

Mayor Cooper - memo  
Pls. Have someone add  
this info to appropriate  
city file. Thanks.

Sharon Nunez

History of the Wilson Cemetery tract

The 10-acre site in north Covington that eventually became the Wilson Cemetery and Garden of the Pines Mausoleum was part of a swath of vacant and truck farming lands until the early twentieth century. The cemetery tract is less than two miles north of the center of Covington. The town, which dates from about 1810 and was incorporated in 1813, grew steadily through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite its proximity to the center of the largest town in St. Tammany Parish, the area north of town around Columbia Road (a major Covington artery from its earliest days) was not a desirable area. It was low-lying and prone to flooding from Mile Branch, the eventual northern boundary of the cemetery (Goodwin 1996:44).

The ownership of the land during French, British, and Spanish colonial eras has not been established. After the Florida parishes were taken over by the United States in 1810, American administrators set about integrating the Louisiana land ownership procedures and regulations into the U.S. land legal framework. Louisiana land, like all newly acquired territories after 1795, was surveyed into township and range grids, the system that replaced the confusing metes and bounds definitions of the original 13 states. However, in Louisiana, the township-range formation had to be adapted to the numerous colonial land titles already extant. To solve this problem, the General Land Office instituted a policy of placing the parcels of existing land titles over the township-range grid. Each township-range block was divided into the prescribed 36 sections but they were sometimes rearranged to accommodate the usually odd shaped arpent parcels and tracts of pre-U.S. era landowners. The landscape of St. Tammany Parish was typical of how this system was implemented in Louisiana. The Township 6 South, Range 11 East quadrant encompasses Old Covington (the core of the town as it existed prior to the twentieth century) and the site of the future Wilson Cemetery. The quad has 45 sections instead of 36. The pre-American sections (sometimes called "headrights") ranged in size from 27.5 acres to 923.5 acres and a few contained the standard 640 acres of township-range sections. Unsurprisingly, these early land claims took up most of the prime land in the area, concentrated along the Bogue Falaya River and Columbia Landing, which became the nucleus of Covington. One of the oversized sections, No. 41, was claimed by the heirs of John Wharton Collins, the founder of Covington (which he named Whartonville). Section 38, which shared two boundary lines with Section 41, was the site of the future Wilson Cemetery.

On the first U.S. Land Office map of T6S R11E, 1828 (Figure 1, U.S. General Land Office), there are nine "private claims" parcels noted by the surveyor. These parcels were labeled with their owners' names. Section 38 was called the Massy-Baker tract. Its non-conforming shape was vaguely similar to an inverted "L." Section 38 contained 640 acres and ran in a southeast-northwest direction, beginning at the center of Old Covington and the Bogue Falaya. Its northernmost point was near modern-day Champagne Street, south of U.S. 190. The cemetery site was located in the extreme northeast corner of the Massy-Baker tract. The name, "Massy-Baker" became a fixed reference point in St. Tammany land records. Many parish deeds and legal land descriptions use Massy-Baker as a starting point for their provenance claims. The landmark status of the land tract did not confer any comparable notoriety to the Massy and Baker who were presumably the tract's owners. Records in the St. Tammany clerk's office do not specify any first names or other details about the owners. No other records consulted, including the U.S. Census, have yielded any further information about the identity of Massy (which is spelled several ways, including "Massey" and "Massie") or Baker (St. Tammany Parish Clerk's Office; U.S. Census 1810, 1820; Ellis 1981).

