 Writing in the Age of the Beautiful Death, Latrobe reiterates the problem that New Orleans’ topography posed to sentimentalization of the body and the beautification of cemeteries. Motivated by these topographical concerns, changing attitudes toward death and burial, deadly epidemics, and an increasing population, New Orleanians looked for a new site upon which to bury and mourn their dead. The solution was Metairie Ridge, an abandoned distributary of the Mississippi

River that rises above sea level a few miles back from the French Quarter. Originally a bucolic agricultural site, the Firemen’s Charitable and Benevolent Association opened the first cemetery there in 1840; called Cypress Grove, this was also New Orleans’ first benevolent cemetery. The cemetery’s first tomb was a grand society monument designed by French architect J. N. B. de Pouilly for firefighter Irad Ferry who was previously interred in Girod St. Cemetery. When Cypress Grove opened, Ferry’s remains were moved into the new tomb with great processionary fanfare.\(^{30}\)

The link between the ridge cemeteries and the city’s Anglo influence is seen in their direct ties to New Orleans’ first Protestant cemetery. Girod St. Cemetery, known to the city’s French citizens as Cimitre des Heretiques, was christened in 1822, and could be accessed directly from the American sector.\(^{31}\) Near the edge of the backswamps, Girod St. Cemetery was often closed to burials due to flooding. The 1839 *Daily Picayune* explains, "For the last two weeks, the water in the Protestant burying ground has been nearly ankle deep. This of itself is a disgusting circumstance—and besides, the action of the sun upon human bodies interred so near the surface of the earth as they are compelled to be here...produce sickness in this extreme hot weather."\(^{32}\) Due to Girod St.’s watery location and changing fashions, white Anglos and society members began to move their dead to the burial grounds on the ridge. The location of the ridge cemeteries near the New Basin Canal made this move easier. Recently opened to connect Lake Pontchartrain to the booming American sector, the New Basin Canal had a shell road alongside it, the route

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that the procession of Irad Ferry and many other cortèges took from the American municipality to the new burial grounds. Eventually, the city would build a dedicated streetcar line out to these burial grounds still named “Cemeteries.”

The crown jewel of the burial grounds along the ridge is Metairie Cemetery. Christened in 1872, Metairie Cemetery is built on the site of a former racetrack with 150 acres designed with avenues wide enough to accommodate carriages out for a daytrip or attending a funeral procession. Historian Peter B. Dedek, like many other scholars, sees Metairie Cemetery as New Orleans’ first garden cemetery, which brought New Orleans’ burial traditions more in line with the rest of the country. However, this view overlooks the first garden cemeteries on the ridge, which are better viewed as transitory spaces where older New Orleanian customs interacted with “true” garden cemeteries. Despite these semantics, the essence of the rural cemetery is to “rob death of its hideousness” and create a rural, contemplative space that is fitting for both leisure and mourning. Even the names of some cemeteries on the ridge such as Cypress Grove and Greenwood highlight their goal as a rural site of pleasant leisure. The original motto over the Egyptian style gates of Cypress Grove reiterates this: “hereto their bosom Mother Earth, take back in peace what thou has given.” Contemporary accounts present these cemeteries as both a literal and spiritual elevation above the surrounding backswamps,

34 Jessica H. Schexnayder and Mary H. Manheim, Fragile Grounds, 69.
37 Farrell, Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920, 149.
highlighting the sublimity of the location and showcasing how New Orleans’ topography informed its interpretation of the Age of the Beautiful Death.

The new, worldly tomb designs of the 19th century also underscore the city’s ties to international influences and current burial trends. New Orleanian tombs in the early 19th century were primarily simple, freestanding structures built of brick. Beginning in the 1830s, tomb designs became more elaborate. A key figure in this was J.N.B de Pouilly, who alongside other European artists, new visual standards from easterners, and affordable stone arriving in the city, transformed the aesthetics of New Orleanian cemeteries. This shift in taste coupled with growing wealth and society culture in New Orleans, transforming the city’s cemeteries into the cities of the dead that they are known as today. As he strolled through St. Louis No. 1, Joseph Holt Ingraham, writing as A Yankee, marveled that the tombs “resembled cathedrals with towers, Moorish dwellings, temples, chapels, palaces, mosques—substituting the cross for the crescent—and structures of almost every kind...Many of the tombs were constructed like, and several were, indeed, miniature Grecian temples.”39 This myriad of styles highlights the international influences of death and mourning customs in New Orleans even as early as 1835. Thus, Ingraham concludes, “It was in reality a ‘City of the Dead,’” showcasing not only the visual effect of rows of above ground tombs but the microcosm of the city’s polyglot population in its mourning rituals.

Societies once again typified these standards with their grand communal tombs. One of the most visually recognizable is the tomb of The Societa Italiana di Mutua Beneficen

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which was among the most expensive tombs constructed at the time. The tomb was completed in 1857 by Italian immigrant Pietro Gualdi at the cost of $40,000 funded by the society’s mutual dues.⁴⁰ Some societies went beyond communal tombs, opening their own cemeteries for their members. In addition to the Firemen’s Charitable and Benevolent Association, the Oddfellows and Masons also opened their own society cemeteries along the ridge. Society tombs and their co-mingling of bones encased within grand edifices, highlight how New Orleans customs married communal burial and mourning with the sublime aesthetics of the Age of the Beautiful Death.

Perhaps most important to observers in the age of the beautiful death, New Orleans’ cemeteries inspired sublimity. The same anonymous resident who critiqued the Creoles’ dying culture in 1849, looks upon the Italian Society tomb marvels that:

“In the niche are arranged some of the most perfect specimens of Italian sculpture from the hands of the best artists of the age...as a receptacle for the dead it is without exception the most imposing and forcible appeal to the heart of the living that can be contemplated. And while standing before it in all the perfection of art and science and the genius of man, an awe of aweful sublimity steals over the soul.”⁴¹

In a seventy-nine-page pamphlet filled with critiques of the city’s development, religiosity, slavery, and squalor, this stands out not just as approval, but a moment of deep appreciation for the city and a structure that is a masterful example of sublime architecture.

The extent of the city’s funeral industry, the new ridge cemeteries, and grand tomb designs showcase the depth of the Age of the Beautiful Death in New Orleans. There was

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a well-established group of funeral directors who provided a range of mourning regalia, fashionable new burial grounds, and world class artisans. These all highlight how New Orleans was in communication with wider trends and wealthy enough to implement them with great mastery and skill. However, these skillful implementations of sentimental death mores only furthered the visibility of death. This visibility was heightened by New Orleans’ long battle with disease, its penchant for home funerals, and processionary culture. For the “dying of death” to be widely implemented in the city, Progressive Era reforms needed to finally institute proper health systems and prove the need of funeral directors to the public. Simultaneously, the ongoing Anglicization of the city and shifting race relations would erode the practices of home funerals, processions, and society culture, leading to the rise of the modern funeral director and private mourning customs.
IV. New Orleans’ Progressive Era

Creating a separate space for the dead in hospitals and funeral parlors, detaching the body from its sentimental presence in the home, and lessening the living’s comfort level with the dead and dying are necessary prerequisites for the “dying of death”. Key to this process are urban sanitation and medical breakthroughs which bring the death rate down and compartmentalize the dead and dying in new professional facilities. As much of the nation entered a period of sanitation and urban renewal, New Orleans continued to be known for filthiness, insanitation, and extremely high death rates.

Richard Campanella explains, “New Orleans becomes the nation’s filthiest, least healthy and most death prone major city for much of the nineteenth century, a fact oftentimes denied or covered up by the city’s commercial interests.”42 New Orleans’ site between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain not only meant that the historic cemeteries were often flooded, but also that the city had to constantly battle hurricanes, river floods, stifling tropical heat, and swarms of mosquitoes. The backswamps and near constant influx of water also made building proper drainage and drinking systems difficult. Perhaps most disastrously, the city’s site also made cholera, yellow fever, malaria, and typhoid prolific.

In 1849, an anonymous resident explains, “the whole city, from one extreme to the other, is filled with the filthiest masses of stench and corruption.”43 His main concern is

42 Richard Campanella, Bienville’s Dilemma, 27.
“one dense sheet of thick malaria,” unceasingly thrown from the backswamp. While the anonymous resident is referencing the antiquated notion of miasmas, the mosquito doctrine of 1905 would prove that “sheets of malaria” were indeed coming from the backswamp. He goes on to complain about the “steam and odor from piles of filth” and “piles of offals,” bemoaning the lack of proper sewage or drainage in the city. The resident’s comments on the city’s drinking water aren’t much better, lamenting that the choices were either open cisterns boiling in the sun or river water “thick with what they call “mud” ...a more frightful source of disease does not exist in the Mississippi Valley.” This “mud” in most city rivers would be concerning enough, until one also considers that New Orleans lies at the bottom of a river which drains approximately 40% of the continental United States, including all of the towns and cities along the banks and the runoff from a constant stream of boat traffic.

The Progressive Era in New Orleans primarily meant draining the dreaded backswamp and creating a proper drainage and drinking system. In 1896, the city began construction on what would become the modern-day pump system, which drains water from the higher natural levees to a central low point before pumping it through canals to adjacent lakes. By 1915, the world class system was completed, and the dreaded backswamp of New Orleans was opened to development. The same period saw the opening of the city’s first successful drinking system. Although there had been a system in place since 1836, it merely tapped into the “dirty, gurgling mass” of the Mississippi River. This early system used steam power to pump river water through cypress pipes.

