St. Roch Cemetery and Chapel

1725 St. Roch Avenue

St. Roch Cemetery was dedicated in 1875, followed by its chapel a year later. It is the only cemetery in the United States named for this fourteenth-century saint, who is sought out as an intercessor and helper in times of illness, especially plagues. St. Roch was a Frenchman who became ill in Italy and is much revered by German Catholics.

Father Leonard Thevis, from nearby Holy Trinity Parish, vowed to build a chapel to St. Roch if his parishioners were spared from the terrible yellow fever epidemic of 1868. The chapel and the altar within are in a Gothic style, and the entire complex reflects Father Thevis German origins, as the cemetery was patterned after the Campo Santo dei Tedeschi, the German cemetery in Rome. The names on the tombs are German, Irish, French, and Italian, reflecting New Orleans own ethnic mix.

The second part of the cemetery, immediately behind the original plot, was added in 1895. Its chapel was dedicated to St. Michael and was intended to serve the Italian community, whose numbers were increasing rapidly in that period.

The tombs of St. Roch Cemetery feature elaborate architectural detailing, statuary, inset photographs, mosaic portraits of the deceased, and occasional stained glass. Most unusual are the almost life-sized Stations of the Cross, dating to the late 1940s and built into the exterior walls.

Most fascinating is the chapel itself. The statue of St. Roch, shown with his faithful dog and pointing to the wound on his leg, dominates the tiny space. The remains of Father Thevis lie beneath the floor. In the small room to the side of the sanctuary are dedicatory ex-votos from many who were cured or aided by the intercession of St. Roch. Sometimes they consist merely of bricks or paving stones with the engraved word Thanks or Merci. Other offerings include devices no longer needed: a crutch or cane, a leg brace, or even false teeth. Most often they are tokens of once-afflicted body parts: hands, ears, feet, even a liver!

This is a most impressive sight, but these item represent only a fraction of the ex-votos, as the chapel was refurbished in the late 1940s and again in the 1960s, when many of the objects were moved from the altar to a side room, leaving the remaining items less cluttered. Even this abridged collection is an unforgettable sight.

*Written by Susan Levy*

*Visited September 20, 1992*

When citing information from this document,

please acknowledge the

Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans, 2021.