Land records in the St. Tammany Parish courthouse date from 1812 but an extensive search of the files did not yield another reference to the Wilson Cemetery site until 1901. This problem is possibly related to the various legal land descriptions given for the Wilson Cemetery. The cemetery's correct location is Section 38, Township 6 South, Range 11 East. Yet in the Town of Covington's documents given to owners of plots in the cemetery, it is listed as

Correct legal description

38-6-11

SD

\*  
incorrect  
documentation

Researched by  
Harriet Swift  
New Orleans (EARTH)

being "situated on Columbia Street, City of Covington, in Section 45, Township 7, Range 11E." Both section and township are incorrect. In *St. Tammany Parish Cemetery Records*, widely considered the bible of parish genealogical information, the Wilson Cemetery's township and range are listed accurately but the section is given incorrectly as 41 (Mayor's Office Cemetery Files; Powe & Holden 1977:7). That both an official municipal document and a usually reliable local history source are confused about the cemetery's legal location suggests that there might be a background of misinformation that would in part explain the difficulty in locating site's land records between 1828 and 1901.

The Wilson site is clearly marked on a 1901 map by surveyor F.M. Yates, *The Property of Mrs. Delano*. The map shows the northeast corner of Section 38 and portions of adjacent Sections 45 and 37 (St. Tammany Parish, Map File 180A) as belonging to Sarah H. Klinger Delano, a large landowner for several decades. Mrs. Delano was an unconventional land developer for the time. She was a Missouri-born widow who was an energetic land speculator, buying, selling, and developing land in and around Covington from the 1870s to her death in 1908. Apparently operating on her own without an office or a male associate, Mrs. Delano developed an area near the Bogue Falaya River into residential lots. In the 1890s she turned her attention the area north of Covington. She amassed 180 acres, located in a pie-shaped wedge between Holmesville Road (now Columbia) on the west and the Lee's Ferry Road (now absorbed into Highway 190) on the east (U.S. Census 1850, 1860, 1870, 1880, 1890, 1900; St. Tammany Clerk of Court records; *St. Tammany Farmer*).

This area, documented in the Yates map, became a subdivision known as the Connolly Addition, Number Two. The future Wilson cemetery is clearly shown on the map as a 10-acre parcel bounded by Mile Branch on the north and Holmesville Road on the west. In 1903 this parcel was sold by Mrs. Delano to S. M. Poole, a prominent Covington businessman. Poole was also active in land speculation but his primary business was Poole Brothers Livery and Sale Stable, which included a funeral home.

In June of 1903 Mrs. Delano sold two adjacent parcels of four and six acres to Poole. The sale was made in separate transactions on 19 June and 29 June. It is unclear why the sale was made in segments other than the first purchase of the four acres was a straight-forward cash exchange (Poole paid \$200) and the second sale for the six acres was to be paid in promissory notes (for a total of \$300). None of the paperwork indicates how Mrs. Delano obtained the land, a normal feature of most deeds (St. Tammany Clerk of Court COB A-3; 405-406, 417-419). The legal description of the land conveyed from Mrs. Delano to Poole is unmistakably the Wilson Cemetery site, despite some archaic references. The particulars of the first sale easily correlate to contemporary landmarks, such as the Holmesville (now Columbia) Road and the Mile Branch:

A certain tract of land situated in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana ... commencing at a post on East Side of Holmesville road & south of the Mile Branch from said post a black gum tree 9 inches in diameter bears North 15 degrees East distant 40 links, also a [illegible] tree 10 inches in diameter bears north 21 degrees West distance 55 links, Thence north 67 degrees, 30 degrees east 6 chains & 33 links to Stake in edge of Mile Branch. Thence S. 67 degrees 30 degrees W. 6 chains & 33 links to Stake on E. side of Holmesville road - 6 chains & 33 links to point of beginning containing four (4) acres all in the Massie Baker tract @ T. 6 South Range 11 East ... (St. Tammany Clerk of Court, COB A-3, 405).

