UNEARTHED: USF'S HIDDEN HISTORY

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NECROPOLIS

San Francisco's first Masonic funeral occurred in 1849, after the body of an unidentified man was found floating in the Bay. The corpse was heavily and artfully tattooed with the arcane emblems of Masonry; fellow Masons among the Argonauts banded together and buried the unknown with great ceremony.

As early as 1854, sites were sketched out in the Lone Mountain/Laurel Heights area for a necropolis of four large burial grounds: the non-denominational Laurel Hill Cemetery (1854), also known as Lone Mountain; Lone Mountain's Calvary Catholic Cemetery (1860); the Masonic Cemetery (chartered in 1864); and the Odd Fellows Cemetery (1865). The Columbarium, located at Loraine Court off Anza and Stanyan, is the only surviving structure from the 150,000 person necropolis.

The Calvary Cemetery comprised 50 acres bounded by Geary, Turk, Parker and St. Joseph (near Kaiser Hospital); in all about 55,000 were buried there. The Masonic Cemetery on which the lower campus and the "Terraces" sit was approximately 30 acres, extending from Turk to Fulton, Parker to Masonic Avenues. It was the resting place for up to 40,000 bodies. Its most famous temporary resident was Joshua Norton, the self-proclaimed "Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico."

In the 1880s pressure grew to relocate the cemeteries to Colma in order to open up valuable real estate for development. Burials in the city of San Francisco were outlawed in 1902. After decades of litigation, the cemeteries were abandoned, remains moved, and the property developed. USF purchased the site of Saint Ignatius Church from the Masonic Cemetery Association in 1910, and the remaining lower campus in the 1920s.

Fr. Charles Gagan S.J., who grew up on Chabot Terrace, recalls playing among the empty tombs, where the San Francisco Chronicle reported in 1939, "Ghouls held vandalish orgies on moonless, foggy nights."

Although graves were opened and remains removed in the 1920s, the work was sometimes haphazard. Routine excavations on the upper and lower campuses regularly turn up tombstones and funeral hardware like coffin handles. During the 2011 excavations for the LoSchiavo Center for Science and Innovation, approximately 80 gravesites were uncovered, as well as the partial remains of at least three persons who had been buried more than a century before. The remains were respectfully interred at the relocated Masonic Woodlawn Cemetery in Colma.

The stones in this exhibit remind us that a city of the dead once existed beneath our feet. Three of the four gravestones on exhibit are those of small children pointing to the high rates of infant mortality (15 to 20 percent) in early San Francisco.

- Professor Thomas Lucas, S.J., Curator