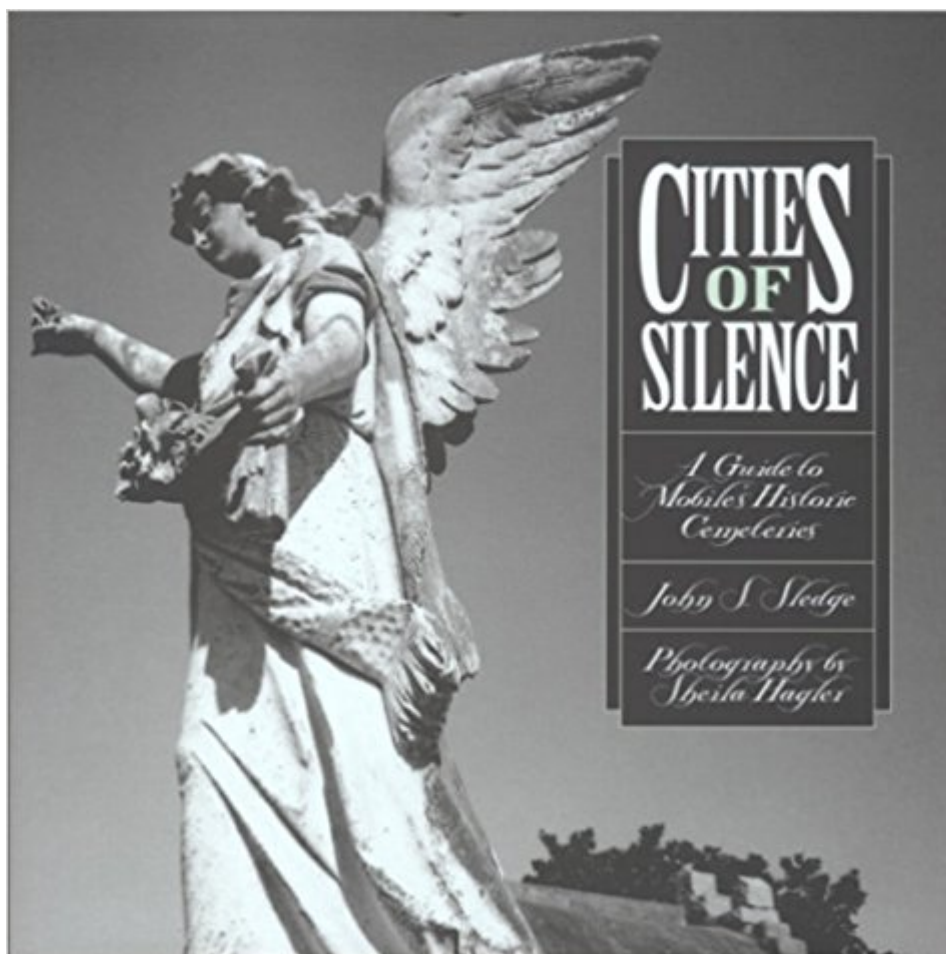


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Cities Of Silence: A Guide To Mobile's Historic Cemeteries



Synopsis

Cities of Silence is a richly illustrated, evocative study of five of Mobile's historic burial grounds: Magnolia Cemetery, Church Street Graveyard, Old Catholic, Sha'arai Shomayim, and Ahavas Chesed cemeteries. Through the use of historic photographs and maps as well as more than 70 contemporary black-and-white images by photographer Sheila Hagler, John Sledge thoroughly examines the development of these solemn spaces. Briskly paced and absorbing, Cities of Silence moves the reader through a world of mourning and ritual scarcely imaginable today. Sledge probes the meanings and practices of Victorian burials and jazz funerals and explains national trends in cemetery landscaping and funerary sculpture. Hagler's breathtaking photographs document the wealth of sophisticated cast iron and beautiful gravestone art characteristic of these cemeteries. Together they unearth a rich stock of legend and folklore associated with Mobile's hallowed grounds, including the stories of the Boyington Oak, grown from the grave of a falsely accused man, and the enigmatic Goddess of Magnolia, said to summon storms when attempts are made to move her. Mobile's cemeteries have been shaped by pestilence, war, and deep-seated religious beliefs. From the devastation of the 1819 yellow fever epidemic to the persistent sectional loyalty demonstrated by the annual decoration of Confederate Rest, from descriptions of arcane Mardi Gras practices to the variety of foreign inscriptions indicating Mobile's cosmopolitan population, this book serves as an important cultural analysis of the Port City and its peoples. Even more than this, Cities of Silence is a celebration of the human spirit in the face of life's greatest test - death itself.

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Customer Reviews

John S. Sledge is an architectural historian for the Mobile Historic Development Commission and book editor for the Mobile Register. Sheila Hagler is a professional photographer living in Grand Bay, Alabama.

Before the United States was a country, colonial burial grounds were called graveyards. They were unattractive, unhealthy and unsafe places of alcoholic gravediggers, grave robbers, partly dug up corpses, and poisonous gases. Then, in 1778, French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau was buried in a white marble tomb on the Isle des Peupliers. This grave set the standard of beauty in nature for the 52-acre Pere-Lachaise cemetery outside Paris, in 1804. From France, the first rural garden cemetery of winding lanes, white sculptures and tombs, family care, and cultivated grounds in the United States was Mt Auburn, outside Boston. In contrast, historic Magnolia, Old Catholic and Sha-arai Shomayim cemeteries were within the city limits of Mobile, Alabama. They were laid out in city-managed and -owned grids, with streets meeting at right angles. Like the rural cemeteries, though, they had artistic entrance gates, fences, plantings and sculptures. Then, during the 1850s horticulturist Adolph Strauch took markers, trees and walls away from Spring Grove cemetery in Cincinnati, Ohio. He favored mausolea large enough for entire families, kept up by hired staff under a director or superintendent, in open lawns. With the War between the States such lawn-park cemeteries made room for soldiers' rests, such as in Mobile's Magnolia cemetery. The design for these special burial plots and for national cemeteries, such as at Gettysburg, grew out of Frederick Law Olmstead's New York Central Park. In 1913 entrepreneur Hubert Eaton laid out the first memorial park in the United States, at Forest Lawn cemetery, in Glendale, California. Hired groundskeepers worked easily around slender vases of artificial flowers, limited sculpture, large group vaults, and ground-level bronze plates. Forty years later, the port city's first memorial park opened, as Mobile Memorial Gardens, on the city's west side. According to author John S Sledge, Mobile's CITIES OF SILENCE have become unattractive, unhealthy, and unsafe. This time around it's from inner city blight, grave robbing, vandalism and weeds. This time around, the answer may be, not in another remodeled style of burial grounds, but in successful historic preservation. In fact, Mobile already has clean-up campaigns, save our cemeteries societies, and walking tours. All this could, once again, make cemetery, from the Greek word for sleeping chamber, the perfect word for Mobile's historic Ahavas Chesed, Church Street, Magnolia, Old Catholic, and Sha-arai Shomyaim cemeteries.

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