The 10-acre parcel is shown on a 1906 map, *Second Connolly Addition to the Town of Covington, La.*, by surveyor Preston Herndon (St. Tammany Clerk of Court, Map File 196A). Commissioned by Mrs. Delano as a map of the subdivision's squares and streets. The tract is marked "Poole 10A" and is oddly contra posed to the new (since the 1901 map) layout of

streets and squares. The 10-acre rectangle is aligned with the angle of Columbia Road, while the residential squares are organized on a different axis, compatible with the other town squares. Consequently, the Poole parcel's southern boundary clips the top of Square 71 and shears the western side of Square 72, on the uppermost tier of the Connolly No. 2 grid. This situation adds to the mystery of the cemetery parcel. Mrs. Delano was contemplating the Connolly No. 2 addition as early as 1900-1901 but elected to sell the 10-acre parcel to Poole, even though it left her with two incomplete squares. In the 1906 map, the only structure shown among the 42 squares is a barn. It was on Square 72, about half a block from the southeast corner of the Poole parcel. Perhaps this was the Poole livery stable but the overall impression is that this area was uninhabited.

Other maps of Covington in the early twentieth century shed little light on the Wilson Cemetery development. The first Sanborn map of Covington, 1915, does not show the cemetery site. In subsequent maps, 1921 and 1927, the tract is shown but is labeled "St. Tammany Parish Fair Grounds." This is curious, as the cemetery was opened in 1919 and the city's other cemetery, Covington Cemetery No. 1, at the other end of Columbia Road, is clearly noted as such on all the Sanborn maps (Sanborn Maps, 1915, 1921, 1927). In 1906, the parcel was sold by Poole to Warren Thomas and W.A. Hood, both of St. Tammany Parish. An oddity of this sale is that Poole is referred to as "Samuel M. Poole." He is indubitably the same Poole who purchased the tract from Mrs. Delano but the question of his given names is not an isolated incident. In other references, both in legal papers and newspapers, he is variously referred to as "S.M. Poole," "C.M. Poole," "C. Marvin Poole" and other variations. Poole realized a nice profit on the transaction, selling the 10 acres he bought for \$500 for \$3,000. Ten years later, on 22 August 1916, Thomas and Hood sold the tract to brothers John A. Stanga and J.E. Stanga. The actual price paid for the 10 acres is obscure. The sale document reads, "This sale is made and accepted for and in consideration of the sum of \$8.50 cash in and paid by the purchaser, due receipt of which is hereby acknowledged by the vendors." The small price suggests that there were other arrangements made between the buyers and sellers that they preferred not to set down on paper. This was and is a common tactic in real estate transfers (St. Tammany Clerk of Court, COB 44, 593-594).

In 1919 the Stanga brothers sold to the tract to the city of Covington. The Stangas, who had been in the funeral home business with Poole at various times, proposed that the city buy the 10 acres specifically for a cemetery. The event was front page news in the *St. Tammany Farmer*:

Mr. Elliott Stanga and Mr. J.A. Stanga offer to sell the Town of Covington, La. the ten acre tract of land on Columbia street at Mile Branch, which is an ideal location and piece of property for the purpose, for the sum of \$1,000.

The ground has already been surveyed for a cemetery and could be quickly put in shape for use.

The Cemetery Committee proposes that the Town buy the ground by taking the amount necessary from the general fund, which can be replaced by the sale of lots.

A special drive could be made to sell the lots, and Mr. J.A. Stanga offers to undertake the sale of lots on a 10 per cent commission for the first \$500 worth, 20 per cent commission up to \$1,000, and 25 per cent above \$1,000. The commission to increase because after selling a number of lots the sales will be harder to make. He asks 90 days exclusive right to sell the lots, after which the sale will be open to other salesmen.

It was moved by H.A. Mackie, seconded by A.R. Smith, that the proposition offered by Messers. J.E. and J.A. Stanga be accepted, and that the Mayor be and is hereby authorized, empowered and instructed to purchase and

receive title from Messers. J.E. and J.A. Stanga to the property embraced in their offer and it is further resolved that he be empowered and instructed to do and perform any and all acts to sign all papers or deeds necessary and proper for the completion and consummation of said agreement of sale.

Carried.

It was moved by H.A. Mackie, seconded by C.H. Sheffield, that the money to be used in the payment of the purchase price of the land to be bought from Messers. J.E. and J.A. Stanga, for cemetery purposes, be taken from the special account dedicated for that purpose and that upon the sale of sufficient lots therein that the said sum of \$1,000 be replaced to the credit of the said special account.

