Questions that won't rest in peace

Group cleaning graveyard deals with its mysteries

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ABBEVILLE — Ever since several civic-minded citizens set out recently to restore an old, abandoned graveyard, they've been haunted by mysteries.

Whose cemetery is it? What's its official name? And who is in several unmarked graves?

The cemetery, three blocks south of downtown on Main Street, is the second oldest in Abbeville. The earliest date on a gravestone is 1870. No one has been buried there since 1954, and most use ended before 1900.

Sawyer White, whose grandfather is buried in the cemetery, started the restoration in August. It bothered him to see the cemetery in such a state of neglect.

"It was really a mess," he said. "Beer bottles and trash all over. It took four hours with a chain saw to get the hedges trimmed. It could stand four more."

He explained the group's motives further. "We're looking to when Abbeville becomes a bedroom community of Lafayette. There are so many little sites like this off the beaten path that could be pretty and picturesque for people to enjoy."

Also involved in the project are Abbeville residents Kenneth Taylor, Donald Hudson, Steven Peltier and Randall Menard.

The group began by drawing a map of the cemetery and photographing each gravestone for before-and-after comparisons. Now they are repairing and cleaning gravestones and plot borders.

Legend has it that the Abbeville Masonic Lodge owned it first and deeded it to city government. But the parish courthouse burned in 1885, destroying records of the transaction.

Now the city has agreed to assume ownership of the cemetery, which will help with maintenance. The city also extended water service.

The group has considered seeking historical status for the cemetery. But that raises another mystery: The cemetery's official name is unknown.

It is known around town both as the Masonic Cemetery and as the Jewish Cemetery. "People probably call it the Masonic Cemetery because Masons were buried there or because the Masons owned it. Or both," Taylor said.

He said it may be called the...
Jewish Cemetery because Jewish families were among the first to use it, or “Jewish” may have been a catch phrase for all non-Catholics.

The mystery of the unidentified bodies is another baffling one.

The group found 61 headstones. But seven plots are unmarked. Also, a large area in the rear of the cemetery has no plot borders or headstones.

White theorizes that these graves were destroyed by flooding over the years.

An archaeologist has promised to try to determine where bodies are buried in the area.

Why did burials there end around the turn of the century? Maybe because the cemetery filled up, the group speculates, or maybe it involved a ban on burials during a yellow-fever epidemic.

The group has held public meetings to talk about its plans and to seek possible answers to the mysteries.

As many as 25 people have attended the meetings.

Meanwhile, the restoration work goes on every Tuesday afternoon.

Hudson enjoys the work.

“It’s like putting a puzzle together,” he said.

He spoke of the time they looked under what appeared to be a pile of bricks and found an intact marble slab with the name Sylvanius Petty on it. A little research concluded that Sylvanius may have been related to the famed artist whose scantily clad Petty girls were favorite pin-ups during World War II.