44 Ibid., 21–22.
46 Richard Campanella, Bienville’s Dilemma, 42–43.
into homes; however, without adequate purification, it was a more convenient way to receive water often contaminated with cholera or typhoid. Further, the original system served very few residents and was notorious for its unreliability, leading most people to rely on cisterns until the 20th century. In 1908 the Carrollton Water Works Plant opened, designed to purify and then distribute river water to city residents. Water main construction was ongoing, with most of the city grid receiving water by 1926. The combination of these two projects not only meant improved health and wellness of all citizens but also a gradual end to a longstanding battle with diseases born from contaminated water and mosquitoes.

Although all cities battled disease in the 19th century, New Orleans’ struggle to create adequate sewage and drinking systems made it especially vulnerable to diseases spread by contaminated water such as typhoid or cholera. Further, the stagnant water in the backswamps and urban cisterns were the perfect breeding grounds for mosquitoes, which lead to a long and deadly battle with the Saffron Scourge. Between 1793-1905, Yellow Fever killed more than 40,000 New Orleanians, with almost half of these deaths occurring in the epidemics of the 1840s and 1850s. The deadliest year was 1853, at the height of which nearly 100 people died per day. In August of that year alone, 4,844 people died, or a staggering 4.3 percent of the population. The extreme rate of death meant years where cemeteries were overflowing, hospitals became overrun, and streets were deserted as anyone who could leave fled across Lake Pontchartrain or to the

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47 Ibid., 226–27.  
48 Ibid., 34.  
49 Jason Berry, City of a Million Dreams: A History of New Orleans at Year 300 (University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 148–49.
Mississippi Gulf Coast. This intimacy with death birthed much of New Orleans’ burial customs, directly attributing to the city’s large society culture, triggering the construction of numerous cemeteries, and undoubtedly leading to a lasting familiarity with death that changed the very texture of mourning.

As the epidemics reached their peak in the 1850s, there was still no well-established health board. Throughout the 19th century there were attempts to establish a board of health, but early efforts failed to function efficiently without funding or legal enforcement.\(^\text{50}\) In June of 1853, just months before the deadliest outbreak in the city’s history, *The Daily Picayune* responded to rumors of yellow fever by asking, “Will the proper officer please inform the public who compose ‘The Board of Health’? Does such a body exist?”\(^\text{51}\) Answering the call, the state established an official board of health in 1855 (notably, the first in the country), but the pestilence continued, with massive outbreaks in 1867 and 1878. The epidemic of 1878 was the most extensive on record in the country and its deadly grip combined with subsequent medical breakthroughs ultimately lead to the creation of the National Board of Health in 1879.\(^\text{52}\)

In 1902, this body reformed into the United States Public Health Board; it was active in 1905 when the last yellow fever epidemic in the country occurred in New Orleans. During this epidemic, state and local officials followed the guidelines of the recently published mosquito doctrine. Coupled with the ongoing projects between 1899-1915 that drained the backswamps and the new water treatment plant which slowly eliminated

\(^{52}\) See JoeAnn Carrigan’s “The Saffron Scourge: A History of Yellow Fever in Louisiana 1796-1905” for a detailed examination on how this occurred.
cisterns, New Orleans’ century long fight fizzled into a memory. However, this fear of disease, mosquitos, and contaminated water continued well into the 20th century, with an ongoing public campaign evoking the period’s deadly legacy and directly leading to the rise of funeral directors in the city.

A 1917 health almanac published by the Louisiana State Board of Health highlights the priorities of the Progressive Era in New Orleans and showcases how the movement is tied to the growth of funeral directors. The health almanac begins with a list of things that “we are thankful for” including that “smallpox and typhoid can be prevented, there is a growing appreciation of the value of a pure water supply, a beginning has been made to eradicate the mosquito,” and that “there is an increasing demand for the registration of birth and death.” The latter, in accordance with a new national law, necessitated certified funeral directors. The mosquito continues its ubiquitous presence on the following pages, with an art nouveau drawing of mosquitoes as air raiders dropping bombs into an explosion with a skull and the words “disease and death.” Like a mantra throughout the pamphlet are the words: “Stagnant water breeds mosquitos. Mosquitoes convey malaria. Dump piles breed flies. Flies carry disease germs.” The health pamphlet then dedicates an entire page explaining the value of clean water supplies, using statistics of property and capital loss to try and persuade the public to clean wells and cisterns. The almanac ends with a plea to the population to help accurately record birth and death so that all their hygienic reforms are not fruitless.53

In 1907 the newly formed United States Public Health Board submitted the Model Health Vital Statistics Bill to the states. It established a system for the collection of vital records in which smaller local bodies would report statistics to a central federal agency. Federal agencies then launched individual state campaigns to establish the law. The National Resources Committee of 1938 explained that they fought a “long hard, often discouraging campaign to bring in the states.” This process first required educating physicians, undertakers, and legislatures before aiding the state “in preparing promotional publicity and facilitating the exchange of ideas as to the most effective way of presenting public health data to the public.” Louisiana passed the law in 1914 and the 1917 health almanac is a clear example of this promotional publicity.

The almanac proudly explains that Louisiana is one of only 26 states to implement the Model Law to “ward off epidemics of communicable diseases and prevent disaster.” The pamphlet then implores citizens to comply for although “Louisiana has this law, its enforcement depends upon the co-operation of those upon whom the responsibility rests.” Part of this cooperation meant bringing the dead to a certified funeral director. In order to get a death certificate, a physician or other professional attendant certified the cause of death and then passed the document to the funeral director who would gather personal facts of the deceased from the family, certify the document, and deliver the completed certificate to the local registrar to obtain the burial permit.

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56 Louisiana State Board of Health, “Health Almanac.”
The 1917 health pamphlet evokes New Orleans’ recent memory of epidemics in order to achieve the state board of health’s key objectives. In addition to keeping water supplies clean and the mosquito population down, this also includes implementing Louisiana’s recent adoption of the Model Law. As stated by The National Resources Committee in 1938, the last step in this process was involving the public, as death statistics could not be compiled unless the dead were brought to a certified professional. The proper implementation of the Model Law meant preventing the horrors of recent memory and thus, the Louisiana State Board of Health asserts, the public could assist in this process by bringing their dead to certified funeral directors. Cash books from this period underscore this move, as historic undertakers such as Tharp-Sontheimer began to include three categories: Certificate of Death, Furnishing (ephemera of earlier eras as well as embalming), and Merchandise (caskets, coffins, robes).58 Thus as the Progressive Era in New Orleans lowered the visibility of death, lessening the living’s comfort with the dead and dying, it also legally necessitated funeral directors, directly correlating with the decline of home funerals.

The sheer number of the dead and dying, particularly at the height of the 19th century, made separating the living and the dead more difficult. This was compounded by the number of societies in the city and their centralization of funeral rites that increased the visibility of death by transforming burial monuments and funerals into city wide events, so grand in scale that they could hardly be ignored. As the Progressive Era brought death rates in the city down, it also lessened the need for society culture, whose prominence in

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the city can partially be attributed to New Orleans’ high death rates and the lack of sanitation for lower classes. The timeframe of New Orleans’ sanitation projects coincides neatly with the decline of society culture and home funerals, reinforcing the funeral parlor’s deep connection with the downfall of societies and The Progressive Era.
V. The Decline of the Home Funeral

In part due to this elevated visibility and comfort with death, New Orleanians remained deeply dedicated to the home funeral well into the 20th century, after death rates had fallen, hospitals had become common, and funeral directors were well established. Relative to its high concentration of wealth and international influences, New Orleans’ ongoing practice of home funerals is notably later than other urban centers and continued the sentimentalization of the dead body into the modern era. Although the custom of displaying the dead in their own home or that of a family member may seem strange in the modern landscape, it was a well-established custom before and throughout the Age of the Beautiful Death. *The Daily Picayune* in 1839 gives a brief glimpse into how this custom looked:

> We saw a corpse ‘exposed,’ (as they term it downtown), in the first municipality yesterday. The chamber in which it was laid out was hung with black cloth, fringed with white. A single file of burning candles stood round it, like so many sentinels round the bed of a sleeping prince. The candlesticks were dressed in a robe a fanciful cut white paper. The deceased was a young man...he wore, also, white, silk stockings, white trowsers, and indeed an entire white suit. 59

The writer’s use of quotations around exposed, explaining that this is how “they term it downtown,” and the funeral’s location in the first district (the Creole part of town) hint that this was a foreign custom to Anglo viewers. In most parts of the country (possibly including where this writer is from), home funerals began to wane due to urbanized residential patterns, the rise of hospitals, and the establishment of funeral parlors.

59 *The Daily Picayune*, October 3, 1839.
Scholars of urbanization identify the decline of the parlor, rise of tenements, destruction of ethnic enclaves, and the dispersal of family units as key detriments to the home funeral. New Orleans’ societies negated these factors by hosting funerals in society halls or other member’s homes. If the funeral was held at home, societies also ensured familial-like assistance with fellow members visiting the home to help prepare and mutual dues providing for things like coffee, candles, food, and soap. This partially negated what scholars consider the “decommunalizing” aspects of city life by creating a central, communal space for funerals and a wider mourning circle as opposed to the immediate family and friends as is seen in the “dying of death.”

For those who could host in the home, newspaper announcements show a staggering attachment to the custom into the 20th century. Death notices in The Daily Picayune reflect two primary shifts. Earlier public funeral notices in the 1840s and 1850s were almost exclusively for society burials with individual funeral notices increasing significantly in the late 1850s. After the Civil War, notably in the 1880s, individual death notices began to outnumber those of societies, a trend that is partially explained by the general decline of society culture. In turn, these individual death notices began to move into funeral parlors by the 1910s.