Carried.

The newspaper article appears to be taken directly from the council's official minutes with the proposal written by J.E. Stanga incorporated into the text. Unfortunately, there is no discussion of why the town needed a second cemetery or why it was "an ideal location and piece of property for the purpose." On the surface, the tract's land value would seem to have declined from the high point of Poole's \$3,000 sale to Hood and Thomas. However, the real price paid by the Stangas cannot be ascertained from available sources and their sale price of \$1,000 to the town is easily recognized as a strategy to prime the pump for future profits from sales of burial plots (St. Tammany Clerk of Court, COB 77, 500-501).

Documentation of the Wilson Cemetery and its use and growth is sparse and inconclusive. A study of the City Council's ruling on cemeteries and its various cemetery committees might shed some light on the development but those records are not currently available to researchers (McKinnon interview). The name of the cemetery is a mystery. In early post-1919 references, it is referred to as "Covington Cemetery No. 2" and "the new cemetery." Oral tradition among many people in Covington holds that it was named for a Mr. Wilson who donated land for the cemetery. Marilyn Wilson Prat [correct spelling of Prat, one "T"] of Metairie, a granddaughter of Joseph Marvin Wilson said in a telephone interview that she had been told since her childhood that her grandfather had donated land for the cemetery and that he was buried there. While the donation story is flatly contradicted by the legal evidence, the Wilson story was given wide circulation in the *St. Tammany Parish Cemetery Record*. Co-author Doris Martin Holden reported in her section on the Wilson Cemetery and Garden of the Pines mausoleum that in 1977, caretaker Clifford Flot pointed out an unmarked vault and told her it was "the grave of the Mr. Wilson who donated land for the cemetery." Holden further added that "There is a black cemetery adjoining this one, and has not been included [recorded] here" and that caretaker Flot informed her that the cemetery originally covered the adjacent ballpark (Powe & Holden 1977:151). No documentation has been found that the cemetery existed before 1919 or that it extended further than the 10-acre tract it now covers. The oral tradition, supported by the discovery of a grave in the former playing fields in April 2008, points to an unofficial potters field that the town of Covington took over to maintain as an official burial ground in 1919 (Prat interview, Nufiez interview, McKinnon interview).

A useful path of research about the possibility of an unofficial burying ground in and around the current cemetery would be in the history and usage of land to the east of the 10-acre cemetery. Several sources suggest that much of it was owned by religious orders or individuals who could have maintained their own cemeteries and/or allowed indigents to be buried on their lands. The 1901 Yates map of Mrs. Delano's property indicates that the land immediately north of her boundary in Sections 37, 45, and 38 was 100 acres owned by a "Father Paul." In 1959, John A. Lloyd and Russell P. Morgan purchased a triangular lot that adjoined the cemetery (the cemetery's eastern line is part of the parcel's legal boundary description) from St. Scholastica Convent (St. Tammany Clerk of Court, COB 1084, 521). Other references, not fully explored, suggest that the convent owned quite a bit of land in the vicinity.

The cemetery is in the traditional African American neighborhood of Covington but the burials include both white people and African Americans. In Holden's record of the burials in Wilson Cemetery, the earliest date is 1924 but the vast majority are after 1950. A walk through of the cemetery in July 2008 confirmed that she only included gravesites on the south side of the cemetery and the mausoleum. Apparently, Holden considered the north side of the tract the "black cemetery adjoining this one." This does not seem to be an accurate reflection of the cemetery based on the 1913-1923 burials record book kept by the Covington city clerk. The book, now in the possession of the St. Tammany Clerk of Court's archival department and transcribed by archivist Robin Perkins, presents a different history of the Wilson cemetery. The book was used for all burial plot sales. Before 1919, the Covington Cemetery was the only cemetery operated by the city. After that date, entries are marked "old cemetery" or "new cemetery," to differentiate between Covington No. 1 and the new cemetery on North Columbia Road. Some entries have no information other than the plot buyer's name and price paid, but the majority of the 234 names listed have sufficient notes to determine the site of the plot purchased. "New cemetery" is denoted for 48 names, but of those only three are listed as "colored." None of the 48 names appear on Holden's 1977 list of internees in the Wilson Cemetery. This indicates that these first official burials were made on the north side of the tract, which has become known as the "colored" or "black" section. The 1913-1923 record book suggests that the majority of the 48 new cemetery burials were white people, making the "colored section" label a misnomer. Although only African American entries were tagged "colored," it is unlikely that the keeper of the burial plot book was less than vigilant in his or her notations of race. During the era of rigid racial segregation in the early twentieth century, race was an all-consuming issue for Louisianans, even in death (Burial record book, St. Tammany Clerk of Court).

