

Odd Fellows Rest Cemetery in New Orleans, Louisiana, was founded by the Grand Lodge of Louisiana, Independent Order of Odd Fellows in 1847, and was dedicated by the Order in January of 1849. The cemetery was situated at the lake end of Canal Street, at its intersection with the high ground of the Metairie ridge (now City Park Avenue), within a “perfect triangle” of land walled on the two street sides, approximately 325 feet on each side of the triangle. The cemetery is located amidst a neighborhood of more than one dozen cemeteries founded during this period in what was then outside the city limits, but accessible by rail and by waterway from the City of New Orleans. At that time, cemeteries were considered a potential health hazard and locations outside the city limits were chosen as a precaution, in the interest of public health. Many of the burials in these cemeteries are above-ground, a local custom embraced in New Orleans in part due to soil and water table problems in the deltaic plain in which the city was built, and due in large part to local adoption of the “European-style” (French and Spanish) custom of above-ground burial.

The first burials were of the remains of local Odd Fellows who had died previous to the dedication of the cemetery. As with all of the cemeteries in New Orleans during that period, the cemetery also served as a burial ground for victims of the dreaded yellow fever disease, particularly during the worst outbreak of the disease in the summer of 1853.

Subsequent burials were not limited to members of the Odd Fellows. Many of the early burials were not of natives to the city, but of immigrants, especially German, who passed away during this period of exploding population growth in New Orleans. Members of the several local lodges of the Odd Fellows and their family members were also interred in Odd Fellows Rest, both in the modest and inexpensive vaults located in the walls of the cemetery, or in the more elaborate above-ground tombs, typically constructed of marble or granite, or of less substantial masonry construction.

From its inception, the cemetery had no land to grow, and as a result was unable to sustain continued interest, especially when contrasted with the far larger and more prosperous private, for-profit cemeteries in the immediate vicinity. As the developed city grew to the cemetery, Odd Fellows Rest was long threatened with demolition by eminent domain due to concerns by city engineers as to the traffic conditions at the busy intersection. By the middle 1970s that threat was removed by construction of the nearby interstate highway, but great damage had been done to the sustainability of the cemetery.

After World War II, the number of Odd Fellows lodges and membership in New Orleans declined steadily, with the last local lodge closing in the late 1970s. During those years, the Odd Fellows entered into a series of contracts to provide management services for the cemetery. But the threat of demolition, lack of funds and the constraints imposed by the small size of the cemetery eventually led to neglect and considerable deferred maintenance of the cemetery grounds and tombs. This in turn led to a reduction in burials and operating income for the cemetery, and eventually to vandalism and decline.

In 1980, the cemetery was added to the National Register of Historic Places, which led to much-needed and privately sponsored investment in the historic cemetery gates by New Orleans preservationists. But despite this encouraging investment, the continued lack of local management and the inherent limitations of the cemetery all but assured its continued decline over the subsequent years.

Responding to these and other concerns, national officials of the IOOF made a series of visits to the cemetery starting in 2013. These officials identified an immediate goal of providing regular and sustained day-to-day maintenance of the cemetery, with a longer term goal of providing capital improvements to the cemetery infrastructure.

Within one year, the IOOF arranged for renewed local maintenance of the cemetery and later was able to secure the funds to begin making repairs for the long-term care of this historic reminder of the early years of the Odd Fellows in New Orleans. In late 2017, total reconstruction of more than 150 linear feet of the exterior walls was undertaken, rectifying an unstable condition that had persisted for decades and that to the general public had served to visually identify the cemetery as a forgotten and uncared for relic of a long-past era.

The future of Odd Fellows Rest looks brighter now than it has for many decades, but it is clear that sustaining the cemetery for the long-term will require continued investment and active attention and interest in its maintenance and operation. Plans are being made to provide for that, and it is hoped that, after 170 years, Odd Fellows Rest will once again be a fitting symbol and embodiment of its original mission and the lofty ideals of its founders.