Silent Histories, Crumbling Memories

The Forgotten Cemeteries of Imperial St. Landry Parish

January 20, 2003 Thru August 30, 2003

Opelousas Museum & Interpretive Center
315 N. Main Street • Opelousas, Louisiana
They came and settled on the prairies and down in the swamps. Here, they raised their families, worked and lived off the land, and worshiped their God. These were the people of Imperial St. Landry Parish. A parish that when it was divided became seven parishes — Imperial Calcasieu (1840), Acadia (1886), Cameron (1870), Evangeline, Beauregard, Allen, Jeff Davis, and St. Landry (1911-1912). Land was an important commodity and every effort was made to keep the land in the family while epidemics such as Typhoid or Yellow Fever took their toll. Wanting to keep their departed loved ones close by, family cemeteries were very common and were easily found. Today, most of these cemeteries are lost or abandoned and some are completely gone forever.

With an evergrowing emphasis on Genealogy and Historic Preservation, these family histories play an important part in our lives today. Many of the grave markers are gone; especially those made out of Cypress. Many graves are unmarked and known only as a depression in the ground. Lists of burials were usually recorded in the Family Bible. Other times, they were never recorded such as in an epidemic when several deaths occurred in a short amount of time. There was not time to mark each and every grave.

Burial customs varied from culture to culture and region to region. With the passing of a loved one, they were waked in the parlor of the home. Mirrors were covered and clocks were stopped on the time of death. When a departed one was taken from the house for burial, they were taken out feet first so that those following weren’t summoned to follow the deceased on their journey. These and many other customs are still being observed today.

When people were buried in the family plot, families believed that some family member would always carry on the tradition and maintain the cemetery. But as the years passed, the land was sold out of the families and the new owners pulled up crosses and markers, plowed the graves under, or built houses on top of these cemeteries. Those that did survive were vandalized. Some caring land owners, if they had a cemetery on their land, respected the families buried there and continue to maintain these sites. In the parishes of St. Landry and Evangeline, there are 125 known lost or abandoned cemeteries that have been found so far, but there is an untold number that will never be found. And that is a shame. These graves tell a different story. Their histories are silent but you can hear them if you take the time to listen. Their crumbling memories are a lifeline for those that seek. Put the two together and the fascinating stories of the lost or abandoned cemeteries are told.
This is a cemetery
Deaths are recorded...Families are reunited
Memories are made tangible...and...
Love is undisguised...This is a cemetery.
Communities accord respect...
Families bestow reverence
Historians seek information...and...
Our heritage is thereby enriched.
Testimonies of devotion, pride and warmth...
are carved in stone to pay warm tribute to
accomplishments and to the life...
not the death...of a loved one.
The cemetery is homeland for memorials that
are a sustaining force of comfort to the living.
A cemetery is a history of a people...
a perpetual record of yesterday...
And a sanctuary of peace and quiet today.
A cemetery exists because every life
is worth living...and remembering
...always.

—Author Unknown

Louisiana Purchase Bi-Centennial
1803 - 2003

"Voices From Our Past"
ST. LANDRY CATHOLIC CHURCH CEMETERY TOUR
"Tracing the Paths of Our Ancestors"

TOUR DATES
April 5 & 6
(April 5: dusk tour at 7 and 8 p.m.)
April 12 & 13
April 26 & 27
May 3 & 4
September 27 & 28
(September 27: dusk tour at 7 and 8 p.m.)
October 4 & 5
October 11 & 12
October 18 & 19
DATES SUBJECT TO CHANGE.

TOUR TIMES
Saturday: 9 - 12 a.m. (one tour per hour)
Sunday: 12 - 3 p.m. (one tour per hour)
Evening Tours: 7 and 8 p.m.

COST: $10 per person
15 persons per tour

OPELOUSAS MUSEUM & INTERPRETIVE CENTER
315 N. Main St., Opelousas, LA 70570-6201
(w) 337-948-2589  (f) 337-948-2592  www.cityofopelousas.com
Sue Deville, director  musdir@hotmail.com
Monday-Saturday 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Closed Sunday
Admission: Donations accepted  Group tours by appointment