As to the provenance of the Wilson name for the cemetery, more research is needed to determine how and when Covington No. 2 became the Wilson Cemetery. Some people familiar with Covington history and its cemeteries have said they recall hearing that the "Mr. Wilson" who donated land for the cemetery also helped people in need pay for burial expenses. It is not improbable that a person named Wilson made generous gifts to grieving families but it is improbable that the person was Joseph M. Wilson (1849-1914) as has been claimed. There is no documented connection Joseph M. Wilson to the cemetery other than oral tradition. In addition, Wilson, a farmer, died in 1914, five years before the cemetery was opened. His granddaughter recalled being told that the family was a large landowner in St. Tammany Parish, but land records do not confirm this. There are no clear records that Joseph Wilson owned land in the parish. There are records showing that his wife, Dora Voss Wilson, and two of their daughters, Laura Wilson Bahns Trosclair and Amy V. Wilson Trosclair, made several sales and purchases of land between 1906 and 1920 in Township 6 Range 11, but not in or near Section 38. It appears that the land trading was primarily an inter-family affair connected to the Voss farm of the wife's family, north of Covington in Section 5 (U.S. Census 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920; Prat interview; Nuñez-interview; St. Tammany Clerk of Court). A final aspect to the Joseph M. and Dora Voss Wilson family's putative ties to the Wilson Cemetery is the lack of their use of the burial ground for their own family members. Other than the caretaker's remarks to Doris Martin Holden in 1977, there is no documentation that the vault pointed out was for the Wilsons or that anyone named Wilson was buried in the cemetery in the first half of the twentieth century. Joseph M. Wilson's final resting place is not known, but his wife, Dora Voss Wilson, and at least one of their daughters and a son-in-law are buried in the Old Soldiers Cemetery off Highway 21 (sometimes called the Garden District Cemetery). Numerous members of the Voss family are also interred there (Powe & Holden 1977:144-149).

In 1959, the Garden of Pines mausoleum was added to the Wilson Cemetery. The town of Covington continues to maintain and administer the site.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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1981 *St. Tammany Parish: l'autre côte du lac*. Pelican Books, New Orleans.

Goodwin, R. Christopher and Associates

1996 *Cultural Resources Survey and Testing of the Mile Branch Channel Improvements, Covington, St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana*. Prepared for the U.S. Corps of Engineers, New Orleans.

Powe, Dolores Butler and Doris Martin Holden

1977 *Saint Tammany Parish Cemetery Records*, privately printed, Covington, Louisiana.

*St. Tammany Farmer*

1919 Town Buys New Cemetery, A Ten Acre Tract. *St. Tammany Farmer*, 6 September: Page 1, Covington, Louisiana

### **Archival Sources**

Clerk of Court files

St. Tammany Parish Courthouse, Covington, Louisiana

Covington cemeteries history files

Mayor's Office, Covington, Louisiana

*St. Tammany Farmer* newspaper

1914-1920

### **U.S. Census**

1800 Second Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.

1810 Third Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.

- 1820 Fourth Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.
- 1830 Fifth Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.
- 1840 Sixth Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.
- 1850 Seventh Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.
- 1860 Eighth Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.
- 1870 Ninth Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.
- 1880 Tenth Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.
- 1890 Eleventh Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.
- 1900 Twelfth Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.
- 1910 Thirteenth Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.
- 1920 Fourteenth Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.
- 1930 Fifteenth Census of the United States. Bureau of the Census, Washington, D.C.