By 1860, The Daily Picayune had a special, front-page section of all the day’s funeral notices instead of spreading them out between society, military, and special notices. This prime location alerted readers to who had died and where and when they could see funerals or burial cortèges. These death notices differ from modern obituaries.

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61 This, as well as the trends discussed below, were all gathered from a comprehensive examination of death notices every month in The Daily Picayune from 1830-1940.
by focusing on the funeral; more detailed obituaries were limited to prominent citizens or businessmen. In this period, there was a central heading simply reading “DIED” followed by a list of names. Beneath each name were brief details of the death (when and where) and the individual (land of origin, length of residency in New Orleans). Most then included a brief paragraph that read “friends and family are respectfully invited to attend the funeral, which will take place at” then giving the day, time, and place, which was most often the deceased’s residence.

This formula began to shift in the mid-1890s, with more funerals occurring at churches, funeral parlors, hospitals, hotels, and even street corners. The involvement of churches in home funerals before this period vary, with some death notices showing that the cortège would proceed from the home to the church before the cemetery and others detailing the religious ceremony done by a priest in the home before proceeding to the burial ground. However, the consistent shift to the church without the home in these notices is not discernable until the 1890s.

This trend continued into the early 20th century, with Francophone names and addresses in wealthier neighborhoods leaning more toward church funerals and those with multiple benevolent societies under their name leaning more toward funeral homes. By roughly 1905, the neat, front-page list of death notices had been relegated to the 9th or 10th page, often chronicling funerals that had already occurred rather than invitations. This is the same period when funeral parlors are seen in approximately equal numbers to home funerals with rites in 1918 almost equally distributed between home, church, and parlor funerals. By 1925, funeral parlors began to eclipse the home funeral, although they can be occasionally found into the 1940s.
These trends are reinforced by death notices, one of the most popular items on funeral bills from the Age of the Beautiful Death. The 1866 “Amusements” section of *The New Orleans Times* relays a comedic anecdote that shows the use of these notices. A “great tragedian,” Mr. E. Eddy, advertised his debut as Hamlet by hanging theatre posters in “the most frequented through-fares,” showcasing the highly public locations where these notices would be hung. New Orleanians, thus “could not fail to see the little notices which bore such remarkable resemblance to the funeral cards which have recently decorated the posts and telephones in public places, and they were led to believe without reading further, that Mr. Eddy was dead. His appearance last evening happily dissipated such an impression!”62 This clever gimmick highlights the ubiquity of the notices, with New Orleanians simply assuming Mr. E. Eddy had died after seeing his name on the style of poster. The ongoing popularity of the public facing tradition is reiterated by the *Daily Picayune* in 1911, which chronicles a “practical joke” that is played on two progressive leaders after their death notices are posted in “conspicuous places” around the business district.63

Prominently displayed, death notices mirrored the language of newspaper funeral announcements. Centered at the top of the poster was the word “DIED” followed by the deceased’s name, their parents or spouse, land of origin, and length of time in New Orleans. Then would be the ubiquitous phrase of “the relatives, friends, and acquaintances of” followed by a list of families associated with the deceased and any lodges that the dead belonged to “are respectfully invited to attend the funeral.” The breadth of a citizen’s influence on the city and the size of their funeral can be surmised

from these documents. The 1907 death notice of John T. Schoen invited officers and members of nineteen different benevolent societies, highlighting the active social integration of the city’s undertakers. Notably, even as a prominent and historic funeral director, John T. Schoen’s funeral was still held from his late residence, testifying to larger trends that identify the shift from home funeral to funeral home post World War I in New Orleans.64

Mirroring the trends of newspaper adverts, the language of death notices began to shift in the 20th century. The juxtaposition of two death notices from father and son showcase the change in customs. The first is for F. Leonce Fazende, who The Daily Picayune described as a “highly esteemed citizen of New Orleans...from an old and distinguished Creole family.”65 His 1898 death notice is entirely in French, harkening to the ongoing language and cultural struggle between the Anglos and Creoles. The notice invites “les amis et connaissances” of three associated families as well as members of the Pelican Mutual Benevolent Association (of which Fazende was the secretary) to the funeral at his residence. From there, “le convoi partira” before proceeding to the cemetery.

His son Joseph Victor Fazende’s 1909 death notice is entirely in English but follows the same visual formula of his father’s. However, only one family is mentioned, and the only society is St. Vincent de Paul, a church organization, with no mention of any benevolent or labor institutions. Mourners are instructed to gather at St. Augustin Church

64 “Death Notice of John T. Schoen” (Jacob Schoen, & Son Funeral Directors), April 29th, 1907, Private Collection of Jacob Schoen & Son Funeral Home.
65 “Petitpain, Fazende, and Related Family Papers,” 1776-1925, LaRC-617, Tulane University Special Collections.
rather than the traditional location of the home.\textsuperscript{66} Not only does the younger Fazende’s death notice reflect a shift away from the French language, a longstanding point of pride for the old Creole vanguard of New Orleans, it also highlights affluent white Creole’s withdrawal from the city’s benevolent societies. Most topically, the 1909 death notice showcases the shift away from the home funeral and reinforces newspaper trends that wealthier Creoles were more inclined to Church funerals. The continuing privatization of the funeral is underscored by the gradual disappearance of death notices from undertaker’s cash books by the 1920s and increasing rarity in family papers after 1915.

The home funeral was a primary target of the “dying of death” because it kindled comfort between the dead and the living and created larger community mourning by transforming private spaces into public ones. The public facing adverts in newspapers and in “the most frequented through-fares" were necessities before modern communication, but they also made the funeral accessible to a much broader mourning circle and even strangers, a practice that kept older trends of community mourning alive.

Home funerals continued in New Orleans well into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, long after the city became a vibrant urban center and funeral directors were well established there. In addition to sentimentalizing the dead, home funerals also reinforced the processionary culture of New Orleans, as mourners gathered at residences across the city before traveling to the cemetery together. This meant that not only was the home a locus of mourning, but the streets were as well.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
VI. Processionary Culture

A key feature of newspaper adverts and death notices is the crucial word *from.* Whether the home, mortuary parlor, hospital, street corner, or church, funeral notices instruct members to gather at a specific location so that the mourners could progress from there to the burial ground. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, this meant funeral cortèges (on foot, by carriage, and later by car) were a regular occurrence on the streets of New Orleans, creating a near incessant visibility of death and mourning.

Funeral processions for state and military figures are common throughout the nation in this period, and newspaper accounts show that New Orleans was deeply involved in this custom. Dozens of societies marched for Southern figures such as Henry Clay or Daniel Webber and hosted grand honorary funerals for national public figures such as Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison. Perhaps the largest of these public figure funerals was that of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, whose internment in Metairie Cemetery was estimated to be attended by 140,000 people. However, New Orleanian newspapers also chronicle “grand and imposing pageants” for lesser-known citizens such as Michael James Buckley, a firefighter who died in a blaze in 1863 with several fire companies marching in full uniform, “forming a long and beautiful appearance.”

Most visible to historians are the cortèges of societies who had colorful street parades for funerals and tomb dedication ceremonies. The grandest procession for some societies was the consecration of their new cemeteries or tombs on the ridge. When the Odd

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67 Jessica H. Schexnayder and Mary H. Manheim, *Fragile Grounds,* 84.
68 “Fireman’s Funeral,” *The Era,* October 13, 1863, America’s Historic Newspapers.
Fellows consecrated Odd Fellow’s Rest in 1849, the society held a grand ceremony which *The Daily Picayune* describes:

The procession, with its bands of music, the showy regalia of the members, and the splendid funeral car, *drawn by six white horses*, with black housings, formed a scene picturesque and beautiful in the extreme, and it was gazed upon with feelings of awe and respect as it marched to the sound of solemn music through the streets of the city. All contemplated the spectacle with emotion, and no one could fail to admire the sublime principles which draw together in the bands of brotherhood men of all classes and all nations. 69

Two circus troops led the procession along the New Basin Canal shell road, which *The Daily Picayune* estimates was more than a mile in length, consisting of carriages of members and various spectators. Completing this sublime scene of community mourning was an ornate funeral carriage with sixteen boxes, containing the ashes of Odd Fellows from different cemeteries around the city, representing the move from the historic cemeteries into the new fashionable burial grounds.

Of course, these processions fall in line with a larger processionary culture that was omnipresent throughout the city. The most contemporary example of this is Mardi Gras, a tradition that dates from at least the mid-19th century in New Orleans. Historian Peter Dedek explains that “many of the same people must have participated in both the early Mardi Gras parades and funeral processions. The Fat Tuesday parades that we see today are survivors of an era when festive street demonstrations were associated not just with joyful holidays but also with death.” 70 Not only did the citizens of New Orleans have processions for death and Mardi Gras but also for other Catholic events, smaller ethnic

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69 “Consecration of Odd Fellow’s Rest,” *The Daily Picayune*, February 27, 1849, America’s Historic Newspapers.

holidays, society anniversaries, and personal celebrations. These omnipresent processions usually took place on Sunday, a tradition that offended the city’s new Anglo population.

