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Between Stone and Silence: Ephemerality, Monumentality, and Burial in 19th-Century San Juan

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Abstract

Scholars of the new, suburban burial grounds constructed in the nineteenth century have long imagined a tension between the monumental and ephemeral in the design and use of these sites. Ephemerality, in this framing, challenges the permanence of the monumental both in the construction of intentionally temporary public monuments and when architectural features designed to endure are destroyed. Navigating through interdisciplinary methodologies, including practice theory and spatial analysis, this article illuminates pivotal moments in the evolution of San Juan's first general cemetery. From clashes between imperial projects and local implementations to midcentury conflicts and substantial 1860s redesigns, the narrative uncovers a dance between permanence and transience. Embracing overlooked sources, innovative techniques, and experiential engagement with material spaces beyond traditional archival approaches, this methodological journey enriches our comprehension of 19th-century burial practices. Providing a captivating lens for understanding meaning-making processes, the fusion of materiality and practice theory not only revolutionizes our understanding of historical actors' choices but also offers a methodological roadmap for researchers navigating the complexities of historical cemetery studies. This paper emphasizes the importance of blending traditional and unconventional strategies for a holistic understanding of spatial dynamics and cultural practices, contributing not only to the exploration of 19th-century burial practices but also to methodological advancements in historical research.

Keywords: *Material Culture, Spatial Practice, Memory and Memorialization, Cemetery Studies, Puerto Rico.*

Introduction

Early on August 8th, 1867, a group of men gathered in the general cemetery of San Juan, Puerto Rico. They met to execute the first in a series of large-scale exhumations. A doctor, a city councilor, and the overseer of the burial ground carried the paperwork to record the details of their task. They were joined by workers: gravediggers who brought equipment to complete the day's manual labor. Throughout the morning they opened the designated graves and verified that the bodies were completely skeletonized. Two niches were left unopened as the occupants had died of smallpox; a handful of remains were transferred to private pantheons or ossuaries.[2] The bones of the rest were buried together in a common

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[2] A note on terminology. The term *panteón* is used to capture several different burial forms in 19th-century records. Depending on the context, it can refer to anything from an individual grave to the cemetery itself. For clarity, I use the term grave, burial, or interment when referring to individual burial. I use pantheon or

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trench. The grave goods—burial clothes, flowers, and occasional coffin fragments—were burned. This task took place six times over the next two months.[3] The ninety-five exhumations doubled the number of available graves in the cemetery, buying some breathing room as officials attempted to solve a space crisis that threatened the continued viability of the burial ground.

The general exhumation performed that morning was a significant turning point in the existence of the cemetery in San Juan. It interests me as a historian because it brings together three foci of my research: what spaces were built, how those spaces were used, and how space took on meaning. The cemetery had recently undergone major reforms which saw the addition of new burial options, including in-ground burial, rental niches, and perpetual family mausoleums. This spatial restructuring coincided with the codification of new burial and exhumation practices, both private, when kin requested to relocate a loved one to a family memorial, and public, when cemetery officials emptied graves to reclaim space. And yet, while it represents a critical juncture in which novel material and cultural practices emerged, that morning's activities left barely a trace in the archive. In this article, I explore this archival limitation as well as the methodological and practical approaches to the archive and material space that allow me to reveal the cumulative choices that remade the place of the dead.

While my larger research addresses the material and cultural practices of death and dying more broadly, here I focus on the conundrum of space. In studying the new general cemeteries built across the Atlantic World in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, I have had to productively engage with the fact that any site coexisted in three forms: ideal space, material space, and ephemeral space. The ideal space often existed only as abstract, perfected forms in literature and design. This conception of a site, even though it was rarely built, leaves a heavy archival trace through plans, drawings, and architectural designs. Material space, in contrast, is the real-world environment shaped by practical constraints on the ground. Ephemeral space is a more transient and sensory-focused domain, designed to be temporary. While both the material and ephemeral are part of the built environment, each, in their own way, is elusive in archival documents. I take a holistic approach that considers these three dimensions as interconnected parts of a single system.

This article presents an exploration of my methodology. First, I lay the foundation by articulating the overarching theories that shape my interdisciplinary approach. Next, I delve into the practical methods applied both within and beyond the archive's confines. I then illustrate my methods through case studies at pivotal moments in the evolution of San Juan's first general cemetery. In the first case study, I consider the clash between imperial projects and local implementations in the early-nineteenth century. Both permanence and temporality inform and shape the ideal and the material aspects of San Juan's new burial ground. I next move to midcentury, exploring the conflicts and regulatory efforts that unfolded as authorities sought to reform the general cemetery. A lack of permanent features gave rise to informal uses of the space. This segment exposes the tension between the idealized use of the cemetery and the lived practices that unfolded

tomb when referring to the simpler, more basic structure. I use mausoleum or family crypt when referencing the more elaborate monuments built later in the process. Finally, ossuary refers to a location where the desiccated bones are placed after exhumation. These can take multiple forms, either private sites incorporated into family plots or public sites used by the general population.

[3] August 8, August 12, August 24, September 4, September 23, October 1, 1867, Archivo General de Puerto Rico (AGPR), Municipio de San Juan (MSJ), Sanidad (S), Cementerios (C), legajo (leg.) 131 P1, expediente (exp.) 33.

within its bounds. Finally, I look to the 1860s—a decade marked by substantial efforts at large-scale cemetery redesign. New material features emerged, accompanied by novel practices that consolidated the cemetery's social role as a place of remembrance and memorialization. This journey unveils a nuanced dance between the permanent and temporary, showcasing how ideal, material, and ephemeral components interacted to shape meaning within San Juan's burial ground.

Actions and Objects: Towards a Methodology of Practice and Materiality

My project centers around the analysis of urban cemeteries and their roles within cities. An urban cemetery presents a unique object of analysis—it serves multiple functions and represents divergent meanings for different users. As both a work of art and a public works, it is a communal space, as well as a location for private reflection. Simultaneously spiritual and mundane, cemeteries pose a challenge for study due to their dual nature: objects weighted in their physical and tactile nature, and ideas constructed in a complex network of symbols. All three elements of space—the ideal, the material, and the ephemeral—coexist in the interstices between the abstract and the real. To navigate these complexities, I developed a mixed-methods approach that blends practice theory, material and spatial analysis, and social and cultural historical approaches.

