

# THE ART OF MEMORY



# INTRODUCTION

Holt Cemetery is located off of City Park Avenue near Delgado Community College's administration building and childcare center. The juxtaposition of the cemetery's location, a place for the deceased, next to places of new life gives a small taste to the uniqueness of Holt. This cemetery is one of the only entirely below ground cemeteries in the city. It is believed that Holt took its name from Dr. Joseph Holt though there is no true evidence to support this theory. Dr. Holt was a medical professional at the time that was said to have taken control of the yellow fever epidemic. The word Holt can be directly translated as "dead" in Hungarian—a suitable name for a cemetery.



# HISTORY OF HOLT

## 1879-PRESENT

Holt Cemetery is classified as a «Pauper's Cemetery» or «Potter's Field.» Potter's fields traditionally cater to indigent populations, and, as a result, are prone to neglect. Holt's conception was a result of the closing of Locust Grove Cemeteries I and II due to their overcrowding and unkempt nature. In 1879, yellow fever was quickly sweeping the community leaving people in need of a burial place for their loved ones. Holt cemetery became a public cemetery distanced from the denser city populations.

Unlike other cemeteries, Holt has no mausoleums. There are no distinct rows or organized layout to the space. It reflects much of New Orleans itself in its appearance. With its makeshift ambiance and colorful sites, Holt is very much a melting pot. Its character and aesthetics stand in unique contrast to other resting places in New Orleans. Many headstones are not carved marble as seen in other traditional cemeteries, but made from everyday materials.



Headstones made of wood, plastics, metals, and even street signs give tribute to loved ones. Plots are sanctioned off with shells, bricks, wood, and in some cases pipes and fences. Much of what is seen in Holt can be traced back to African influences and traditions. The placement of sentimental items, those that were owned by or important to the deceased, is one of the most prevalent traditions carried out at Holt. Items such as clothes, stuffed animals, toys, and trinkets left by loved ones can be seen adorning the graves. Other traditional African burial rituals such as planting trees and the placement of inverted vesicles are practiced at Holt.

Holt is a dynamic cemetery, and many changes have occurred over the years. The addition of a wall, gate, and an asphalt pathway lined with street lamps were made by the City of New Orleans. Along with these physical changes, hours of operational hours were set for the first time in its history. The changes taking place at Holt are indicative of renewed interest in maintaining the cemetery, and due to this renewed interest citizens may now have the ability to make their voices heard, allowing them to guide the changes in a way that best benefits the community.



Memorials

-OF-

Henry B. Belmont

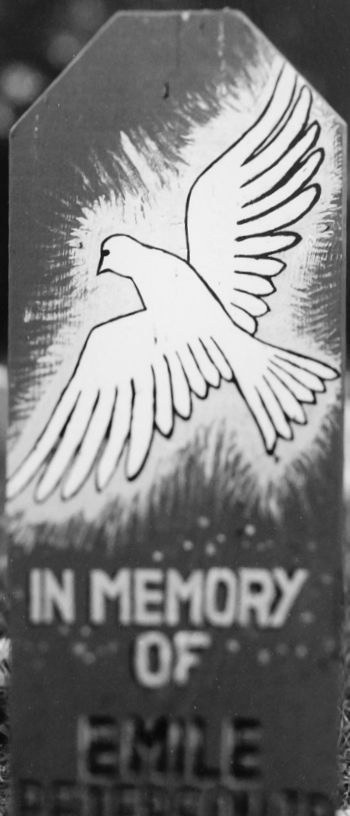
Born

Sep 27 1901

Dec

1918

# IN MEMORIAM



Holt is a resting place for a vast array of citizens. Although it was declared overcrowded 50 years ago, people are continuing to be buried in Holt because the graves can be reused if the plots are not cared for. Headstones show records dating from before World War I to present day. Sadly, many of the burials at Holt are entirely unmarked. Observing all of the adorned graves brings a sense of overwhelming humbleness when turning to see headstones without even a name.

# BUDDY BOLDEN (1877-1931)

Buddy Bolden, also known as «King Bolden,» or «Father of Jazz,» was one of New Orleans' most famous and influential musicians. Known for his improvised ragtime music, Buddy Bolden's unique musical style was a key influence in the development of jazz in New Orleans. Performing in a time before the term «Jazz» was common vernacular, Bolden's powerful and mesmerizing music sparked a creative revolution that later gave birth to the musical genres that define our city today. Bolden's personal life and history, in a similar manner to his music, allow listeners to view the changes and similarities in both our city and musical culture.



Bolden suffered from schizophrenia, and after a brief episode of alcohol induced psychosis, was institutionalized until his death and subsequent burial at Holt Cemetery. Similar to the State instituted insane asylum where he spent the last of his years, Holt Cemetery

was used to house the marginalized masses that society was unsure how to deal with. The location of Buddy Bolden's burial within Holt is unknown, but several monuments have been erected in honor of the late musician. Despite the fact that none of Bolden's original recordings have survived, and the mystery of his burial location, his impact is still felt internationally through the jazz music he has helped inspire.