In addition to gambling, shopping, attending theatre, leisure walks, and dancing, Sunday was usually the processionary day in New Orleans, with militia companies, associations, and clubs of all kinds regularly sponsoring Sunday parades. In 1849, the anonymous resident, continually critical of the city’s customs, complained that “the sabbath appears to be regarded by almost everyone as a holiday, and its return is as much desired for a day of pleasure, as if no other day was appropriate for such purpose. Military parades are never on any other day but the Sabbath.” This celebratory, processionary spirit remained foreign, and even offensive, to Anglo immigrants throughout the 19th century primarily because it balked Protestant customs of rest and austerity on Sundays. Benjamin Latrobe explains that in 1819, “the most prominent, and, to the Americans, the most offensive feature of French habits is the manner in which they spend Sunday.” Tangled in this foreign processionary culture are the innumerable funeral cortèges that American immigrants such as Latrobe encountered on the streets of New Orleans.

After coming to the city as one of America’s most prolific architects, Latrobe encountered these processions and marveled at them with fascination and patronizing curiosity. Soon after arriving, he watched two funeral processions, remarking that “the parade of funerals is still a thing which is peculiar to New Orleans, among all the American cities.” These two cortèges were both composed of African American and

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71 A Resident, “Truth Is Stranger than Fiction”, &c., 32.
mixed (or, in Latrobe’s 19th century wording, “quadroon”) mourners. He described the mourners as Catholic and well dressed, hinting that at least some of them are of the gens de couleur libres. The procession was led by a man in military uniform followed by young boys carrying heavily embellished staves. Next were a pair of priests engaged “in loud and cheerful conversation,” indicating that this was far from the quiet, solemn procession of the “dying of death” and different from the “emotional, hysterical” Protestant customs that are often cited by scholars of this era in rural areas. Attached to the coffin were two, long white ribbons held by six well-dressed girls whose veils trailed behind them. At the end was a crowd of people holding candles, completing the scene and further reiterating the use of mourning regalia hinted at by the staves, ribbons, and veils.73

These sentiments are echoed when Latrobe decided to join a funeral procession later that month. Despite having seen numerous parades since the first two he chronicled, Latrobe was drawn into this procession by the sheer number of people and followed the cortège to the cemetery. Near the grave, he watched as the dead’s family mourned, one woman even jumping into the grave with the casket. Afterward,

On the heap of bones stood a number of boys, who then began to amuse themselves by throwing in the skulls, which made a loud report on the hollow coffin, and the whole became a sort of farce after the tragedy, the boys throwing about the legs and thighs and hunting up the skulls for balls to pelt each other. The noise and laughter was general by the time the service was over...I asked if her granddaughter, who threw herself into the grave, could possibly have felt such excessive distress at the death of an old woman who before her death was almost childish, and was supposed to be above one hundred years old, as to be tired of her own life. She shrugged her shoulders two or three times, and then said, “Je n'en sais rien, cela est une manière.”74

73 Ibid., 191–92.
74 Ibid., 230–32.
Latrobe’s Anglo reaction to the emotional spectacle and his curiosity at the “excessive distress” is notable when seemingly, due to the dead’s age, a more measured response would have been appropriate. Likewise, the woman’s casual French reaction that “this is the way” shows that this is not an unusual, disapproved display of extreme emotion but a common and accepted way to grieve. Contrary to other mourning customs recorded in the South in this period, the mourners display not only intense emotional reactions but also casual comfort and even jolliness in the rite, seen in the general noise and laughter that Latrobe observed.

Of course, a longstanding tradition that can trace its way back to the funeral cortège and its combination of solemnity and celebration is the modern-day jazz funeral. However, there is a modern perception that this was primarily an African American, Protestant practice. As Latrobe’s account shows, the tradition was also followed by the city’s Catholic African American and mixed populations. Further, New Orleans’ 19th century societies and their colorful, music-accompanied funeral cortèges spanned nearly all religions, ethnicities, neighborhoods, and professions, with many members belonging to more than one group.

Accounts of their details are rarer, but private individuals’ death notices involving processions also span surnames of various ethnicities, addresses in multiple neighborhoods, different languages, and religious affiliations into the 1920s. In 1835 Joseph Holt Ingraham, writing as A Yankee, saw a large crowd near a Catholic chapel. He pushed past the crowd to see an elaborate altar topped with a coffin covered in black velvet. The decadent scene was completed by “a dozen huge wax candles, nearly as long and as large as a ship’s royal-mast, standing in candlesticks five feet high...mingled with
innumerable candles of the ordinary size, which were thickly sprinkled among them, like lesser stars.” This prolific use of regalia was reinforced by the mourners, who formed a long lane from altar to door, each holding a candle ornamented by “fanciful paper cuttings,” an item that features prominently on the funeral bill of Louise Celeste Coralie Mayronne. Other items on the bill were also on display, such as the white scarves that fell from the shoulders to the feet of the pallbearers who brought the coffin to an ornamented hearse topped with tall black plumes. Ingraham and the mourners then followed the procession for almost a mile before reaching the cemetery.\textsuperscript{75}

In direct contrast to Latrobe’s earlier account of the girl jumping into the coffin, these mourners watched the internment in silence, which could be attributed to the race of the mourners or the undisclosed circumstance of the death in each case. The other key difference is that this procession is almost entirely by carriage, seemingly due to the mourners’ wealth, an explanation that is reinforced by luxurious regalia such as the black velvet pall and size of candles. Despite these differences, both cortèges are Catholic and heavily involve regalia and thus the city’s funeral directors. Perhaps even more notably, both funerals attract and at the very least do not object to bystanders and strangers joining in the ritual. Ingraham remarks upon this at two points in his account. The first is when he approaches the door and notes that in addition to the line of mourners in the central hall, “casual spectators, strangers and negro servants without number,” line the sides of the chapel.\textsuperscript{76} This continued into the cortège; whenever the mourners “alighted from their carriages and proceeded on foot to the tomb. The priests...were the last who entered, except

\textsuperscript{75} Joseph Holt Ingraham, \textit{The South-West}, 148–156.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 149.
for myself and a few other strangers attracted by the curiosity.”77 This shows that strangers were involved in all aspects of the proceedings, from the formal mourning ritual in the church or home, into the streets, and even watching the final moments of internment, whether the burial was accompanied by intense displays of grief and the casual playing of children or the silence of the grieving broken only by melancholy chanting of the priests.

Rather than functioning solely as transportation, funeral processions were an opportunity to display splendor and communal solidarity as they were, in theory, public events accessible to all. Not only were pedestrians and strangers such as Latrobe and Ingraham involved in the proceedings, streets and neighborhoods were as well. The sheer number of funerals and the spatial patterns of the city led to the incessant visibility of death. Latrobe explains that “The funerals are so numerous here, or rather occupy so much of every afternoon... that they excite hardly any attention.”78 Funeral processions could gather at homes, churches, or society halls, which were sprinkled throughout the city’s many ethnic enclaves and neighborhoods. From there the cortège would move to the cemetery, which were primarily located at the rear of town, as is the case for most historic cemeteries, or along the ridge. This meant proceeding through residential areas with larger parades often taking detours through major streets.

Residents were alerted to processions passing through their neighborhoods through death notices and newspaper advertisements. Occasionally, these would include the request that “fellow citizens residing in the streets through which the procession is to pass the propriety to hang the front of their houses in mourning.”79 This community

77 Ibid., 153.
involvement was furthered by the most undeniable draw of New Orleans’ processionary culture, the musical accompaniment of the cortèges. The earliest evidence for funeral music in New Orleans is for military figures and societies with benevolent associations, worker’s organizations, and other clubs incorporating bands by the 1820s. Nearly all societies hired the best brass bands with separate dues specifically allotted for musicians and some organizations keeping bands on retainer. The musicians would be accompanied by hundreds of members dressed in matching uniforms, carrying banners or wreaths displaying the club’s name, completing the sensory spectacle as the cortège paraded through the streets.  

“Town Talk” a running Daily Picayune segment notes that:

There is something indefinable in the interest which is added to a funeral procession by the solemn music from the brass instruments.... stand upon the street corner and watch one of those displays so common here, and test in indescribable feeling of awe which steals over the senses, as the deeply solemn dead-march wails in sadness through the thronged streets. You see the meeting of the living with the dead – the bustle of life and activity...the sight of a pageant like this is one of the most earnest appeals which can reach the heart, and yet the sermon is soonest forgotten. The same solemn music which lent its mournful melody in escorting the deceased to his grave, changes to a merry measure when the last sod is thrown upon the hillock.

The writer’s recommendation to stand upon the “thronged streets” and watch testifies to the spectator nature of these mourning rituals while his casual remark of “one of those displays so common here” underscores the frequency of both the cortèges and their musical accompaniment. “Town Talk” also details the meeting of “the living and the dead” within the music and the ritual itself, highlighting the very obstacle that funeral cortèges presented to the “dying of death.”

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81 “Town Talk,” The New-Orleans Times, October 29, 1866, America’s Historic Newspapers.
Contrary to their traditional ties to the “dying of death,” New Orleanian funeral directors were deeply involved in the city’s processionary culture. Most of the city’s oldest undertakers either began their careers as livery stable owners or expanded their services to provide carriages. One of the most popular pre-Civil war undertakers was Pierre Casanave, a free man of color from St. Domingue, who had the largest and possibly the first black owned undertaking business in the South. After several years as an undertaker, Casanave upgraded his business by purchasing a large stable in the French Quarter where he opened a mortuary parlor with horse drawn hearses and bands for burial processions.\(^\text{82}\) The well-known Creole undertaker, John Bonnot, organized the grand street parades of Henry Clay, John O. Calhoun, and Daniel Webster in addition to the funerals of nearly all Creole families.\(^\text{83}\) The body of Confederate President Jefferson Davis was even prepared for its massive funeral pageant by A.F. Bultman, who would go on to be one of the most modern funeral directors in the city.\(^\text{84}\) This trend is reinforced by cash books of numerous historic funeral directors where most of the entries are single carriage rentals with funerals interspersed between them. Even as processionary culture declined, funeral directors continued this trend, maintaining a strong relationship with the burgeoning automobile industry of the 20\(^{th}\) century.

