

In mid-December 2013, somebody scaled the cemetery wall during the night, painted the Widow Paris tomb with bright “Pepto Bismol” pink latex paint, and applied a coating of white latex to the marble inscription tablets. (see photograph on back cover) An out-of-town devotee, making her annual visit to honor Marie Laveau, reported the shocking discovery to a cemetery custodian. The Archdiocesan Cemeteries Office dispatched workmen to remove the latex paint by pressure washing. This extreme treatment indeed got rid of the paint, but it also dislodged layers of stucco and lime wash, exposing the soft brick underneath. Save Our Cemeteries, a non-profit cemetery preservation group, eventually came to an agreement with the Cemeteries Office to raise funds and have the tomb completely restored by experts from Bayou Preservation LLC. The work entailed rebuilding the roof, renewing the stucco on the walls followed by several coats of lime wash, and cleaning the marble tablets. The restoration was finished in time for All Saints’ Day 2014. Nobody was ever arrested for painting the tomb, but those in the know believe that the perpetrator was a “mentally disturbed homeless kid” who thought he was performing a service by obliterating the X marks.

Unlawful entry and vandalism at St. Louis Cemetery no. 1 continued after the incident of the pink paint. A young man boasted on Facebook that he and his girlfriend had gone over the wall at night, pitched a tent, and lived in the back of the cemetery for months. In April 2014, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* reported on a pair of renegade tour guides who removed bricks from the sides of tombs, allowing tourists to insert their cameras or reach inside to snatch a souvenir bone. In January 2015, vandals broke into the Barbarin Family Musicians’ Tomb and pulled bones out onto the sidewalk.

The Archdiocese had finally had enough, announcing that effective March 1, 2015, nobody would be admitted to St. Louis Cemetery no. 1 unless accompanied by a licensed and insured tour guide registered with the Archdiocesan Cemeteries Office. Tour companies were charged a hefty annual sum for a permit covering all their employees. The Cemeteries Office stated that fees would “go toward staffing the cemetery during the day, beefing up security at night, and help with overall restoration.” Tour company owners signed an agreement not to allow group participants to “vandalize and/or deface any tomb” by “placing candles, beans, pennies, or other items near or on any tombs, and/or marking any tombs in any manner.” The agreement went on to ban tour guides from allowing participants to bring in “any food or beverages” and to “ensure that no trash of any kind is left on the premises.” An article about the new rules in the online edition of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* received many comments. While some readers were supportive, others objected to being forced to pay for a guided tour when unaccompanied visitors had previously entered the cemetery for free. To their credit, the Cemeteries Office has since issued permanent passes to those who can document that they own tombs or have family buried in St. Louis Cemetery no. 1, and researchers can apply for temporary permission to enter the cemetery.

Publicity over the pink paint episode and other acts of vandalism, plus the new restrictions on cemetery access, focused public interest in the Widow Paris tomb and generated inquiries about who exactly is buried there. Some even questioned whether Marie Laveau herself actually rests in this tomb. To address these issues, I turned to the rich archival resources available for Orleans Parish. Most important were the records at the Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. I also used the "Dead Space" survey of St. Louis Cemetery no. 1, conducted in 2001-2002 by the University of Pennsylvania School of Fine Arts graduate program in historic preservation. The Dead Space team, as part of their effort, created a searchable online map and database for every tomb in the cemetery. These key sources were supplemented by the U.S. census; civil birth, marriage, and death certificates; city directories; newspaper articles; and the Robinson's Atlas and Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for the City of New Orleans.