Soldiers, Early Baton Rouguans

They Should Be Remembered

By POWELL A. CASEY

Few persons who drive along Capitol Lake Drive through the triangular park east of the Arsenal Museum know that they are passing through a place where about three hundred American soldiers were buried.

From a year or so after the United States purchased the land in 1819 until the Civil War it was the burial site of members of the Baton Rouge Garrison and their families and of some civilians.

MOST WERE FROM northern states and were highly vulnerable to yellow fever. Early Army records in Washington show that in September 1819 twenty soldiers died from yellow fever at the post. In 1820 during one period yellow fever was carrying off three or four soldiers per day.

The commanding officer of the 1st U.S. Infantry Regiment reported that 91 members of his regiment died there in 1821. The Surgeon General reported deaths there for the 17-month period ending in September 1822, 1823 and 1824 of 47, 27 and 41 soldiers respectively.

These large losses diminished only when the troops were moved to temporary camps on the pine cedars hills along the Amite and Comite rivers and along Thompson and Sandy creeks.

The British in 1779 built a fort on the bank of the Mississippi River at a site just south of the Pentagon Barracks. Spanish forces under Gov. Bernardo de Galvez bombarded and captured the fort in September of that year, renaming it Fort San Carlos.

The British soldiers who were killed or died as prisoners of the Spanish presumably were buried near the fort which was built on the privately owned plantation of Messers. Watts and Flowers. They and their heirs contested the right of the Spanish and subsequently the right of the Americans to occupy the property.

THE SPANISH KEPT a small garrison at the fort until 1810 when the West Florida revolutionaries under General Philemon Thomas ousted the Spanish, turning it over to the United States in December of that year. During the Spanish occupancy there is a reference to a burial in the "garrison cemetery".

Surveys of the Garrison property made in 1819 and in 1821 show the post cemetery to be in the southeastern corner of the property where the state department of Education Building was built several years ago. During the years of 1815 and 1816, both regular and volunteer soldiers occupied the Post but the number of deaths is not known. North Street and Fith, (Uchee Sam) Street had not then been opened in this vicinity and a subsequent survey disclosed that a Catholic cemetery at the rear of the lot presently occupied by St. Joseph's Cathedral had extended into the garrison grounds. The church, with the assistance of the City Council, moved these graves and ultimately the entire church cemetery to a new location.

The southeast portion of the garrison grounds was for use by the post hospital. In 1823 a survey of the grounds was made and not used for an old post cemetery. It locates four and one-tenth acres in the new post cemetery just east of the 1819 powder magazine which is now the Arsenal Museum Building. Soldiers were buried in plain coffins and no permanent markers were furnished until after the Civil War, so visible evidence of the older cemetery had probably disappeared.

A Survey made in 1825 shows the cemetery area east and southeast of the powder magazine to have ten acres in it, but only about five acres were grave are on high enough to warrant fencing. The War Department was requested to fence the five acres in a petition submitted by about 15 prominent Baton Rouge citizens, who said that both military and civilian graves were being damaged by cattle wandering through the area.

Among the graves endangered was that of General Philemon Thomas, who was once Baton Rouge's oldest citizen and a veteran of wars. After the Civil War his remains were removed to the National Cemetery.

Despite strong support from the Governor and senators from Louisiana, the War Department was reluctant to spend the estimated $6,000 required to put a brick wall around the cemetery.

The post commander explained the presence of civilian graves in the cemetary by saying that since an early date the post commandants had allowed civilians to be buried there because of the absence of a general cemetery in the city. His correspondence refers to the graveyard as the "Military and Protestant" Cemetery several times.

The result was a recommendation that no more civilian burials be allowed in the almost-clogged site, except for those families that had already fenced their plots. A general cemetery (Magnolia) was then being established in Baton Rouge.

WITH THE OPENING of the Baton Rouge National Cemetery in 1869 there was now no need for a post cemetery although the post remained active until 1879. A Baton Rouge military graves in the latter year showed about 39 graves having markers being those of officers and their families.

With one or two exceptions these were in the form of slate. The remains in these graves and the original slabs were removed to the national cemetery between 1879 and 1882, where they may be seen near the entrance.

Possibly the only soldier or former soldier buried at the post cemetery after the national cemetery was opened was ex-Captain Francis D. Newcomb, who died in Havana in 1877. His body was returned to lie beside that of his wife, who died at Baton Rouge in 1883 while the officer was supervising construction there.

The files in Washington contain a letter written by Newcomb reporting the death of his wife from the fever. He asked for about $500 to take his six small children to the home of his parents in Greenfield, Mass., and make arrangements for their well-being.

APPEARENTLY THE ONLY bodies of soldiers removed from the post cemetery to the new national cemetery were these 25 marked by identification slabs. The others, being without identification either as soldiers or as individuals seem to have been ignored. The official maps of Baton Rouge between 1868 and 1950 identify the site as the "Protestant Cemetery." The cemetery was closed in 1890. Deterioration began thereafter and caused the families of persons buried there to remove the remains to Magnolia and other cemeteries.

Mrs. Wilmer Grayson, the daughter of Col. Thomas D. Boyd, who as president of L.S.U. resided on the Capitol Grounds, recalls that she and other children sat on the top of the Indian Mound sometimes and watched persons opening graves in the post cemetery. Incidentally one plank in Washington identifies the Indian Mound where the two old cannons are now located as "Office Cemetery."

When the decision was made to build the new Capitol at its present site, a request was apparently made to families to remove the remains of any of their relatives from the old Post Cemetery.

The state employed the late George O. Maher of Baton Rouge, one of the earliest inventors of electrical devices to locate metal objects underground to use his "radio machine" to search for grave sites where no markers remained. He located 23 metal objects of various types and sizes. Several were used around 1850 of the type similar in shape to Egyptian mummy cases. Some had removable metal plates over glass windows which allowed a view of the remains.

The body in one casket was fairly well preserved and was described as being of a "Spanish" type person clothed in a formal coat with pleated skirt. A cloth wrapping around the neck fell off exposing a deep gash in the neck such as might have been caused by a sword thrust. Perhaps this "Spanish" discovery and the nearest of Spanish Town has caused the cemetery site in recent years to be referred to sometimes as the "Spanish Cemetery."

HUNDREDS OF SMALL metal Benches including rusted coffin handles were discovered either by Maher's metal detector or by digging the dragee which reduced the level of the ground by about ten feet both in rear and in front of the powder magazine. Thomas Atkinson recollected seeing, at least one sword at the site. Charles P. Monroe saw the dragnet cut through what appeared to be two Indian graves in the area in front of the magazine.

George O. Maher Jr. and Bert Tesser also as Atkinson and Monroe say that the 23 iron caskets were buried in a concrete vault at a point about 30 feet north of the junction of Capitol and Sixth Streets, where Capitol Lake Drive leads to the Governor's Mansion.

The final burial place of 23 men, women and children is not marked, but neither is there any memorial for the 290 soldiers whose remains, in 1900-year-old unmarked graves, were dug up by the dragnet and scattered over the Capitol grounds. Perhaps these grounds should be renamed the Baton Rouge "Camps Banks."