New Orleans processionary culture began to wane at the end of the 19\(^{th}\) century. In addition to white Creole’s turn against the custom, this is primarily due to the decline of New Orleanian societies. Toward the end of the 19\(^{th}\) century, sanitation projects, national

\(^{82}\) Jason Berry, *City of a Million Dreams*, 152.

\(^{83}\) “John Bonnot: Death of the Famous Old Creole Undertaker,” *The Daily Picayune*, September 12, 1890, America’s Historic Newspapers.

labor laws, and private insurance diminished benevolent organizations' membership.

Funeral homes also began to offer similar services without many of the accompanying responsibilities such as mandatory funerals for other members, advertising 10 cents a week mutual dues that guaranteed a funeral for all members and their children under seven. Protestant African Americans who were disproportionately affected by fewer sanitation services, limited access to healthcare, and discriminatory insurance practices are the notable exception to this. From emancipation through the end of the 19th century, when other society membership began to diminish, Protestant African Americans in New Orleans formed more than 200 benevolent associations. However, even their membership began to decline in the 20th century, transforming these groups more into social clubs than benevolent societies.

In contrast, most white benevolent organizations dissolved in the 20th century due to greater access to insurance, improved social and economic opportunities, and changing residential patterns. Strengthening racial tensions also pushed many of these groups further toward mainstream culture, as immigrant groups and white Creoles strove to be seen as more “American”. Newspaper editorials in this period begin to hint at this transition in burial customs. In 1892, The Daily City Item published an account by a Chicago physician who has “not enough fingers on which to count cases” of mourners who have fallen victim to “customs.” The deadly custom is when “a delicate member of the family has not been out of the house for weeks...[and] is subjected to a long slow ride

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87 Ibid., 24.
in a carriage on a cold inclement day.” This only increases the depth of grief and “custom has had its way, the victim, following the custom, thinking it her duty, returns to her home again, not to go out again till she is followed over the same road to the last resting place by perhaps others who fall victims after her.” His authority as a medical expert and repetition of the word custom imply that this is an unhealthy practice driven by antiquated notions of grief. Further, this physician suggests that traditional methods of mourning create a perpetual state of grief that continually begets these customs, leading to a cycle of funeral cortèges driven by the pain caused by participating in them.

These sentiments are strongly reiterated in an 1894 editorial from *The Boston Herald* reprinted in *The Daily Item*. The chosen topic is the “queer burial rites” of the English, which “are very elaborate, often curious, even fantastic, and as often they suggest fetish worship rather than a decent regard for the decorous interment of the dead.” The writer’s complaints are reminiscent of New Orleanian rites: white fabric elaborately draped over the body, processions to the burial ground, mounds of flowers on graves, and hours spent in graveyards. Even worse, English mourners “indulge in grief with morbid extravagance...find luxury in woe,” while to “privately indulge their grief in their own rooms” would be more appropriate. In America, the editorial proudly explains, “with well-bred people there is little ostentation at funerals,” no funeral cards, and no lavish floral offerings. The writer’s views directly encapsulate the “dying of death,” particularly the movement’s de-sentimentalization of the body, unornamented funerals, and private, reserved mourning. Much like the editorial from the Chicago doctor, these

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89 “Queer Burial Rites: English Customs That Are Curious, to Say the Least,” *The Daily City Item*, April 3, 1894, America’s Historic Newspapers.
opinions are found reprinted in New Orleanian newspapers, showcasing how national trends began to disseminate in the city, especially “with well-bred people” such as white Creoles.

The turn from regional customs in favor of national standards is also vividly seen in the decline of funeral music. While calls to end funeral music date to the 1850s, these were usually tied to years of severe epidemics, when the sound of brass bands was thought to upset the sick. Yet by 1890 the general attitude had shifted so *The New Orleans States* felt comfortable reporting that it was “safe to say that in five years from today the hideous brass band and long lines of...tired men traveling through the mud and slush at funerals will no longer be seen.”

This prediction is not entirely correct, with brass band funerals for societies and white citizens found in newspapers into the 1910s and of course the jazz funeral negating it entirely; however, *The New Orleans States* did foreshadow the widespread decline of the funeral cortège and the tradition’s use of music in the 20th century.

Perhaps the biggest blow to funeral processions in New Orleans came in 1903 when Pope Pius X issued an edict prohibiting secular music at religious events such as funerals and weddings. *Motu Proprio* also prohibited the piano, snare drums, brass drums, wind instruments, and bands at these events. The proclamation makes the concession for musical ensembles and secular music in processions outside of the church, provided the

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band does not play any profane music and preferably limit themselves to only vocal performances of spiritual canticle.\textsuperscript{91}

In 1907, the Archbishop of New Orleans issued a pastoral letter regarding \textit{Motu Proprio} which was to be read at all masses. “We feel it our duty today, dearly beloved,” the Archbishop begins, “to address upon you the same subject, in order to stimulate you—both the Clergy and the people—to renewed zeal, and furthermore, to assist you by salutary instruction and practical guidance in complying—as dutiful and loving children—with this first message of Our Beloved Father and revered Pontiff.” His paternal disappointment, especially four years after the original edict, testifies to the ongoing popularity of brass bands at Catholic New Orleanian funerals. This is reiterated when he laments that “an abuse when allowed to exist for a length of time hardens itself into a custom.” If these regulations aren’t followed, the archbishop warns, “there is a grave danger...that the Divine Service be made to appear as a mere excuse and occasion for a fine concert.”\textsuperscript{92} These sentiments echo Anglo disdain, such as Latrobe’s, for New Orleanian processions and celebrations on Sundays. This edict further codified the larger forces that were pushing white Creoles and other Catholics away from traditional burial rites, thus limiting funeral processions and musical accompaniment to Protestants. Wealthy, white, and Protestant Anglos such as Latrobe or Ingraham had long held aversion to New Orleanian processionary culture, meaning that \textit{Motu Proprio} primarily


limited music-accompanied funeral cortèges to African American Protestants, directly
leading to this group’s ongoing use of the custom in the jazz funeral.

Continuously high death rates, ongoing home funerals, and processionary culture do
not prohibit the possibility of a modern funeral industry in New Orleans. As has been
shown, the city’s wealth and cosmopolitan nature allowed it to readily embrace and even
perfect the large-scale funeral services and sublime cemetery architecture that were
considered modern in the early 19th century. The Age of the Beautiful Death and the
period’s funeral directors kindled domesticity and comfort with the dead body and
encouraged public mourning through ritualized, aesthetic means. New Orleans’ ongoing
familiarity with death, attachment to home, and processionary culture created a vibrant,
visible mourning scene that was compatible with the sentimental death mores of the Age
of the Beautiful Death. However, these same factors made the city more resistant to the
“dying of death,” which required separate spaces for the dead and mourning customs that
were private from everyday life. This is not to say that funeral parlors and private
mourning were not occurring in this period, but that improved public health, declining
processionary culture, and shifting race relations had to first lower the visibility of death
and change wider public sentiment before these death mores became mainstream. These
factors coalesced with the growing professionalization and nationalization of the city’s
funeral directors, who undertook a dedicated campaign to finally push New Orleans’
burial rites into the mainstream.
VII. The New Orleanian Funeral Director

The New Orleanian funeral director is not tied to the coming of the “dying of death” or American death customs. As has been seen, they were well established throughout the 19th century, providing the popular funeral services of The Age of the Beautiful Death and regalia for the city’s vibrant processionary culture. In contrast to the lone, shunned undertaker depicted by much scholarship on this period, New Orleanian undertakers were often affluent men deeply involved in the city’s social scene. The first undertaker in New Orleans was H. Dubue. He trained John Bonnot, the prolific undertaker that planned the cortèges of Henry Clay, John O. Calhoun, and Daniel Webster. Originally born in France, Bonnot was considered the “society undertaker of the Creoles.” When he died in 1890, The Daily Picayune included a full obituary, a service that was limited to prominent citizens and wealthy businessmen in the 19th century.93

The Daily Picayune also gave the honor of a full obituary to “Honest John Power.” Originally from Ireland, Power began his career in New Orleans as a builder and constructed several St. Charles Avenue mansions as wealthy Anglos spread further uptown. Power became an undertaker in the 1850s and continued in the trade for 40 years. Not only was he a member of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Joseph Benevolent Societies, but he was also the oldest member of the local chapter of the Ancient Order of Hibernians.94 Another example of affluent New Orleanian undertakers is Pierre

93 “John Bonnot: Death of the Famous Old Creole Undertaker.”
Casanave, a free man of color who served the city’s white Creole population and the *gens de couleur libres*. Casanave had previously been the clerk of wealthy Jewish businessman Judah Touro and used the legacy his employer left him to set himself up as an undertaker. By 1864, he was said to be worth $100,000. Casanave was even president of the elite *gens de couleur libres* organization *Société d’Économie et d’Assistance Mutuelle* whenever the society opened Economy Hall in 1857.