## JESSIE HILL (1932-1996)

Notable for the classic song "Ooh Poo Pah Doo," Jessie Hill, a New Orleans Rhythm & Blues legend, was born in the Ninth Ward in 1932. He grew up in a heavily musical environment in close contact with artists Eddie Bo, Oliver Morgan and Prince La La, and eventually started his own band in his teenage years called "The House Rockers."

Hill died of heart and renal failure in New Orleans at the age of 63 and he is now resting under a plywood grave marker in Holt Cemetery. Jessie Hill's memory is carried on by his three grandsons, Travis Hill, James and Troy Andrews. Troy Andrews, who goes by the stage name "Trombone Shorty," performs all over the country, and has worked with New Orleans schools to help increase music literacy.



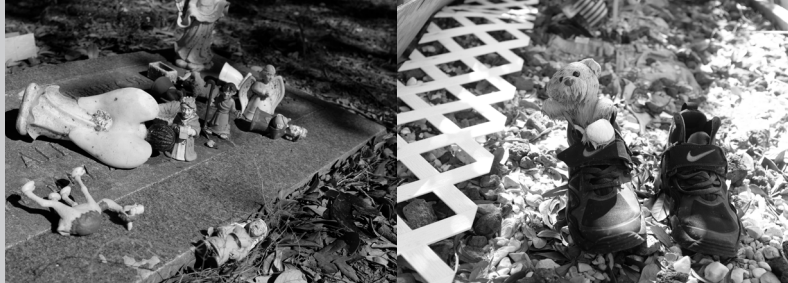
His burial will stay an unforgettable day for Holt Cemetery. Accompanied by a brass band and a second line, New Orleans legends such as Ernie K-Doe, Dr John and Milton Battiste attended his funeral. Ernie K-Doe and his wife Antoinette were wearing the same suits than Jessie Hill was in his casket, personally handmade by Antoinette herself. Doris Hill described the clothes ensemble as suitable for a «jazz emperor».

## UPSTAIRS LOUNGE FIRE (1973)

Holt Cemetery has been the final resting place for scores of marginalized, oppressed, misunderstood, and indigent. Holt's classification as a «Pauper's Cemetery» coupled with New Orleans' turbulent and violent history has led to its association with some of the city's most notorious crimes. In 1973 an arson attack at the Upstairs Lounge, a popular gay bar, led to the death of 32 people. This act of violence remains the deadliest arson committed in the city, and one of the deadliest attacks on members of the LGBT community in American history. The remains of a number of victims of the fire, Ferris LeBlanc, and three other bodies, unclaimed or unidentifiable, were buried in a mass grave at Holt Cemetery.

## ROBERT CHARLES (1865-1900)

Robert Charles was a free man of color, who was pursued by New Orleans police in association with the shooting of an officer. Charles was involved in the Liberian emigration movement; he believed in self-defense for the African American community, and protection against police brutality. The Robert Charles Race Riots started with Charles and a white officer shooting one another. Media provocation and the racially charged atmosphere led to calls for lynching by whites, while resulting tensions fueled a days-long manhunt. The Riots went on for 4 days, resulting in over 50 injured and casualties of four officers by Charles. On July 25th, the riots ended in Charles' death, but stirred political reactions. The Anti-Lynching League was formed, but rebuffed by the Green Turtles, a group of opposing white New Orleanians. Unfortunately, segregation intensified after the riots and lynching increased drastically from 1900-1931.



# THE FUTURE OF HOLT

As of August 2013, Holt has been slated to receive 450,000 dollars worth of renovations. So far, these renovations have manifested in the form of a fresh new asphalt path, lined with new lighting. These renovations were conducted quickly and many people who have cared for Holt over the years were surprised. Looking forward, there are ongoing efforts for Holt cemetery to be registered on the National Historic register, given the historical significance of many of its departed residents. Many important questions have to be asked as to what Holt will do, or be, in the future landscape of the city.

A move for historical classification is important for Holt Cemetery. This would hopefully help preserve, protect, and improve the condition of Holt. Acceptance into the National Registry has the potential to give Holt Cemetery more publicity, which could promote education and preservation for one of New Orleans' most unique cemeteries. Currently, programs at Delgado and the University of New Orleans are providing upkeep and advocacy for Holt. Organizations such as Save Our Cemeteries, and people like Dr. Ryan Gray play an important role in the movement for National Registry. The main goal of National Historic Register approval, and the efforts of everyone involved in raising awareness, is to generate a connection that will allow the public to shape Holt in the way that best suits them.





# ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The University of New Orleans' Special Topics in Cultural Anthropology class would like to thank:

Dr. Ryan Gray for sharing his research and knowledge about Holt Cemetery,  
Rick Olivier for sharing his beautiful photographs,  
The Departments of Anthropology and Urban Studies,  
The Jean Brainard Boebel Chair in Historic Preservation at the University of New Orleans,  
The Neighborhood Story Project,  
The New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park,  
Save Our Cemeteries, and  
our teachers Rachel Breunlin and Bruce Sunpie Barnes.

This booklet was made by: Kelsey Brown,  
Camille Lenain, Jackson Molaison, and Odie Tucker.



The **Art of Memory** is a booklet providing images, photography, history and stories from **Holt Cemetery**. This is a collaborative ethnography by the Department of Anthropology's New Orleans Public Culture course exploring the history and ongoing importance of New Orleans' Public cemetery.