Corps plans to excavate levee graves

By EMILY KERN
Westside Bureau

WHITE CASTLE — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has decided to excavate and move hundreds of graves in a black cemetery that lies partially beneath a Mississippi River levee built 70 years ago.

In 1933, the corps moved the old Mount Salem Baptist Church to make way for a new levee set farther back from the river. The work was part of a large flood-control project after the Great Flood of 1927. The Rev. John Batiste, who has led efforts to get the corps to move the cemetery, said he feels it’s his mission to provide those buried there with a dignified resting place.

“It was morally wrong, and sinfully wrong, what was done to them,” Batiste said.

Although records housed at the Atchafalaya Levee District office show otherwise, the 800 or so graves were not moved. They remained undisturbed beneath the levee and along the Mississippi for nearly 70 years until being rediscovered by the corps in September 1999.

A worker came upon skeleton remains while digging test holes for a levee project meant to control erosion, said Ken Ashworth, a corps archaeologist who mapped out the cemetery in 1999 and 2000.

After studies using remote sensing and other imaging equipment confirmed the presence of a rather large cemetery, the corps’ New Orleans District office recommended to its regional headquarters in Vicksburg, Miss., that the cemetery be relocated.

The corps had to wait for approval from its regional office, which was finally granted about two weeks ago, said corps spokesman Jim Addison. The relocation project will cost about $4.2 million.

“Most of the graves are intact and in place,” Ashworth said. “We had to have the evidence before justifying multimillions of dollars.”

The project is expected to take about three years, and design work could begin by October, the start of the corps’ fiscal year, Addison said.

The first phase will be removing all of the graves between the levee and the river. Ashworth said. Then, the corps will have to move the levee toward the river and remove the graves from beneath it, he said. Finally, the levee will have to be moved back.

John Ashley, with the corps’ Mississippi Valley Division in Vicksburg, oversees projects in the New Orleans District. He said it has always been the corps’ desire to relocate the cemetery.

“We’ve got the funds to do the project and move ahead,” Ashley said. “It’s the right thing to do.”

But Batiste, pastor of Brazel Baptist Church, where many of the relatives of those buried under the levee attend services, said he thinks the corps is just doing damage control.

“They haven’t said anything to us,” Batiste said. “I have no knowledge of it (the corps’ plans) whatsoever.”

Batiste said he and his congregation have learned to deal with the wrong committed against their ancestors and have even desensitized themselves to it. He said that if the corps admits, between 800 and 850 people are buried there, the number is probably closer to 2,000.

“Just imagine that your parents or your grandparents are in that cemetery, and the government has taken a drag line through it and mowed down the headstones,” he said.

The descendants of those buried there thought they would never see recompense, Batiste said.

Batiste, along with three people who...
claim their ancestors were unearthed during the levee work, recently sued in U.S. District Court in Baton Rouge, asking for $25 million. That case has not been resolved.

Corps officials say they decided to move the graves well before the suit was filed. The graves will be moved to a nearby spot, most likely close to Braziel's current cemetery on Cannonburg Road.

The Mount Salem burial site was used from 1884 until the river flooded in 1927. Batiste said corps' archaeologists found more bodies of children than adults due to the high infant mortality rate back then.

"You think about the quality of life that they had and their struggles and the ills done to them," Batiste said, "and even in their death they haven't been able to rest in peace."

"During those times, the people were afraid to say too much about it on account of the massive destruction between the races," said Raymond Jackson, who at 78 serves as Braziel's head deacon.

Jackson said he talked with his brother, who was pastor of the church in the 1940s, and with another man known as Old Man Lockett. Both would mention the corps working in the graveyard at night and the bodies being exposed, Jackson said.

Another church member rescued three headstones from the graveyard and moved them to Braziel's cemetery, he said.

Jackson's wife, Mary Lee Jackson, said she is angered and saddened by the corps' actions in the 1930s.

"They shouldn't have trampled on our people like that," she said.

But the couple said they are satisfied with what the corps has decided to do.