I draw on twentieth-century cultural theories while remaining attentive to the limitations of these analytical approaches. Foucault's engagement with discourse may have opened the door for new questions, but the all-encompassing nature of power inherent in his model leaves little room for historical actors. Instead, it ascribes agency to a subject always-already subjected to power relations. For historians, the challenge lies in bridging the gap between individual actions and overarching structures. Practice theory offers a conceptual solution. Concurrent with Foucault's developing his theory of power, Pierre Bourdieu developed a theory of practice, focusing on the body's role in cultural production and social consumption. Like Foucault, Bourdieu explored power's connection to social stratification but reintroduced the agent's significance. Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* introduced concepts like fields, habitus, and capital, highlighting the dynamic nature of action over time (Bourdieu, 2013). Still, his focus remained primarily on the reproduction of class.

Sherry B. Ortner addressed this limitation by reexamining early European versions of practice theory in *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. She critiqued early versions for overemphasizing social reproduction and integrated three streams of thought—heightened attention to power dynamics, historicization, and an enriched view of culture—into her model (Ortner, 2006, pp. 10–18). Ortner's approach, maintaining Bourdieu's agency-structure connection while integrating power, history, and culture, provides a versatile method for studying the reproduction of social structures and the potential for change. Today's practice theory centers on understanding social behavior and culture through human actions and routines in specific contexts. Practice theory explores how individuals and groups engage with their environments, both material and social, influencing the construction and preservation of cultural norms, values, and systems.

Practice theory incorporates ethnographic study as a vital component. While this may be suited to anthropological and sociological studies, for the historian working from the archive it can pose challenges. Practice is frequently an informal interaction involving people and their environment; it does not find its way into the record. In the absence of

bodies in motion, or informants to interview, how can a historian access the spectrum of practices in a given historical moment? Let us consider for a moment both Bourdieu and Ortner. They speak of practice as the actions of the individual in particular spaces through time. While their work emphasizes the action, there remains the question of space. A powerful argument can be made about the relevance of material culture, the objects that are left behind, to the study of social practice.

This brings me to a second component of my methodology, which considers the objects of death and dying. From Marx's *historical materialism* (Marx, 1904) to Horkheimer and Adorno's *cultural materialism* (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002), there exists a wealth of conceptions of, and approaches to, the study of the material realm. My work emphasizes the approaches of material rhetoric—the study of how material objects and their physical characteristics have been used as persuasive tools in communication throughout history. Artifacts, such as architecture, clothing, and other tangible items, can convey messages, values, and ideologies as effectively as written or spoken words. The recent interest in the study of "things" shows the potential of this approach. In *the Social Life of Things,* Arjun Appadurai advises:

> …we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context (Appadurai, 1986, p. 5).

Appadurai, while concentrating on commodities, points to the value of studying material culture as a means of expanding the idea of practice.

Lorraine Daston's *Things That Talk* moves the study of things past Appadurai's focus on commodities. Here, practice is integral to the study of material history. She urges the abandonment of studies predicated either on the "brute intransigence of matter, everywhere and always the same," or the inverse, which focuses solely on of "the plasticity of meaning" (Daston, 2004, p. 16). Instead, she conceptualizes material objects—things—as the "nodes at which matter and meaning intersect." Meanings are historically contingent and change as they incorporate new influences. Repeated human interactions with material objects create a cultural milieu in which things demonstrate a property similar to that of crystal formation in supersaturated liquids (Daston, 2004, p. 19). Things are the seeds around which a meaning "can suddenly congeal… crystalliz[ing] ways of thinking, feeling, and acting" (Daston, 2004, p. 20). The repetition of patterns within social discourse, the association of objects with particular social groups, the reference to classical forms, and the use of objects in a particular manner are all components upon which the conceptual existence of objects is built. The combination of actions varies with each object, but what remains consistent is a slow and sustained accrual of values that eventually coalesces into a new and unique meaning mapped onto the physical form. In drawing on these theoretical models, my approach works to understand how San Juan's burial ground took on meaning by recreating the "supersaturated" cultural solution.

Paper and Space: Practical Methods in the Archive and Beyond

To understand how the spaces of the deceased acquired meaning and how this meaning evolved, my methodology examines both practice and the object in the spaces of the dead. I trace not only the actions of individuals but also the role played by material objects. Implementing this approach necessitates an expansive conception of the archive. Practice—the quotidian actions of individuals—is often absent from the textual record.

Similarly, the records of burial culture see ideal objects and spaces overrepresented while the practical and intangible qualities go overlooked. To overcome these limitations means blending traditional archival strategies with overlooked sources, applying innovative techniques, and going outside the textual archive to recreate the plurality of experiences that informed emergent meanings around death and burial.

Applying quantitative and qualitative techniques, I combine both broad and deep analysis of varied source material. First, I provide a broad framework for reforms across the Spanish Empire by looking at three sets of documents: eighteenth-century Spanish religious and secular literature on cemetery reform, the legislation this generated, and the subsequent projects for new urban cemeteries. I then turn to a deep analysis of the cemetery project in San Juan. By examining what the inhabitants of the city—alone and in groups—said, did, and thought at pivotal points in this process, I shed light on the local specificities that shaped the trajectory of reform. I establish the evolving institutional concerns central to the project by drawing on the letters of bishops, governors general, and captains general, alongside the reports of city councils, sanitation boards, planning committees, and regulatory bodies. These approaches follow established methodologies of the social history of cemetery reform, establishing what people in the city did and built. I further engage a cultural approach that asks what these acts meant. Using wills, I look at what individuals conceived of as critical in their own burial. I combine this with the underused sources of burial records, petitions for the exhumations and transport of bodies, and the monuments in the physical space itself, to approximate attitudes around death and burial.

My use of digital methods to perform spatial analysis is a key departure from traditional approaches. From parish interment records, I constructed a database of over 8000 burials that took place during the reform process. It contains information on the deceased's age, race, legal status, as well as birth and marital status. It also captures key details of their burial, including sacraments, location of burial, funeral rituals, and details of their wills. I geocoded these entries, allowing me to map burial across the city, and within the cemetery. This database uncovers the relationship of race, gender, and class in a hierarchy of burial. Using these digital techniques, I reconstruct the collective practices of burial in the population even in the absence of detailed records of individual actions.

