CLINTON - "How shall this life be born when all its light is out?"

Caroline Silliman Wharton penned this one question the day she died, in response to the despair of seeing her mother and four of her five children die during the yellow fever epidemic that swept through Clinton in 1853.

Before she finally succumbed to the same illness, she cried out her poetic last words: "Father, mother, children! I am coming! Wait for me!"

Patricia and Sarah Dart, two volunteer "actresses," portrayed mother and child in this very bleak look into a portion of the town's past.

This was just one of many glimpses into the lives of those buried in the Clinton Confederate Cemetery provided during the Shades of the Past, an East Feliciana Pilgrimage program held Saturday at the cemetery.

Volunteers dressed in period costumes stood near various graves as groups toured the cemetery. As each group approached one of the graves, the one-day actor began a monologue that revealed the roots of the town and the parish.

The cemetery program was added to the pilgrimage five years ago because of the lack of homes available for touring.

"We were looking for an innovative, new idea to carry on the pilgrimage," said Mildred P. Worrell, who helped organize the program and also portrays a plantation mistress.

"We walked out behind the Marston House (near the cemetery) and said if we can't get the houses, we'll take them down to the cemetery," she said. "It just developed from there."

The idea has grown into a very important part of the pilgrimage and it is hoped that the number of volunteers will grow from the current 23 to about 40, Worrell said. There are now three shifts in which different people portray different Clinton ancestors.

"I hope there will eventually be 12 people in each shift," she said.

The program is a much better teaching aid than simply relying on houses, Worrell said.

"When you use historical re-enactment, it makes the people in the houses come alive," she said.

By noon, three busloads of people had passed through the cemetery and listened to the stories. There was nothing but praise for the program.

"It was very well done," said Joy Plauche of New Orleans. "It was really different.

"The story of the mother and child (Caroline Silliman Wharton) was so convincing," Plauche said. "I really cried."

"I've got goosebumps," said another tourist.

Worrell did most of the research and wrote many of the narratives. Much of the information for the monologues came from family records and family members, she said.

"Sometimes a family member comes and tells us they have relatives buried in the Clinton Cemetery and we try to persuade them to portray that character," Worrell said.

One such volunteer is James Gray Marston III, who is a descendant (though not direct) of James Gray Marston. Marston, of Shreveport, has portrayed his ancestor for several years now, Worrell said.

"He wrote most of his own material," she said.

Many of the portrayed characters were historically prominent figures in Clinton's past, but one of the characters was used to illustrate why many people came to the area, Worrell said.

This character is Caroline, a woman shrouded in mystery because there is no last name engraved on her tombstone.

There is only "Caroline" and a set of initials: G.W.R.

Because little is known about Caroline, a fictitious past was created to illustrate the hopes of people to overcome past failures by moving and starting a new life, Worrell said.

Caroline is portrayed as a girl who ran away from a Mississippi farm with a "traveling man," only to be left "in a fix down under the hill in Natchez to fend for myself." After losing a baby at birth, she became a prostitute, but fell in love with a customer who was on his way to Clinton to start a farm.

When the customer wrote her faithfully and finally persuaded her to join him, she traveled to Clinton but died in his arms before they could marry.

"A lot of people came here (Clinton) to get a new start," Worrell said. "This lady represents the masses who came to the frontier seeking a new life."

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