## **Maps**

Herndon, Preston

1906 *Second Connolly Addition to the Town of Covington, La.* Map File 196A, St. Tammany Parish Clerk of Court, Covington, Louisiana.

Sanborn Map Company

1915 *Covington, St. Tammany Parish, Including Ramsay.* Sanborn Map Company, New York.

Sanborn Map Company

1921 *Covington, St. Tammany Parish, Including Ramsay.* Sanborn Map Company, New York.

Sanborn Map Company

1927 *Covington, St. Tammany Parish, Including Ramsay.* Sanborn Map Company, New York.

Schultz, O. P.

1946 *Map Showing Survey of Cemetery in Section 38-T-6-S-R-11-E* Map of Wilson Cemetery-Garden of the Pines, File 03338, St. Tammany Clerk of Court files, Covington, Louisiana

Turner, James P.

1828 *Township 6 South, Range 11 E, Greensburg District, Louisiana.* Original U.S. plat map, Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records.

Yates, F.M.

1901 *The Property of Mrs. Delano.* Map File 180A, St. Tammany Parish Clerk of Court, Covington, Louisiana.

## **INTERVIEWS**

22 July 2008

Prat, Marilyn Wilson

Granddaughter of Joseph Marvin Wilson

31 July 2008

Núñez, Sharon Snider

NRHP Task Force, Friends of Covington Cemetery



**19 August 2008**  
**McKinnon, Diana**  
**Clerk to City Council, Covington, Louisiana**

(9)

JOHN ADAM STANGA

EDITH JOSEPH ELLIOT STANGA

TO

TOWN OF COVINGTON

Notarial act before James Monroe  
Simmons, St. Tam. Psh. N.P.

Dated: Aug. 26, 1919

Filed: Aug. 27, 1919

Rec: Sept. 1, 1919

Rec: COB 75, folio 546

Consid: \$1,000.00 cash

Warranty, subs. & subr

DESCRIPTION

All that certain piece of land lying and being situated in the Parish of St. Tammany, La. and described as being bounded by fractional square No. 71 on south of the Hennelly Addition to the Town of Covington, on the West by the Hehesville Road; on the North by the Mile Branch and on the East by the properties now belonging to the Sisters of St. Benedict, at Covington, and St. Joseph's Abbey, of St. Benedict, La., both religious corporation domiciled in this parish and State, and being more fully described in primordial titles, recorded in COB 44, fol. 593, of the records of this Parish, and for greater certainty herein described as follows, to-wit:

A certain tract of land situated in St. Tammany Parish, La., designated and described as commencing at a post on East side of Holmesville Road and South of Mile Branch, from said post a black gum tree 9 inches in deameter, bears N. 15 degs. East, distant 40 links, also a gum tree 10 inches in diameter, bears North 21 degs. West, distance 55 links. Thence North 67 degs. 30 minutes East, 6 chains and 33 links to stake in edge of Mile Branch; thence South 30 degs. East 6 chains and 33 links to a stake. Thence South 67 degs. 30 minutes West 6 chains 33 links to stake on East side of Holmesville Road; thence North 30 degs. West along said Holmesville Road 6 chains and 33 links to point of beginning, containing four acres, all in Massie Baker tract Township 6, S.R. 11 E.,

Also, a certain tract of land in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana, described as commencing at a stake on east side of Holmesville Road which is the South West corner of the above land; thence South 30 degs. East along said Holmesville road 9 chains and 49' links to stake; thence North 67 degs. 30 minutes East, 6 chains and 33 links to stake never barn; thence north 30 degs. West 9 chains and 49' links to stake which is south east corner of land surveyed for vendor herein; thence south 67 degs. 30 minutes East to point of beginning, containing six acres, also in the Massie Baker tract in Tp. 6, S.R. 11E.