Finally, material space serves as a wellspring of insight. Archival documents, while invaluable, fall short of encapsulating the essence of lived environments. To truly grasp the depth of a space's affective and experiential dimensions, one must go beyond merely examining designs within the archive. It necessitates embarking on the same paths that bodies and mourners once traversed. A mere centimeter on a map cannot convey the scorching heat of an August day, nor can it elucidate why the logistics of transportation were such a paramount concern in a world prior to embalming practices. Debates over perimeter walls documented in municipal records offer only a fragment of the narrative. To truly comprehend the significance, one must stand on the cliffs just beyond the cemetery walls, feeling the relentless wind and witnessing the distant rocks below. This visceral experience unveils layers of meaning that words and records alone cannot capture.

The fusion of materiality and practice theory provides an intriguing vantage point for considering historians' processes of meaning-making. When we consider the rhetoric of the archive and the practice of finding and analyzing archival documents, we begin to recognize how our immersion in Western academic traditions becomes an integral part of our scholarly identity. We must acknowledge that our position within the global knowledge production system inevitably influences the nature of our scholarly contributions. I cannot

help but think of Lara Putnam's discussion of the benefits of the "externalities" involved in in-country archival research. "Things happen in archives and national libraries and on the way to them" that transform the researcher. In addition, interacting with local experts contributes to academics' exposure to the plenitude of non-Western knowledge centers, and forces a recognition of "one's ignorance early and often" (Putnam, 2016, p. 395). The experiential friction of engaging with the material spaces in which history transpired has the capacity to revolutionize our understanding of the choices of historical actors. In the case studies below, I work to make visible how all these approaches play a role in my process.

Monumental Imperial Projects versus Provisional Local Implementation

Old San Juan sits on an islet jutting into the ocean. The narrow grid of streets remains largely unchanged from its colonial layout. During my initial research trip on the island, I leased a studio apartment in the city center. My first weekend, equipped with Google Maps' most direct path, I set out to locate the object of my study: the Cementerio Santa María Magdalena de Pazzis. Following cobblestone streets uphill, I traversed the city toward the tip of the islet. Despite the early hour, sweat trickled down my spine. Upon reaching the top of the roadway, I encountered a wide expanse of green lawn. At the far end loomed the fortress El Morro. However, the cemetery was nowhere in sight. After wandering this park in confusion, I spotted it: a disembodied dome topped with a cross. Despite the illusion of the two-dimensional map, the cemetery lay not next to the fortress but below it. Retracing my steps, I found a small street sharply diverging from the main route. Narrow and winding, it descended beneath the city walls. I would learn to be cautious navigating this tunnel, as it was barely wide enough for the cars which whipped through at high speeds. On the far side I arrived at the cemetery gates. While this entrance is a later addition, the path I traversed was the same that countless bodies followed on their way to the grave. While the cemetery has transformed in 200+ years of active use, its location, neither prominent nor practical to my modern sensibilities, has remained the same. This initial case study centers on the first iteration of this burial ground as it was opened in the early nineteenth century.

The transition to general cemeteries in the nineteenth century did not take place in a linear or mechanical way. Instead, the adoption of modern systems was a conflicted and contingent process across the Atlantic World. Social traditions, imperial ambitions, and local conditions resulted in diverse cemetery forms. In distinct regional styles, the designers of these cemeteries sought to create spaces that would evoke feelings of solemnity and reverence.[4] The Spanish states' desire to transition to *extramuros* general cemeteries across the Empire was mediated by local conditions. In this section, I analyze how different conceptions of space – the ideal, the material, and the ephemeral – played a role in shaping cemetery development in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I focus on the practical aspects of

[4] For considerations of the emergence of 18th- and 19th-century cemeteries, see Ariès (1974), Curl (2002), and Ragon (1983).

cemetery design, both for hygienic and religious purposes, and how these factors became integral to the notion of respectable Catholic burial practices.

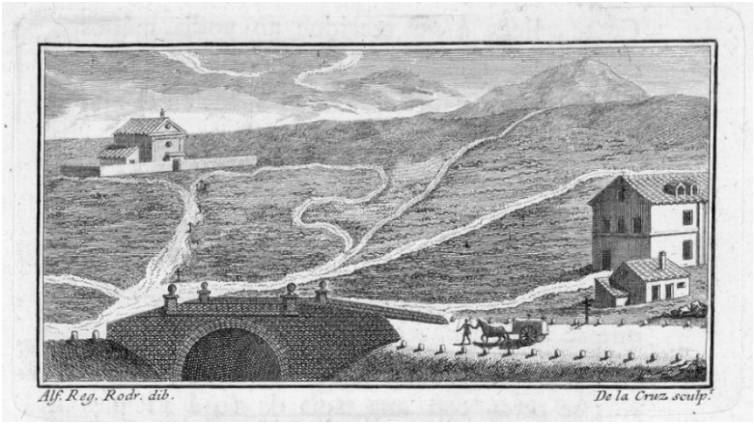


Figure 1: Intended form of extramuros general cemeteries in the Spanish Empire. (*Noticia del establecimiento*, 1787, p. 7).

During the 18th century, churchyard burial grounds became recognized as threats to urban health due to their association with disease and epidemics. Across the Atlantic World, cities began transitioning from traditional churchyard burials to general cemeteries.[5] King Carlos III began this reform process in the Spanish Empire when, in 1787, he issued a cedula prohibiting burials in churches and mandating the creation of *extramuros* (extramural) cemeteries. His intention was clear: Catholic Spain was to build general cemeteries that served the interests of both Religion and Public Health (Carlos III, 1787). Nevertheless, many municipalities cited financial constraints, land shortages, and reticence in the population as barriers to implementing changes. Instead, provisional cemeteries were opened to service short-term increases in the number of dead created by epidemics and military conflicts; these were closed after the crisis (Pérez García, 2015). It took 70 years for most Spanish towns to transition permanently to general cemeteries.