While there were other undertakers in the city at this time, many of them not as affluent as these examples, these men highlight the type of professional undertakers who were operating throughout the 19th century. Many New Orleanian undertakers were first generation European immigrants who had experience in other professional trades: notaries, architects, builders, jewelers, hotel owners, etc. They referred to themselves either as undertakers, funeral furnishers, or funeral directors and their centers of business were usually modest livery stables with small parlors attached, used to display merchandise rather than host funerals. As undertakers, funeral furnishers, or funeral directors, these men primarily specialized in ephemera, invitations, transportation, dressing the body and later, embalming. They were also deeply involved in the city’s public mourning scene, whether hiring bands for funerals, providing elaborate hearses, or marching in cortèges as members. As in the rest of the South, this prolific and often well-respected group changed during the pivotal years of the Civil War.

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96 Jason Berry, *City of a Million Dreams: A History of New Orleans at Year 300*, 153.
VIII. The Civil War, Embalming, and Professionalization of Undertakers

The Civil War and the subsequent popularization of embalming was a key moment for all the nation’s undertakers. As a broader catalyst, the Civil War disrupted and reinforced many longstanding mourning and funeral traditions. In *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* historian Drew Gilpin Faust chronicles both the toll of war deaths and civilians’ mourning rituals. It is necessary to note that Faust directly addresses the concept of the “dying of death” in this period, definitively stating that death remained sentimental and known to Americans in 1860. However, she also states that patterns of death had shifted so that, while not uncomfortable with death, most Americans expected individuals who reached young adulthood to survive into middle age. The Civil War introduced a drastically different pattern where loss became so commonplace that it was no longer felt individually, producing substitute mourning rituals in community figures. The “texture of the experience” to the contemporary American, she explains “was the presence of death.”

This texture was felt differently between the two warring factions, with 18 percent of white males of military age in the South perishing from the war and only 1/3 of that in the North. The scope of death on both sides, Faust explains, “transformed the mid-nineteenth century’s growing sense of religious doubt into a crisis of belief that propelled many Americans to redefine or even reject their faith in a benevolent and responsive

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99 Ibid., 398, 403.
Churches grew dramatically in the South following the Civil War, setting the stage for the region’s emergence as the Bible Belt in the 20th century. Further, Faust explains, the Civil War contributed to a redefining of the living’s relationship to the dead, creating new narratives of national identity and obligations of the dead seen in the development of Arlington National Cemetery.

One of these narratives was a growing sense of “Southerness” that former Confederate states developed after the war. In “The Southern Funeral Director: Managing Death in the New South”, historian Charles Wilson explores how the Southern funeral director participated in this movement. As a New South businessman-professional, the post-Civil War undertaker recognized Southern deficiencies and desired to lift the region’s standard so that the New South could become economically independent. The crux of Wilson’s argument is that “the American funeral industry was a northern invention. It emerged among the middle classes in the Gilded age and since then has transformed the way most Americans respond to death.” Previously, the undertaker would have had “a very limited role in the drama of death,” with the first dramatic change coming during the Civil War. Like many other scholars, Wilson traces the professionalization and status of undertakers to embalming, which gave undertakers a surgical-like prestige. Embalming also meant that undertakers began to specialize, setting up separate undertaking parlors as opposed to back-door businesses alongside their hardware stores, cabinet shops, or livery stables.

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100 Ibid., 560.
101 Ibid., 514.
Faust also identifies embalming as a chief legacy of the Civil War. Although embalming was practiced in America since the 1850s, she states that it had chiefly been used to provide cadavers for dissection and not to prepare bodies for funerals. During the Civil War however, it became popular to transport bodies and transform the physical state of the dead to help process traumatic loss. Despite her denial of scholarship concerning the dying of death, Faust states that “the southern funeral industry remained far less developed,” and that “embalming remained much rarer in the Confederacy than in the north.”103 The prevailing scholarly narrative underscores this argument, primarily linking embalming’s spread in the South to Northern families who hired undertakers to get the embalmed bodies of fallen soldiers back to their homes.

New Orleans once again bucks these trends. The city had a sizable, well-respected class of undertakers who began to experiment with embalming during the yellow fever epidemics of the 1850s. Faust centralizes embalming’s ability to ease pain brought on by sudden, violent death and the inhumanity of mass death of the Civil War. During the throes of Yellow Fever, New Orleanians watched healthy young men and women fall unceremoniously day after day, often buried in mass graves. Pierre Casanave seemed to recognize this when he purchased Thomas Holmes embalming fluid in 1856. Casanave advertised that the new process was simple, without inconvenience or exposure, warranted to keep free of decomposition, and without smell in any season. He even offered to embalm deceased ministers, physicians, and lawyers for free, highlighting his influence in high social circles, advertising skills, and confidence in the procedure.104

addition to Casanave, at least two others New Orleanian undertakers advertised the service before the Civil War, emphasizing that while not mainstream yet, Casanave’s implementation of the procedure was no anomaly in New Orleans.  

Of course, the Civil War’s effects were deeply felt by the people of New Orleans and the growing funeral industry. Michael L. Taylor, in “The Civil War Experiences of a New Orleans Undertaker,” sees the Civil War as the continuation of a larger trend of the professionalization of the funeral industry rather than a catalyst for it. Taylor also recognizes that instead of introducing embalming to the city, the war expanded its acceptance of it. These are crucial distinctions because they highlight how New Orleans, if not many other areas of the South, had long been in communication with larger national trends. Further, these distinctions decentralize war as a primary explanation in the modernization of funeral customs. By decentralizing war, scholars can incorporate regional factors rather than relying on periods of intense trauma to modernize areas that would otherwise have remained the “exception” to the rest of the nation.

The growing professionalization of undertakers and their communication with national trends can be seen in post-Civil War New Orleans in the formation of undertakers’ societies. As early as 1895, undertakers had formed into a brotherhood called the New Orleans Funeral Directors’ Association, in part to deal with a series of strikes from the Carriage Driver’s Association. Despite the longstanding presence of labor societies in the city, the organization of New Orleans’ funeral directors followed their national counterparts who had formed the National Funeral Directors’ Association.

106 Ibid.
in 1882.\textsuperscript{107} In 1913, New Orleans undertakers joined their colleagues in the Louisiana Funeral Directors’ Association, notably the last state organization formed in the country.\textsuperscript{108}

Scholarship has highlighted how southern funeral directors tried to keep their societies separate from their northern counterparts.\textsuperscript{109} While multiple attempts to form secondary national associations do testify to this fact, there is evidence that Louisiana funeral directors courted national organizations. At the first annual convention, Secretary Markey of the Louisiana Funeral Directors’ Association announced, “It is manifested in the fact that we are here assembled in our first annual convention...that Louisiana is not backward in this age of progress and advancement.” The committee quickly sought to prove those words, submitting an official bid to hold the 1914 national conference in New Orleans. The association's president also presented a movement to abolish funerals on Sunday, echoing Latrobe’s sentiments from nearly 100 years before. The group then integrated with the state and city boards of health to compile vital statistics as proposed by the Model Law.\textsuperscript{110} In addition to courting the National Funeral Directors’ Association, the Louisiana Association’s key objectives represent the ongoing Anglicization of the city’s death customs and the crucial role that funeral directors played in this process. In the years that followed, funeral directors unleashed a flurry of advertisements in an effort to implement their goals and modernize the New Orleanian funeral.

\textsuperscript{107} Charles R. Wilson, “The Southern Funeral Director: Managing Death in the New South,” 57.
\textsuperscript{108} “Sunday Funerals Much Opposed by Undertakers: Louisiana Funeral Director’s Association Holds First Convention,” July 17, 1913, Private Collection of Jacob Schoen & Son Funeral Home.
\textsuperscript{109} See Charles R. Wilson’s “The Southern Funeral Director: Managing Death in the New South” or James Ferrell’s \textit{Inventing the American Way of Death} for a more in-depth discussion of this.
\textsuperscript{110} “Sunday Much Opposed by Undertakers: Louisiana Funeral Director’s Association Holds First Convention.”
IIX. The Rise of the Funeral Home

It should be noted that funeral directors everywhere used advertisements to gain the public’s trust. This is perhaps because the shift from home funerals to funeral homes was the biggest change in burial customs, as it required convincing the public to give up their personal parlors and domestic connection with their dead in favor of a public, general use space. The earliest evidence of the shift from the home to the funeral parlor is the appearance of the undertaker in the home who dressed and prepared the body in the place of family and neighbors. These early undertakers were usually stationed at the back of another business, such as a furniture shop, and specialized in preparing the body for the funeral and providing caskets. From here, primarily due to the advent of embalming, undertakers moved from simple mortuary parlors to larger quarters, usually remodeled residences retitled “funeral homes.”

The transition in New Orleans seems to have been more gradual, as funeral directors already had specialized spaces designed for their business. While these specialized spaces generally included livery stables, this inclusion was to specifically cater to the extent of the city’s processionary culture rather than supplement a non-professionalized industry. In the 1880s, the term “mortuary parlor” became more common. These were transitory spaces that could host funerals but were designed as multi-use business quarters, with carriage services, casket selections, and embalming all happening in the same modest space. Groetsch-Leitz Company’s mortuary parlors were one of these early spaces. A heavily embellished 1912 advertisement for their business shows the stark jump from the simple ads of previous decades and highlights the intermediary mortuary parlors of this period. The ad promises, “When death enters a home the undertaker can be as helpful as
any member of the family.” Groetsh-Leitz undertakers then promise to assist in all decisions, whether the funeral is held at “your home, the church or in our parlors... [which] are large enough to accommodate six funerals at one time.” Further, the undertakers will handle all details, including, “notices to the papers, hospital certificates, sexton’s fees, and burial permits.” This advertisement and Groetsch-Leitz Company’s mortuary parlors still have a foot in traditional funerals, presenting themselves like members of the family in the home and including public notices while also offering modern services such as hospital certificates, mortuary parlors, and burial permits.

