Abandoned cemeteries lack documentation

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Abandoned cemeteries are old news to Frances Mayeaux. She's just powerless to do anything about those like Little Misery on Old Hammond Highway.

"We really have no authority over them," said Mayeaux, director of the Louisiana Cemetery Board. Not all cemeteries are required to register with her office, Mayeaux said.

The reason is that it costs less than $25 for a plot in those grounds. And unless the transaction costs more, no one has to notify the state, she said.

Mayeaux encourages people who open new burial sites to register with her office, if for no other reason than to record that the plot exists, she said.

In East Baton Rouge Parish, there are 12 cemeteries that charge $25 or more for a plot, and 19 that don't, Mayeaux said.

But there are many more old church and family cemeteries here and across the state that are not registered with her office, she said.

The problem started years ago, when land owners donated pieces of property to churches or just decided to save a parcel to use as a family burial site, Mayeaux said.

"In some cases, towns started long ago, and some land owners verbally gave a piece of property to the town," she said.

Many times, no record of the transaction ever existed, she said.

Today, some of the cemeteries have been abandoned, like Little Misery.

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"We have such a problem with abandoned cemeteries in this state," she said.

Not all the old cemeteries have been left to deteriorate. Family members care for the sites, but clear ownership of the land is in question.

Knox Cemetery at the corner of Jones Creek Road and South Harrell's Ferry Road is an example, said Elsie Holmes, whose mother, father and other family members are among the 80 or so people buried there.

As the southeast part of the parish grows, Holmes fears the plot of land will someday become the victim of progress.

She has been assured by government officials that road expansion in the area called for in the parish's Horizon Plan will not affect Knox, Holmes said.

Still, she worries, especially since she is uncertain about ownership of the land.

"It is run by anybody who goes out there and cleans it up," Holmes said.

When her mother died in 1929, her father called Rabenhorst Funeral Home and told them to bury the woman at Knox, Holmes said.

Things aren't much different today, according to Larry Moore of Rabenhorst.

His funeral home will dig a grave and bury a person at Knox if a family requests.

But it is up to families to resolve disputes if a grave ends up on land that is already dedicated, Moore said.

There is no one else to turn to.

"I don't think there is such a thing as an owner" of Knox, Moore said.

Where ownership of the land is clear, sometimes the old cemeteries can co-exist with progress.

A church cemetery sits at the corner of Greenwell Springs Road and North Sherwood Springs Forest Boulevard, near a new store built by K&B Drug Stores.

The land developer offered to remove all the people buried there to another cemetery, said the Rev. Charles Thomas, pastor of Rose Hill Missionary Baptist Church, owner of the cemetery.

However, some family members objected, so the 109-year-old graveyard stayed. K&B built a white fence around the cemetery, and today the graveyard sits almost in the store's parking lot.

K&B tends to the land outside the fence and the church and family members keep the cemetery trim and neat.

But if Thomas could have had his way, he would have taken the offer to move.

"When the Lord calls, they're going to get up, regardless of where they are," Thomas said.