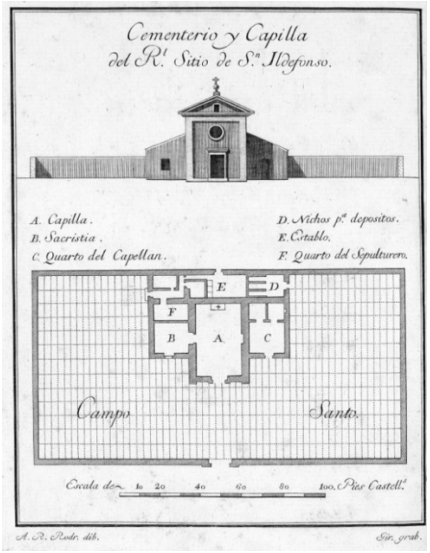


Figure 2: Proposed plan for the design of new general cemeteries. (Frontispiece, *Noticia del establecimiento,* 1787).

[5] For discussions of some of the regional variations in the construction of new general cemeteries, see Bermejo Lorenzo (1998), Legacey (2019), Malone (2017), Reis (2003), Rugg (2015), and Voekel (2002).

In 1804, Carlos IV issued a new edict to address the failure of his father's burial reforms. It again prohibited interments in churches and ordered the construction of general cemeteries. The edict also contained a design plan upon which municipalities could model their new burial grounds. For the first time, the Spanish state made its vision of a monumental cemetery clear. It included practical elements such as a sturdy fence, grand entrance, geometric grid divided by roads, and management buildings. The design also featured religious sites such as a sacristy, chapel, and ossuary.[6] Still, many cities failed to comply until 1813, when new legislation required compliance with existing laws within one month, including an absolute ban on church burial and the construction of hygienic cemeteries away from the population.[7]

In San Juan, officials had put off the construction of a new cemetery for decades. Each time Madrid issued new legislation, the municipal council found logistical reasons to justify the delay. The new edict ended this. However, it arrived in a moment of bitter conflict between civil and ecclesiastical officials. Governor Salvador Meléndez Bruna and Bishop Juan Alejo de Arizmendi were entangled in a power struggle over the extent of civil authority in ecclesiastical affairs. Burial reform was one arena where this larger struggle played out.[8] Although Arizmendi had previously supported construction of general cemeteries, he now publicly campaigned against their introduction to the island.[9] Meléndez and municipal authorities used the 1813 edict to exclude the bishop from the process.[10]

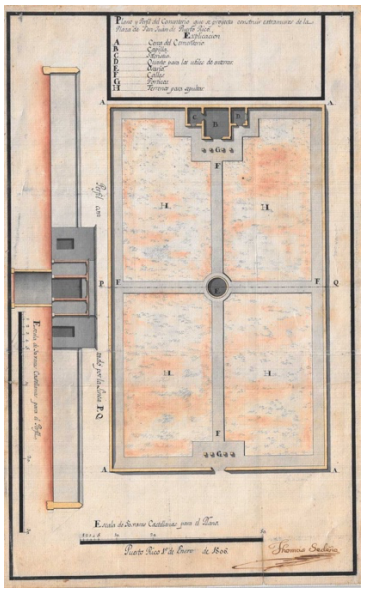


Figure 3: This 1806 design for the general cemetery planned for outside the walls of San Juan closely follows Charles IV 1804 ideal layout.[11]

[6] Carlos IV, Real Cedula, April 13, 1804, Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Indiferente 666ª, Real Cedulas, Orden, y Circular 1800–1805; "Plano de los cementerios y capillas que pueden establecerse en los extremos de las poblaciones," 1804, Archivo Histórico Nacional (AHN), Sección de Ultramar (U), leg. MPD3424.
[7] Real Orden, November 1, 1813, AGPR, Records of the Spanish Governors (SG), leg. 10, exp. 8-A.
[8] On the conflict between Meléndez and Arizmendi, see Rodríguez León & Alegria (2004).
[9] Arizmendi to Meléndez, July 30, 1810, AGPR, SG, caja 10, exp. 8-A.
[10] José Batlle Espina to city council, July 18, 1813, AGI, Gobierno (G), Santo Domingo (SD), 2416; Antonio de Vegas to city council, October 19, 1813, AGPR, SG, leg. 10, exp. 8-A; Correspondence between Meléndez and Arizmendi, 1813-1814, AGI, G, SD, 2416.
[11] Thomas Sedeño, "Plano y Perfil del Cementerio que se proyecta construir extramuros de la Plaza de San Juan," January 1, 1806, AGPR, Mapoteca, gaveta 26, plano número 557.

The council moved ahead with the project. They were well-versed in the ideal cemeteries imagined by officials in Madrid. Indeed, multiple architectural plans show how city officials envisioned a local iteration of the imperial design. These plans replicate the design sent in Carlos IV's cedula of 1804.[12] It is a design showing the suggested location of this cemetery that is of note. It centrally features the "permanent" cemetery; however, in the bottom right corner a small line denotes a "provisional" site.[13] The geometric layout of the permanent was never built, instead, the temporary site—irregularly shaped to fit the available space—was opened for use.

The council constructed a provisional cemetery in the shadow of the Castillo San Felipe del Morro, high on the cliffs overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Situated on a narrow strip of land, the site was bordered on one side by the fortifications and on the other by the cliff face. This cemetery was little more than a simple wooden fence erected to enclose a rough field (Caro Costas, 1966, pp. 54–58).

Arizmendi deemed it unsuitable for Catholic burial. The space was insufficiently enclosed, exposing it to profanation. Wood from the fence was being stolen for firewood, and this compromised barricade allowed the incursion of dogs and animals from nearby slaughterhouses. Unchecked, these animals would desecrate the newly buried and carry off the bones of the dead. The bishop refused to bless the site until these issues were resolved.[14] Intent on getting the cemetery opened, the town council made concessions after contentious negotiations with the diocese. Councilmembers made enough improvements to meet the legal requirements and demanded that the diocese, "*en nombre de la ley,*" set the benediction date within three days.[15] While church officials complied, neither the bishop nor high-ranking members of his administration attended the ceremony.[16]

Having lost the battle over cemetery construction, Bishop Arizmendi continued to publicly criticize the new burial ground. His letter to all the island's parish priests emphasized the need for sacral infrastructure to preserve the spiritual benefits of prayers and masses. He insisted on a chapel and altar suitable for Catholic rites.[17] In response, the council commissioned a plan for the division of space within the provisional site.[18] In it, a chapel was prominently located and encircled by a small plaza. The plan also imposed a grid inside the uneven footprint of the cemetery. Religious, civil, military, and social distinctions were recognized in the most prominent section, closest to the chapel. A wall divided this from the much larger section that extended to the cliffs, designated simply for "*panteones para el pueblo.*"[19] The council aimed to imbue the site with respectability by promising to incorporate key elements of monumental cemetery design, although this plan was never put into action. What this initial period of construction shows is the distance between an

[12] Ignacio Mascaró, "Plano de los cementerios y capillas que pueden establecerse en los extramuros de las poblaciones," May 31, 1814, AGI, SD, Mapas y Planos (MP) 709; Ignacio Mascaró, "Plano y perfil del cementerio que se proyecta construir extramuros de la Plaza de San Juan de Puerto Rico," May 31, 1814, AGI, SD, MP 707.