The introduction of true funeral homes in New Orleans begins in the 1920s. These spaces differed from earlier mortuary parlors because they were expressly designed around the funeral with business aspects such as carriages, caskets, and preparing the body separate from the mourning spaces. A transitory space between these two is the grand parlor of The House of Bultman on St. Charles Avenue. Previously, Bultman Mortuary Services had a modest parlor on Magazine St. where they had prepared the body of Confederate President Jefferson Davis for its grand funeral parade. In 1920, Bultman Mortuary Services was evicted from these parlors for turning their livery stables into an automobile garage. This move toward modernity pushed The House of Bultman into the second story of an Antebellum style residence at 3338 St. Charles. This had previously been the home of the younger Bultman, and neighbors originally objected to having a funeral parlor in their upscale residential neighborhood. The House of Bultman first used these quarters just as offices but soon grew to buy two surrounding

111 “Advertisement,” The New Orleans Item, March 31, 1912.
112 “Undertaking Firm Ordered to Vacate,” The Times-Picayune, May 18, 1920, America’s Historic Newspapers.
houses for their establishment. In the style of a “true funeral home,” this meant that one house could be used for embalming, one for offices, and the largest home solely for mourning services.\(^{113}\)

The first “official” funeral home opened in New Orleans was P.J. McMahon’s, a well-known undertaker since the 1880s and councilman to the American ward of New Orleans. In 1924, P.J. McMahon moved to the residential mansion at 4800 Canal with great fanfare. *The New Orleans States* describes the new home as:

> A splendid, dignified, beautiful mansion that typifies the best of the South’s architecture...designed to relieve the home itself of the scenes of strain and suffering that are an inevitable part of every funeral...to lift the pall from the fireside...With these thoughts of service in view, the firm of P.J. McMahon & Songs, Inc. has established the first Funeral Home in New Orleans. It has issued an invitation to the public to come and inspect the place.\(^{114}\)

“Lifting the pall from the fireside” echoes the sentiments that James Ferrell began to observe in 1817 of removing death from the home, only 100 years later. *The New Orleans States* also touches on the key factors that a New Orleans funeral home needed to establish to succeed: its ability to evoke domesticity, connection to the city, and ties to modernization.

*The New Way*, a 1920s pamphlet published by P.J. McMahon, publicizes their new quarters on Canal St. and showcases the key factors that New Orleans funeral homes sought to embody. In the booklet, they promised that the new funeral home “is not our home at all—but theirs. The dignity, warmth, and intimate atmosphere of a private home are the associations of this distinguished looking colonial mansion.” *The New Way* walks

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\(^{113}\) “Bultman Funeral Home Archives.”

through each room of the funeral home, which McMahon promises is “a real home in every sense.” Indeed, it offered multiple rooms to spend the night as well as dining rooms, multiple drawing rooms, three maids, an experienced cook, and porters, highlighting the class of home that P.J. McMahon’s was attempting to imitate and the lingering domesticity inherent in early funeral homes. The booklet then foreshadows the language of modern scholars, concerned that urban dwellings may be cozy and comfortable until “one of the family ceases to be included in that number,” and the small home becomes filled with family and friends. The modern urban dwelling cannot handle this task, and the natural anxiety during mourning is strengthened by “the great responsibility forced upon them at this time.” The answer to this, The New Way promises, is the McMahon Funeral Home, where “we too have kept step with modern progress.” To keep to that promise, they end by showcasing their fleet of automobile hearses alongside a side entrance that “automatically ensures the family privacy.” This final note highlights that the emblem of modernity for New Orleanian funeral directors often meant automobiles; further, it showcases that this modernity also meant a shift toward privacy in favor of large, public mourning rituals.

Another key thread in funeral home’s publicity was to draw a connection between themselves and the city. In 1939, Jacob Schoen and Son published a booklet entitled Thru the Years with New Orleans Since 1874 in which the historic funeral directors document notable moments of the city’s history and their own. The end of the booklet highlights their two funeral parlors. The first is the original 1874 Elysian Fields location, which had

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just been completely redesigned to feature individual parlors and suites with air-
conditioning. These new additions, Jacob Schoen and Son promise, preserve the original
funeral home’s authenticity, and “though containing every modern convenience still
maintains the flavor of the Creole days.” In the new Canal St. Home, *Thru the Years*
showcases a set of antique family heirlooms that Jacob Schoen had purchased in 1861
from an old French New Orleanian family for his bride’s first parlor set.\(^{116}\) The style of
this booklet, its wording, and even the furnishings in their funeral home assert the place
of Jacob Schoen & Son in the narrative of New Orleans history and present the funeral
home as a continuation in the line of old Creole parlors, life, and culture. Having a
funeral there thus offers an opportunity to take part in this bygone era while offering all
the comforts of modernity. Notably, neither *Thru the Years with New Orleans* nor *The
New Way* ever mention “death, dead, dying, or died,” a stark jump from the simple
language of “DIED” present on funeral notices from just ten years earlier. Leaving out
any mention of death highlights both the booklets’ and the modern funeral home’s
connection to the “dying of death” and its tendency to decrease the visibility and even the
reality of death.

The assertion of the funeral home’s connection to old Southern culture is mimicked
by their physical structures. With their white columns, patterned wallpaper, spacious
verandas, and bountiful oaks and magnolias, many historic funeral homes evoked
‘southern charm” or “the dignity and grace of the old South”. The House of Bultman
stood proudly on the lauded real estate of St. Charles Avenue, long the bastion of wealthy

\(^{116}\) Jacob Schoen & Son Funeral home, *Thru the Years with New Orleans* (Kansas City, Missouri: A.J.
Anglos in the city. P.J. McMahon’s grand funeral home, described by *The New Orleans States* as typifying Southern architecture, was once a residential mansion with a two-story Greek colonnade and a private carriage entrance. Charles Wilson explains that this trend is so strong because “in the South sentiment plays a greater part, and attachment to customs and traditions is stronger than in other parts of the country.”117 While this may be true, the style of these homes also appealed to the notion of the New South and lost identities for whites in the wake of the Civil War. Thus, in an era when old New Orleanians and white Creoles perceived that they were losing their identities, funeral homes harkened to an era that they believed had been lost or taken from them.

Later, New Orleanian funeral homes moved closer to the mainstream aesthetic. Perhaps the oldest and grandest example of this is the Schoen funeral home on Canal Street, designed in the modern style that was sweeping the developments in the newly drained backswamps. The grand, 1890 Victorian style family home at Canal and Scott Streets was originally purchased by the National Undertakers, Inc. in 1931 where they promised to provide “a long-needed service to the people of New Orleans.”118 The building was then redesigned in a California style that was prevalent in the new neighborhoods of Broadmoor, Fontainebleau, Lakeview, and Gentilly Terrace.119 When the renovations were complete, the public was invited to inspect the spacious, modern, and well-equipped building.120 In 1935, Jacob Schoen & Son bought this property,

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118 “Advertisement For the Purchase of 3827 Canal Street by National Undertakers, Inc.,” 1931, Private Collection of Jacob Schoen & Son Funeral Home.
eventually adding a modern chapel to host funerals and completing the funeral parlor’s iconic appearance.

In addition to the domestic, Southern atmosphere where the public could feel comfortable and nostalgic, funeral directors in the 1920s asserted that funeral homes were the proper place to host mourning rituals. In 1923, from their new quarters on St. Charles Avenue, Bultman Mortuary Service, Inc. advertised their membership in a group called “National Selected Morticians.” Membership was by invitation only and consisted of thoroughly vetted funeral homes who were dedicated to “the purpose of elevating the standards and bettering the conditions that formerly existed in this calling.” In this aim, Bultman Mortuary Service, Inc. vowed that neither they nor mourners would “tolerate the conditions that were commonplace a generation before.”

Although not directly stated, this is implied to be nonstandard rates of funeral costs, unlicensed undertakers, and home funerals.

The House of Bultman continued to run these ads throughout the 1920s, highlighting the growing connection between the city’s undertakers and national undertaking standards. Another ad in 1923 is titled “A Modern Feature” which highlights the mortuary chapel, “an atmosphere that is restful, quiet and dignified, there is provided a fitting place for the conduct of services.” The advertisement uses a dual pronged approach to marketing the new mortuary chapel; the first is to the “small home dweller,” and the second is to those who have ample room at home but who would prefer a location

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“expressly and appropriately designed for the purpose.” The title of the advertisement itself presents the parlor funeral as a modern elevation above the home funeral. Further, the ad states that the service is not only for people with smaller homes, because the mortuary parlor is “appropriately designed for the purpose,” unlike the home parlor. “A Modern Feature” also emphasizes a key characteristic of the dying of death: quiet, dignified, private services in favor of large scale, music filled mourning on the streets. By the time The House of Bultman took out a full-page ad to welcome the National Selected Morticians to New Orleans for the group’s yearly meeting on October 23rd, 1941, the death notices on this day advertised only two home funerals, which took place in nearby rural communities of Cut Off and Golden Meadow.

