Cemetery's dedication heralds new era

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Vermilion Bureau Editor

ABBEVILLE — The recent dedication of the Old Masonic Cemetery here is being touted as the beginning of a new era of historic preservation in this picturesque city on the banks of the Vermilion River.

Abbeville is rich in history. More than 100 commercial buildings and residences in the downtown district are listed on the National Historic Register.

But residents must be ever mindful of the importance of preserving that history, cemetery committee chairman Sawyer White said.

"If everybody does their part, we can preserve for future generations what we have enjoyed for so many years," he said. "I hope and feel what we have done provides inspiration and motivation for other property owners."

The fundamental differences between Freemasonry and the Catholic Church, between the natural world and the spiritual one, were put aside for the dedication, which was attended by a Who's Who of officials in this heavily Catholic city.

Donald Hudson, a member of the Masonic Lodge 192 F&AM, demonstrated for the gathering a Masonic ritual performed at funerals. The three-step process, repeated three times, begins with the arms outstretched downward, palms up, consigning the body to the grave.

The arms then are crossed in front of the chest, the right arm underneath the left and the right hand over the heart, to signify that the mourners cherish the memory of the deceased. The third gesture involves raising the arms up, palms facing inward, "to commend the spirit to God who gave it," Hudson said.

James Fontenot, in full Scottish regalia, plays the bagpipes during the dedication ceremony for the Old Masonic Cemetery in Abbeville.

John Calhoun White, not a blood relative of W.D. White, was buried here in 1863.

"In 1868, there were no rail mills here, no railroad tracks," White said.

The cemetery on South Main Street was on the edge of town at the time, but now is next to the railroad tracks that run in front of the Riviana Rice Mill.

White thanked everyone who participated over the past two years in the restoration of the old burial ground, which had its last interment in 1904. "You can tell a lot about people from the condition of their cemeteries," he said.

The dedication participants paused after the ceremony to enjoy refreshments provided by Bollino's Coffeehouse and Cafe.

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"The spirits must be pleased to see such a lively gathering at such a solemn site as theirs," Dupuy said.

James Fontenot, dressed in full Scottish regalia, including kilts, with a dagger tucked in the top of one of his knee-length socks, played "Amazing Grace" on the bagpipes as he walked slowly among the graves.

"There's something about playing the bagpipes that speaks both of melancholy and strength," said community historian, historian Ken Dupuy, who spent more than 1,000 hours researching the site and compiling obituaries.

White gave a brief history of the cemetery, the first of three Masonic graveyards in the city, where in 1862 the first burial took place, that of 3-year-old W.D. White, son of Dr. W.D. White, first master of Lodge 192.

White said his own grandfather, Red brick tombs from before the turn of the century—the turn from the 19th to the 20th century—became impromptu tabletops. "The spirits must be pleased to see such a lively gathering at such a solemn site as theirs," Dupuy said.

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