More than 140 years ago a group of Jesuit priests came to Baton Rouge to open a college. They thought the capital city would be the ideal place for the College of St. Peter and St. Paul.

But the school lasted only a few years. It was closed in 1865 because three yellow fever epidemics raged through the city between 1848 and 1865 and killed many of the students and faculty members.

"In those days they thought yellow fever was spread by contact with people," said the Rev. Frank Uter, pastor of St. Joseph's Cathedral. "The remaining Jesuits returned to Grand Coteau; since it was less populated it was considered safer to have a school there."

Five of those who died - the Rev. Anthony Parret, S.J.; Brother Henry Visconti, S.J.; the Rev. Joseph Adams, S.J.; the Rev. Vitalis Gille, S.J.; and Brother Philip Corne, S.J. - were buried in St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery. Although their remains later were returned to the Jesuit Cemetery in Springfield, Ala., a memorial in their honor has been erected at St. Joseph Cemetery on Main Street. The memorial will be dedicated at 4:30 p.m. Thursday, All Saints Day, along with the annual Blessing of the Graves. Bishop Stanley Ott will officiate at the ceremonies in the cemetery and the entire service will be celebrated Mass at 5:15 p.m. at St. Joseph's Cathedral.

This is a good year to honor the Jesuit priests, Uter said. "The Society of Jesus (Jesuits) is celebrating the Ignatian Year, which marks the 450th anniversary of the establishment of the Jesuit Order and the 500th anniversary of the birth of St. Ignatius."

St. Joseph's Cathedral's Board of Trustees is emphasizing the historical significance of the second-oldest cemetery in Baton Rouge, said board vice president Pat Rolston. "Parson the pun, but we're trying to dig up important people, to get the cemetery on the National Register of Historic Places."

"They're there; we just have to match the history with the people," said Bunny Heroman, board secretary and cemetery historian. "We won't even be able to identify a particular spot and say so-and-so was buried there, but we're working to identify names on gravestones."

"We're trying to get people interested in the cemetery," Rolston said. "Walking through the cemetery is like taking a roll call of Baton Rouge."

"I'd like to see it (cemetery) restored for the historical value and also for a place of beauty, tranquility and peace," Bahlinger said.

"The custodian — the man who dug the graves — kept records, which are really interesting," Heroman said. Nineteen-year-old Anton Estein died in New York on Sept. 12, 1896, of heart disease, and was brought to Baton Rouge and buried in St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery on Sept. 16. He's buried on the east side of the Estein lot in a metallic casket with an extra heavy finished box, according to records.

"Another tomb we started working on had one name on it — Celeste Droz. She died in 1870," Heroman said. "A local lawyer, Edwin Smith Jr., is a descendant of hers. When I called him to tell him about her, he said, 'Are you sure? I've looked for her grave for years.'"

"To me this is an interesting process," Bahlinger said. "Through this research we locate a descendant and ask him to restore that tomb. Then we use the money that was designated for that tomb to restore other tombs."

"Last October when we had our cemetery clean-up day, one tomb looked like it had been vandalized," Heroman said. "Someone had moved the top slab slightly and left a triangular area open. We removed the leaves and debris we saw, and there was a perfect little mummy-shaped coffin. It was a light sand color that blended with the ground. You had to look to find it. There was one small crack along the bottom of it; otherwise it was in perfect condition."

"Father had to get the wrestling team from Catholic High to push the slab back on for us, and a small piece of metal was left out. We cleaned and polished it, and it said, 'Valerian Allain, died in Paris, France, in August of 1840 in the 68th year of his life. We were just fascinated,' Heroman said. "I went to the archives and looked up the funeral of this man; he died in Paris and his remains were sent to Baton Rouge. It was a three-month trip. I'm sure they treated the coffin in a special way, with wax or something. We are talking 100 and something years in the rain, and it was still in perfect condition."

"I wonder how Valerian was feeling inside," Rolston said.

Other guests at the All Saint Day ceremony will be the Rev. Edward Arroyo, provincial of the New Orleans Province of the Jesuits, and Jesuits from Grand Coteau, Loyola, and Springfield.