[13] "Plano y perfiles en que se manifiesta el pie de la muralla desde el ángulo flanqueado del baluarte de Santo Domingo hasta el de San Antonio," May 31, 1814, AGI, SD, MP 708.

[14] Bishop Arizmendi to Governor Meléndez, May 18, 1814, AGI, SD, 2416.

[15] Correspondence between Provisor and Vicar General Gutiérrez del Arroyo and the city council, April-May 1814; Gutiérrez del Arroyo to Governor Meléndez, May 25, 1814, AGI, SD, 2416.

[16] May 27, 1814, Archivo Histórico de la Arquidiócesis de San Juan (AHA), Archivo Parroquial Nuestra Señora de los Remedios (APNSR), Libro 21 de entierros, 1812-1815; Acta de bendición, May 27, 1814, AGPR, Sección de planos, E15, 220.

[17] Bishop Arizmendi to parishes, May 24, 1814, AHA, APNSR, Disciplinar, caja 116.

[18] Governor Meléndez to city council, June 22, 1814, AGPR, MSJ, leg. 96-P1, exp. 1.

[19] Ignacio Mascaró to city council and Governor Meléndez, June 21, 1814, AGPR, MSJ, leg. 96-P1, exp. 1.

ideal and the built space, as local realities take precedence over abstract conceptions of space.

Informality and the Ephemeral | Reforms of the 1850s

After I finally located the cemetery, it became my habit to spend time there. Some afternoons I spent photographing and documenting features and locations uncovered in my archival research. Other days passed in solitary observation, experiencing the burial ground as both a natural and social space. The ocean breakers on the cliffs below blanket the site with a dull roar, contributing to a sense of isolation. Indeed, a constant sea wind blows through the site, causing even the hottest summer afternoon to feel manageable. While no livestock or dogs roamed—a very 19th-century concern—I befriended at least three cats living on the grounds. More than once I rounded the corner of a crumbling tomb and came face to face with an alarmingly large (to my eyes) iguana. The cemetery teemed with critters, sharing space with the living and the dead.



Figure 4: The children's tree, festooned with toys, lies near the entrance of the cemetery. Photograph from author's personal collection, 2017.

Living individuals occupied the site in various ways. Tourists quickly passed through, photographing marble angels and the central chapel as they went. Families seemed to occupy a different plane: moving slowly and spending time. An older woman, shaded by an umbrella, directed younger companions in cleaning a grave and replacing withered flower arrangements. Myriad markers of memorial practice filled the burial ground. Over the years, every inch of space has been claimed for burials, leaving a concrete and marble necropolis largely devoid of trees. An exception is the haunting *árbol de los niños* (the children's tree), decorated yearly with brightly colored toys, though official records provide little information. All of these things contribute to the character of the cemetery today, yet few are documented. This case study explores how intangibles of practice informed and shaped the material site in the mid-nineteenth century.

This section is centered on the reforms of the 1850s within San Juan's cemetery. Here I reveal the intricate dynamics between informal burial practices, material elements of the cemetery, and the conceptualization of space. In mapping the evolving landscape of San Juan's cemetery, I uncover how individual actions and official responses shaped the cemetery's development. Through new record-keeping practices, oversight, and the introduction of new burial infrastructure, I trace the municipality's efforts to address the challenges posed by informal practices and economic disparities while reshaping the cemetery's material and spatial dimensions. This case study serves as a testament to the

effectiveness of my interdisciplinary approach in unraveling the complexities of cemetery transformation and the multifaceted interplay between practice, materiality, and space.

The San Juan burial ground constructed in 1814 was never intended to last. Although the diocese negotiated improvements, the provisional cemetery remained little more than a neglected, asymmetrical field enclosed with a simple masonry fence. Complaints to Madrid recounted a litany of shortcomings: dogs exhumed and desecrated the graves; nearby slaughterhouses contaminated the air; and during storms, bodies washed into the ocean.[20] Civil authorities faced the "passive resistance" of the clergy and general population towards the space for decades (López de Victoria, 1998, p. 92). When conditions became too decrepit to be ignored, councilors approved several improvement projects. Initiatives in the 1840s included fortifying the walls, gates, and access road, as well as introducing religious elements like an ossuary and a wooden chapel, which also served as a *depósito* (holding area for bodies). A stone autopsy suite was proposed, driven by concerns over public health. These undertakings, while addressing immediate needs, were marked by their ad-hoc nature. While this generated an abundance of textual records in the archive, few material traces persist from this period.[21] The construction materials proved inadequate for the harsh coastal environment, demonstrating the liminal nature of the cemetery's development. It transitioned from a provisional space to one with more enduring features through a series of pragmatic, rather than planned, interventions.[22]

The additions of the 1840s were driven by necessity. However, once officials started paying attention, they discovered disturbing disorders and abuses. Officials on site during infrastructure work in 1842 observed illegal burial practices. For a price, "a couple of men" were extracting remains from tombs early in order to inter new bodies. The grave's contents, including the remains, clothes, and grave goods, were discarded in the dirt.[23] In the absence of infrastructure and oversight, an informal burial economy emerged. This illegal use of space led to the addition of formal elements in the general cemetery.

