Highland Cemetery

Much-needed facelift preserves history of notable graveyard

By CAROL ANN BILTZER

Even though it's only two blocks from the west gate of LSU, not many people know about Highland Cemetery. For most of its history, it has been buried beneath a cover of vines, limbs and weeds. That's one of the main reasons it's in existence. No one could find it.

This tiny cemetery of less than an acre of land dates to around 1833 and contains the graves of some of Baton Rouge's earliest settlers. It may be the oldest cemetery within the city limits.

Fortunately, in the 1990s, the right person found Highland Cemetery. Evelyn Thom, inlaws lived half a block away on Jimmy Avenue. She was curious about the overgrown cemetery so close to one of the city's nicest neighborhoods.

"I brought my clippers out to get this stone and that stone," she said. "What I found was a resurrection of history, the history of Baton Rouge, the pioneers."

Thom, her husband, Dr. James A. Thom III, who brought his power saw to cut down trees and remove limbs. Together with their children, the Thom's worked to clear the cemetery. They also made a sad discovery:

"Someone had taken many of the gravestones and pushed them in a pile in the back of the cemetery," Evelyn Thom said.

By digging through court records and historical documents, she began to connect the names on the stones to actual people. It was a project that took years, but Thom was able to return some of the stones to their rightful places and to restore the tiny cemetery.

"Evelyn Thom saved Highland Cemetery," said Sid Biltzer, who served on the cemetery board of trustees in the 1990s. "She and Dr. Thom spend four hours every weekend. They cut the grass and cleaned it."

"Half of her life was dedicated to removing this sacred site," said Kenny Kleinpeter, whose ancestors are buried in the cemetery. "She found Highland Cemetery in the 1990s and has taken over Evelyn Thom's project of preserving and maintaining it."

Early history:

The cemetery was originally a tiny piece of an 800-acre plantation owned by George Garic, a German settler from Maryland. Garic came to this area about the time of the American Revolution. He purchased the plantation from Philip Hardy about 1746 and lived there until his death in 1825. Conveyance records give no name for the plantation, although in later newspaper articles, it is sometimes referred to as Highland Plantation.

Approximately, with the consent of Garic, people began using a small tract of the plantation for burials. The area was located on a hill, which was not subject to flooding from the Mississippi River.

Kenny Kleinpeter studies the graves of his ancestors in the Kleinpeter family plot in Highland Cemetery. He has taken over Evelyn Thom's 40-year project of caring for the historic cemetery.

Advocate staff photos by Patrick Dennis

Gravestones were lying in piles all over the cemetery when Evelyn Thom and her family first cleared it.

ABOVE: Even when the cemetery was in disrepair, members of the Favrot family maintained their family plot in Highland Cemetery. LEFT: Evelyn Thom knows every stone in the cemetery she has worked to preserve for nearly 40 years. Behind her is the Bicentennial Gazebo dedicated to the memory of those whose graves were lost. BELOW: Members of the Duplantier family of Magnolia Mount Plantation are buried in the family plot centered with an obelisk.
The first known burial on the property was that of Captain John James Neill, who died at the Baton Rouge fort in 1812. Although his gravestone no longer exists, Evelyn Thom found mention of the burial in an archival record dated 1812, when the gravestone was still present.

Because Garig was a practicing Catholic, he wanted his burial land consecrated as a cemetery. On June 9, 1819, he donated one arpent (about five-tenths of an acre) to the congregation of the Roman Catholic Church of Baton Rouge.

"He (Garig) said at the time of the donation that people had been using the property to bury the dead for three or four years," Thom said. "They had been doing it. This just made it legal.

After Garig died in 1825, the plantation was divided into two sections. The front half, on which the cemetery was located, came into the possession of Robert Penn, who originally owned the property with his brother-in-law, Philadelphia Breton. Penn later married Mary J. Penick and had several children...

Denise Daigre held the Hemdland Cemetery property until her death in 1873. Even before she acquired the property, members of Daigre's family had been buried in the Catholic cemetery. After Daigre's death, the property was divided among her children, who eventually sold it to the city. Virginia Daigre Allain, who made a living selling money by selling burial plots for $250.00.

In 1912, she sold the property to Edward A. Fauveau, who sold the tract to William H. Breaux in 1915. Breaux later sold the land to C.E. Maudlin, a civil engineer, to survey the property and lay out a new town. A 16-acre tract that Daigre obtained, was Highland Cemetery. The property was purchased by the Daigre family, who made a living selling burial plots for $50.00.

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This headstone marks the grave of a Randolph family member.