The sharp increase in ads for funeral directors in the 1910s, introduction of modern funeral homes in the 1920s, and near disappearance of home funerals by the 1940s coincides neatly with the trends of newspaper funeral announcements and death notices that show the decline of home funerals by 1925. This timeline also occurs simultaneously to the Progressive Era in New Orleans, which had drained the backswamps by 1915, eliminated cisterns by 1928, and undertook a public health campaign to institute the Model Law by 1917. These actions severely limited the visibility of death and lessened society culture in the city, creating the separation between the living and the dead that was necessary for the “dying of death.” Although this timeline corresponds with World War I, these factors also predate the war with many Progressive Era reforms beginning in

123 House of Bultman, “Advertisement,” The Times-Picayune, October 23, 1941, America’s Historic Newspapers.
the 1890s and the Anglicization of wealthy, white Creole’s burial customs predating this. While there is no doubt that the crux of the Civil War or World War I accelerated these trends, these events did not suddenly nationalize New Orleans or somehow bring its customs more in line with the rest of the nation. Rather, the Progressive Era, shifting race relations, and funeral directors themselves are directly responsible for the rise of the funeral home in favor of the home funeral, finally eliminating one of New Orleans’ final attachments to sentimental, domestic mourning customs.
IX. The Modern Funeral Cortège

Once the nexus of home had been eliminated from New Orleanian funerals, the streets also became gradually lose their status as a locus of community mourning. Processionary culture had already been corroded by the downfall of societies and the turn of white, Catholics against funeral cortèges and burial music. These were further reinforced by automobiles and the growing proximity between funeral parlors and cemeteries. The first motorized hearse was introduced in 1905. Historian Charles Wilson, in examining the modernization of Southern funeral culture, states that an Atlanta based firm had the first motorized hearse in the South in 1913, but high costs kept it from being popularized until the 1920s. However, New Orleanian funeral directors, with their long-standing connection to transportation, were primed to take advantage of these developments. On October 30, 1912, P.J McMahon & Sons held the first automobile funeral in New Orleans. *The Daily Picayune* gives an account of the cortège, where “a large number of persons gathered to witness the modern way of burying the dead.” The procession was a melding of old and new, with two limousines followed by several horse drawn carriages who proceeded from the traditional nexus of home to St. John the Baptist Church.

The ongoing connection between the city’s funeral directors and transportation as well as the transformation of the industry is seen in a set of two photographs featuring

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The House of Bultman. The first photograph is circa 1891 and shows the original location of Bultman Funeral Directors before they were evicted for turning their livery stables into an automobile garage. The original parlor is a modest, two-story shop, with a small sign atop the balcony reading Bultman Funeral Directors, which is dwarfed by “Carriages to Hire Day and Night” running along the entire top of the building. Centered at the forefront of the image is a large, elaborate funeral hearse draped with tasseled fabric and topped with grand ornaments, much like the one Ingraham would have seen in 1835. The hearse is driven by a well-dressed gentleman in a top hat steering two well-groomed horses, highlighting the level of respectability that funeral directors had already achieved.\textsuperscript{126} The second photograph was taken in 1961 depicting the same company but now in a grand, glass filled atrium in the Antebellum mansion turned funeral home on St Charles Avenue. Five well-dressed gentlemen and one woman stand in front of a row of state-of-the-art Cadillacs in an ad commissioned by Pontchartrain Motors, a local car vendor.\textsuperscript{127}

As undertakers’ businesses modernized, so did their historic connection to transportation. The ongoing regalia of the industry and burgeoning wealth in the city meant that as the 19\textsuperscript{th} century wore on, many more cortèges proceeded by carriage than by foot. This development furthered the growing funeral industry and represented much of the business of late 19\textsuperscript{th} century undertakers. Funeral Directors’ burgeoning businesses then moved from modest establishments into elaborate, historic mansions in the span of

only thirty years, continuously transforming with modern amenities like the glass atrium seen in the 1961 photograph of The House of Bultman. As cars became the pinnacle of modernization, they also became the emblem of modern death culture, as seen on the final pages of *The New Way*. Funeral directors’ ongoing connection with the automobile remains in touch with earlier processionary culture, and lines of cars often still stream into the streets outside of the historic cemeteries on the ridge. However, an automobile procession is more akin to the “dying of death” as each mourner quietly inhabits their own specific space, only interacting with the public and the streets in a very marginal way. Thus, it represents an ongoing New Orleanian interpretation of the national movement with a foot in both tradition and modernity.

Even this modernized funeral cortège became more irrelevant as funeral homes moved alongside and even onto the grounds of graveyards. Scholarship considers the cemetery/funeral home hybrid the ultimate incarnation of the “dying of death,” as it has the unparalleled ability to confine the entire mourning process into one neat space. This move was made easier by the trends of 19th century New Orleanian cemeteries that are sequestered along Metairie ridge. Many early funeral homes, such as P.J. McMahon’s and Schoen’s on Canal are nearby the historic cemeteries; however, the biggest move came in 1979 when New Orleans’ first funeral home in a burial ground, Lake Lawn Metairie Funeral Home, opened in Metairie Cemetery. Still operating, Lake Lawn advertises “unparalleled convenience” rather than the domestic, sentimental, and nostalgic atmosphere of earlier New Orleanian funeral homes. Lake Lawn Funeral Home is a veritable bazaar of mourning offering nine visitation rooms, two chapels, a crematory, burials in Metairie Cemetery, Lake Lawn Park Mausoleum, a cremation
garden, a climate controlled Catholic mausoleum, total pet death care, catering services, and florists all on site.\textsuperscript{128} They advertise traditional burials, “celebrations of life,” cremations, and pre-planned funeral packages, simultaneously appealing to the irreligious, Protestant, Catholic, traditionalists, modernists and even pets, representing the growing nexus of the funeral home in burial customs. At Lake Lawn, on the historic grounds of the crown jewel of the ridge cemeteries, the body is prepared, mourned, and buried, giving New Orleanians the experience of the American Way of Death in the heart of the city’s implementation of the Age of the Beautiful Death.

X. Conclusion: A Ride Along the Streetcar Line Named “Cemeteries”

Moving the dead from the home to the funeral home and then the funeral home to the cemetery created a separate space for the dead and mourning, one of the core prerequisites for the “dying of death.” This is because death is no longer seen by those who are not in mourning; it is pushed to the periphery and only encountered after immense tragedy. Thus, death is unnormalized, inhabiting a specific space. However, even within this Northern model, we must recognize that this quarantined space, at least in New Orleans, is a very distinct Southern space.

This is best typified by the funeral homes and cemeteries on Metairie Ridge. If one jumps onto the streetcar line named “Cemeteries” from the French Quarter, they will first pass the 1930s California style funeral home of Jacob Schoen & Son, where the fifth generation still directs funerals and the furniture of The House of Bultman was moved after the historic funeral home closed following Hurricane Katrina. Further down is what was once the large antebellum home of P.J. McMahon, lovingly rendered on the cover of *The New Way*. Now, it is a haunted house aptly called The Mortuary surrounded by in-use historic cemeteries on three sides. Across the street is a coffee shop sandwiched between Odd Fellow’s Rest and St. Patrick’s No. 2, where visitors can sip drinks while they overlook the tombs of New Orleans’ first Irish Catholic cemetery, built during the height of the city’s struggles with epidemics.

At the end of the line is what Leonard Huber termed “a whole colony of cemeteries.”¹²⁹ There are Jewish, Protestant, Potter’s Fields, Catholic, municipal, and

society cemeteries clustered together on the small strip of high ground, each burial
ground vividly highlighting the legacy of the Age of the Beautiful Death. A short walk to
the left or right are some of the city’s hybrid funeral home/cemetery combinations. To the
right is Greenwood Funeral Home and Cremations, a nondescript 1990s style building
that buffets Greenwood Cemetery, the burial ground opened by the Fireman’s Benevolent
Society in 1852 with such processionary fanfare. Further down to the left is Lake Lawn
Funeral Home, now a modern, glass front structure that stands proudly at the front of
Metairie Cemetery and its grand, romantic revival tombs. This juxtaposition between the
modern and sublime is an iconic New Orleanian landscape, further completed by
Interstate I-10 that cuts through the picturesque burial grounds of the city’s mayors,
societies, and infamous madams to connect the heart of the city to each of America’s
coastlines.

Rather than merely being a consequence of belated American cultural assimilation,
byproduct of urbanization, or aftermath of wartime, the nationalization and
modernization of death customs in New Orleans is tied to the city’s belated sanitation
efforts, the decline of processionary and society culture, shifting race relations, and
funeral directors’ push to move the burial ritual closer to the mainstream. This is an
important distinction to make in scholarship surrounding mourning rituals as the general
understanding is that modern burial trends simply belatedly “arrived” in the South,
usually as a consequence of war. New Orleans was a wealthy, cosmopolitan urban center
that embraced many aspects of modernity, including the death mores of the Age of the
Beautiful Death. However, the city moved slowly into the American Way of Death,
eventually creating a New Orleanian style of mourning that is as informed by its own regionality as it is by broader national trends.

Even further, the journey along the streetcar line called “Cemeteries” gives the impression that death is not the hidden, taboo topic that the “dying of death” asserts. New Orleans’ geographic location, deep establishment of the Age of the Beautiful Death, long battle with death and disease, society culture, and proclivity for processions have left longstanding marks upon the cityscape. The ongoing visibility of death remains in New Orleans’ grand tombs, jazz funerals, historic mortuary parlors, and even in the casual decorations of the city’s citizens. While a form of modernized mourning happens every day within the walls of funeral homes, vestiges of older death customs ebb out onto the streets and into the character of the people, continuing to draw residents and tourists into the city’s orbit every day.
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Biography

Alexis Pregeant is a native of Bayou Lafourche in Southeast Louisiana. She earned her Bachelor of the Arts in History with a specialization in Medieval Religious History from Loyola University of New Orleans. This project was conceived during her ten years as a New Orleanian, half of which were spent in a 1920s Spanish-style bungalow on Metairie Ridge, where the kitchen window overlooked the Masonic Cemetery.