The council appointed a series of *celadors* (overseers) with a mandate to stop the "disorders and abuses" that had come to light.[24] Among other things, these overseers began tracking all income and expenses of the site; these were the first systematic cemetery records.[25] Over time, this careful record-keeping raised questions about the site's fiscal realities. The council felt the cemetery should generate income; instead, year after year, it failed to cover upkeep costs. Councilors became suspicious that, once again, illegal use of space was defrauding the municipality of the money needed to pay for much-needed repairs and construction work in the cemetery.[26]

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[20] For examples of petitions sent to Madrid between 1816 and 1840, see: AGI, SD, leg. 500, exp. 963, 965; leg. 503, exp. 536, 537, 540-542; leg. 2524, exp. 1041; AGI, U, leg. 500, exp. 9516-9518; AHN, U, leg. 2005;

[21] Starting in 1840, the debates around costs, logistics, and design for each of these projects can be traced in the archival record. The municipality's records, specifically the collections Sanidad, Obras Públicas (OP), and Cementerios, all include aspects of the process.

[22] City Council, 1853, AGPR, MSJ, S, leg. 131, P1, exp. 21.

[23] They were extracting bodies before the two-year legal burial period had passed. This two-year window was, according to the medical standards on this date, the minimum time required for the safe decomposition of the flesh. City council, September 18, 1842, AGPR, OP, leg. 62-D, exp. 3.

[24] Correspondence between Joaquín de Negra and Governor Santiago Méndez de Vigo, September 18-20, 1842, AGPR, OP, leg. 62-D, exp. 3.

[25] City council, August 12, 1846, AGPR, MSJ, leg. 96 P1, exp. 1-B; Burial records, 1846-1849, AGPR, MSJ, S, leg. 131 P1, exp. 14-18.

[26] City council, January 9, 1855, AGPR, MSJ, S, leg. 131 P1, exp. 35.

Suspicions were confirmed when Antonio Fernández became overseer in March 1849. Most of the burials in the cemetery were inground, unmarked, and, for the city's poorest inhabitants, in common graves. Affluent families could establish private tombs by paying for the right to use the land on which they were built. Annual fees were required to maintain this privilege. Each tomb was intended for a single burial at a time, with a fee of two pesos for a two-year interment. Subsequent burials required payment of the same fee to the overseer. When Fernández compiled an inventory of the tombs, he found records for only one hundred and sixty of the roughly five hundred in existence. He noted that many families had paid the initial fee but did not keep up with subsequent payments.[27] Although these violations were widespread, they were minor compared to the black-market rental business that came to light.

In the absence of options for burial in the cemetery, an illicit system was being managed by individuals who had acquired rights to multiple tombs. A large and wealthy family might legitimately need two plots, but even the sizeable Dominican order only owned three. Fernández's investigations revealed that at least seven individuals owned four or more tombs. Pablo Abadía, Eulogio Abadía, Luis Guiara, and Teodora Pardo each owned more than ten. The Abadía family alone owned forty-eight, which accounted for roughly ten percent of the cemetery's total.[28] Not only had these individuals acquired multiple plots, but they also built multitiered pantheons on each and charged "excessive" rents for their use. The council found that these businessmen were stealing fees that families should pay to the cemetery, illegally diverting the much-needed funds required for ongoing construction and repair work.

Councilors took decisive steps to eliminate these abuses by confiscating all pantheons in 1855 and requiring families to provide proof that they were up to date on payments.[29] While this established a municipal monopoly on burial, it did not solve the lack of options that had created the demand in the first place. Therefore, the council turned to the construction of a new style of rental site: niches. These sturdy and efficient tombs promised to generate income that the council could use to pay for cemetery upkeep while elevating the overall appearance of the space, and an initial order of fifty niches was placed.[30] Building this new infrastructure in an active cemetery proved challenging. Existing burials made it impossible to implement the new design uniformly, as occupied graves needed to remain intact until the two-year minimum interment period passed. In one case, a new site needed to be found when undocumented burials were discovered in the land allotted for niches.[31] In another, uneven terrain made the generic design unfeasible and required expensive support walls be added for stability.[32] Despite setbacks, the municipality continued to order small groups of niches. The result was a haphazard mix of old construction, scattered niches, and generally chaotic use of land. This would prove to be only a temporary fix.

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[27] Antonio Fernández, *Matricula de panteones*, December 31, 1853, AGPR, MSJ, S, leg. 131 P1, exp. 22.
[28] Ibid.
[29] City council, January 9, 1855, AGPR, MSJ, S, leg. 131 P1, exp. 24.
[30] City council, October 10, 1855; Manuel Sicardó, October 10, 1855; Correspondence between city council and *Junta de Subastas,* October 30-December 31, 1855; City council to Manuel Sicardó, February 20, 1855; AGPR, MSJ, S, leg. 131 P1, exp. 24.
[31] Julian Pagani to city council, May 30 and August 1, 1856, AGPR, MSJ, S, leg. 131 P1, exp. 24.
[32] Manuel Sicardó to city council, May 5, 1856; Médicos titulares de la ciudad to city council, May 30-August 13, 1856, AGPR, MSJ, S, leg. 131 P1, exp. 24.

The Monumental and Ephemeral as Memorial Practice: The 1860s Reforms

Archival labor, grimy and physically taxing, can also be mind-numbingly tedious. To counter the monotony, I often walk the cities where I research. After working in the ecclesiastical archive in San Juan, I would pass through the old harbor gates and follow the path around the promontory of the islet. With the waves of the Atlantic on one side and towering defensive walls on the other, my companions were a colony of feral cats and my thoughts. Where the main path ends, a dirt trail leads up into the brush and, eventually, to the cliffs outside of the cemetery walls. Here, the gritty infrastructure of the site, the residue of old construction, broken urns, and shattered statuary offered a different perspective on the site. Indeed, I spent countless hours examining the cemetery from all angles. Often, I would attempt to track down the projects so urgently discussed in my records. The cemetery staff became my collaborators, shifting from puzzled curiosity about the odd Canadian spending so much time in the burial ground to enthusiastic guides and informants. Their stories, from divots in the walls caused by cannon fire to the oldest extant tomb, brought this space of death to life. It was not unusual for us to compare notes: contrasting the musty records of the past with the oral history of those who kept the space in modern times. This final section explores the reforms of the 1860s, marking the pivotal period that, for the first time, introduced the material and practical components still recognizable in the present-day cemetery.

In this case study, I examine the 1860s cemetery reforms, focusing on the changing perception of monumental elements. This period reflects the intersection of three space conceptions: "ideal space" representing municipal authorities' vision, "material space" defined by physical elements, and "ephemeral space" characterized by evolving burial practices. I unravel the nuances surrounding the transformation of the cemetery from a disreputable site to a place worthy of a "cultured and Christian" city. Municipal authorities, driven by urbanization and aspirations of the urban elite, undertook a phased project to modernize the cemetery. The deliberate use of material elements, changing cultural practices, and historical context culminated in the codification of the cemetery as a symbol of respectability. This section provides insight into the coexistence of harmonized forms of space, where the ephemeral, material, and ideal converge to shape the cemetery's transformation into a testament of social progress and cultural refinement.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Puerto Rican society was in transition. A growing urban elite of civically engaged businessmen, professionals, and merchants in San Juan was intent on advancing social changes that benefitted their class. Its members obtained positions on municipal councils that shaped the structures of daily life in the city. From these posts, they guided projects to modernize the city, transforming its architecture and spatial composition. This emergent middling class, acting through increasingly important institutions of municipal leadership, played a role in determining what—and who—was socially acceptable (Martínez Vergne, 1999, pp. 1–91; Matos Rodríguez, 1999, pp. 36–58). The monumental and ephemeral intersected to shape new material forms and practices in response to the evolving social hierarchy in the city.

By mid-century, officials in San Juan turned a critical eye on the space of burial. For fifty years, critics had complained that the cemetery space was in appalling condition. Now, the wooden chapel was disintegrating in the heavy salt spray, the road was treacherous, and the land inside uneven and unstable. The chaotic arrangement of niches and pantheons added to the disreputable atmosphere. The allegation that bodies washed into the sea

during storms again circulated in the city.[33] The conditions in the cemetery did not reflect the council's vision of a modern San Juan. Councilors embarked on a multi-phase project to improve conditions in the site, transforming it into one worthy of a "cultured and Christian" city.[34]

The first phase of the project completed much-needed work to construct walls, reinforce the land, and install drainage.[35] This was in line with previous municipal priorities: infrastructure and sanitation. In the second phase more prestigious elements were added. A large chapel in white concrete was built in a round central plaza. Interior roads intersecting at the chapel were laid out, and the street from the city to the cemetery repaired. Finally, a monumental gate was installed.[36] All of these were intended to add gravitas to the space, incorporating monumental components that had previously been overlooked.

The act of implementing a new cemetery design entailed the destruction of what had existed before, with old tombs and niches razed. This demolition paved the way for a new spatial arrangement, establishing the long-discussed hierarchy. The spatial reforms introduced a hierarchy, incorporating marble mausoleums for civil and ecclesiastical authorities, orderly banks of niches, and designated areas for family tombs.[37] Families and *cofradias* proving ownership were allocated space in the new system.[38] The city council controlled the remaining space, including an epidemic section, a "*campo de las fosas*" (area for inground burial), and 670 remaining niches.[39] This transformation represented a significant expenditure in San Juan's cemetery, aligning with the councilors' broader agenda of modernizing the city's urban landscape.

These new burial options coincided with evolving memorialization practices, shaping the significance of burial places. General cemeteries led to an increase in exhumations and relocations, reflecting shifts in family memorial practices linked to 19th-century national identity politics. Ties to a place were personal and linked to individual and family histories, with family pantheons becoming more popular. Family memorials symbolized kinship rooted in native soil, prompting efforts to repatriate the deceased (Pérez, 2005, pp. 66–71; Aramburu y Machado, 1901, p. 115). Permanence and transience played vital roles in the new material and ritual aspects of memorialization.

[33] Various cases and conflicts over these issues can be seen in: 1863-65, AGPR, OP, leg. 62, Caja 323; 1862-1863, AGPR, MSJ, leg. 131, P1, exp. 21.
[34] This phrase is used in documents discussing the proposed reform project, 1862, AGPR, OP, Caja 323, leg. 62D, exp. 4.
[35] The situation led to legal cases that continued from 1863 and 1880. AHNC, GG, leg. 344, exp. 16674.3; AGPR, MSJ, leg. 96 P1, exps. 1, 4; AGPR, OP, leg. 62-D, exps. 8, 8-3; AHN, U, leg. 379, exp. 14-16.
[36] 1862, AGPR, OP, leg. 62-D, exp. 4; 1863, AGPR, MSJ, leg. 96, P1, exps. 3, 3-A.
[37] December 20, 1862, AGPR, MSJ, leg. 96 P1, exp. 1.
[38] Cofradías were Catholic lay organizations that originated in medieval Spain. Individual cofradía were devoted to patron Saints or religious figures, and members came together to practice acts of piety and good works. Popular in colonial Latin America, they also served as mutual aid societies for different social and racial groups.
[39] October-November 1862, AGPR, MSJ, leg. 96 P1, exp. 1.



Figure 5: Photograph, features family mausoleums as well as crosses and markers for in-ground burials. *Bird's-eye view of the cemetery outside the city wall, San Juan, Puerto Rico*, (ca 1880).



Figure 6: General cemetery from same angle. Photograph from author's personal collection, 2017.

Among the elite, international relocation of deceased kin occurred.[40] In Puerto Rico, middle-class families increasingly moved bodies between cities or within a single cemetery.[41] Local-level exhumations and relocations became standard, leading the Ministerio de Gobernación to establish rules for a minimum two-year interment and medical certification for safe exhumations (Martínez Alcubilla, 1892, pp. 427–48). Large-scale exhumations became common due to space shortages.[42] In 1851, Spain issued guidelines to control exhumations, prohibiting mass exhumations and extending the minimum interment to five years (Martínez Alcubilla, 1892, pp. 429–430).

The transition from a two-year to a five-year burial period presented a logistical challenge for San Juan officials. Anticipating the cemetery would run out of space within a year, the city council collaborated with the governor to address short- and long-term challenges.[43]

[40] In this period, international moves were more common in the wealthier port city of Havana, Cuba. Based on 223 petitions to exhume and transfer bodies to and from Havana, Cuba and San Juan, Puerto Rico between 1853 and 1897 held in the AGI, AHN, AGPR, and the AHNC.

[41] For petitions relating to private exhumations in Puerto Rico between 1867 and 1896, see AGPR, MSJ, S, C, 131 P1, 131 P2, 131 P3, 131-A, 132 P1, 132 P2, 133-A, 133-B, and 133-C.

[42] In the churchyard system these mass exhumations, performed to reclaim burial space, were known as *las mondas de los huesos*. Spanish legislators utilize this term when formulating the new regulations. The new rules allowed for cemetery-wide exhumations, a practice in which multiple exhumations were performed at a time. However, each individual exhumation had to be documented and certified as safe.

[43] May 8, 1866, AGPR, MSJ, S, C, leg. 131 P1, exp. 33.

The immediate task involved modifying existing leases from a two- to a five-year term. Families, friends, or representatives were given a two-month grace period to renew for three additional years or arrange private tomb transfers. Failure to comply would result in the council exhuming bones and burying them in a common trench.[44]

Families responded based on social and economic situations. Some simply could not afford the new costs. Carmen del Toro explained that her extreme poverty made it impossible for her to extend the lease on her late husband's niche.[45] Others who lacked the resources had friends willing to assist. While Doña Asunción Ramírez del Gragirena did not have the funds, Don José Caldas gave her permission to transfer her husband's remains to the Caldas family pantheon.[46] Some families chose existing family crypts or seized the opportunity to purchase land for new tombs. However, the most common response was no response at all. At the grace period's end, the governor authorized the council to begin exhumations, initiating the first general exhumation on August 8th, 1867.[47] Combined, the reforms in space and practice introduced an array of both permanent and limited tenure options to the public.

Place and permanence became the markers of status in the cemetery. Varied memorialization practices, incorporating monumental and ephemeral material culture and memorial practices, emerged in this new system. While there was no expectation that the individual burial would be permanent, these monuments symbolized family wealth and status. The competition for preferential burial plots laid the foundation for a developing real estate business. Wealthy families began purchasing—and selling—land in the cemetery. In 1866, Don Luis Rengal applied to purchase land for a mausoleum for his siblings and himself. Rengal noted that numerous kin were already buried in the cemetery; he wanted to transfer them all to this new family mausoleum.[48] In 1867, Don Eusebio Hernández petitioned to sell a pantheon he inherited, as his family already owned one in the burial ground.[49] These real estate transactions would become more frequent as time went on.

For the middling classes aspiring to showcase prestige in death without the exorbitant price tag, niches were the preferred choice. A perpetual niche had a high initial investment, but low ongoing costs.[50] Despite this, any form of perpetual site was cost-prohibitive. Renting temporary space was the prevalent practice, with costs ranging from twenty-five to seventy-five pesos based on the niche's proximity to the cemetery center. A limited number of niches at the chapel base were available to rent for one hundred and fifty pesos each. Location was not the only component that took on significance in memorial practice. While cemetery regulations dictated that all the niches would be the same in their construction, families were permitted to install an engraved marker for the duration of the

[44] *La Gazeta de Puerto Rico,* November 27, 1866, Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, Library of Congress, 4; Civil Governor to San Juan city council, May 21, 1867; Public replies regarding renewals, May 8-May 29, 1867, AGPR, MSJ, S, C, leg. 131 P1, exp. 33.
[45] Carmen de Toro to Corregimiento de San Juan, May 29, 1867, AGPR, MSJ, S, C, leg. 131 P1, exp. 33.
[46] Doña Asunción Ramírez del Gragirena to Corregimiento de San Juan, May 1867, AGPR, MSJ, S, C, leg. 131 P1, exp. 33.
[47] Governor Superior Civil to city council, May 21, 1867, AGPR, MSJ, S, C, leg. 131 P1, exp. 33.
[48] Don Luis Rengal to municipal authorities, 1866, AGPR, MSJ, S, leg. 131 P1, exp. 38.
[49] Don Eusebio Hernández to municipal authorities, 1867, AGPR, MSJ, S, leg. 131 P1, exp. 42.
[50] Reglamentos, Capitulo 3ª, 1869, AGPR, MSJ, S, C, leg. 131 P1, exp. 49.

rental period. Within a decade, it became customary to petition to install marble plaques to mark the location of the deceased.[51]

For every burial in a niche or mausoleum, four took place in the ground.[52] For those who used in-ground burial, a new tradition emerged. These families petitioned to erect markers on the site of the burial, often wooden crosses or simple stone markers. A second, related request was to build a fence encircling the grave. Permission came with the requirement that the marker and fencing be removed entirely at the end of the rental period.

Conclusion

My interdisciplinary methodology, which draws on practice theory, material rhetoric, and historical analysis, has proven to be an invaluable tool in unraveling the complexities of burial practices and memorialization within the context of San Juan's cemetery during the nineteenth century. By applying these lenses, I have gained a multifaceted understanding of how societal transitions, local conditions, and evolving cultural norms intersected to shape the cemetery's physical and symbolic landscapes. This methodology allowed me to move beyond a simple examination of historical events and instead delve into the underlying practices, material elements, and rhetorical devices that influenced the meaning-making process of the time.

Furthermore, my exploration of the different conceptions of space within the cemetery not only illuminated the multifaceted generation and contestation of meaning during this historical period but also significantly enriched my engagement with archival and material sources. By attentively considering the ideal, material, and ephemeral space, I was able to approach the diverse array of historical documents, physical artifacts, and spatial layouts with a more nuanced perspective. This approach facilitated a more productive analysis of the archival records, as it enabled me to discern how these various spatial conceptions influenced the documentation and material traces left behind. These varied conceptions of space provided a rich framework for comprehending the intricate layers of meaning embedded within the cemetery's historical context. It allowed me to unravel the complexities of burial practices, memorialization, and the evolving landscape of San Juan's cemetery in a holistic and comprehensive manner, thereby contributing to a more profound understanding of this historical moment.

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[51] For examples of petitions to erect *lápidas* on rental niches, see AGPR, MSJ, S, C, 131 A; 131 P2; 131 P3; 133; AGPR, MSJ, 96 P2.

[52] Reglamentos, Capitulo 1º, 2º, and 4ª, 1869, AGPR, MSJ, S, C, leg. 131 P1, exp. 49; Partidas de enterramientos, libro 1, 1871-1873; De nichos y panteones, libro 1, 1871-1878, AGPR, MSJ, S, C, caja 147; Pagos de panteones del cementerio de la capital, 1877, AGPR, MSJ, S, C, leg. 131 P1, exp. 49.

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