Highland Cemetery has stories to tell

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No sightings of ghosts have been reported at Historic Highland Cemetery in College Town, but should any appear they would probably speak French, Spanish or even German and tell stories of early Louisiana history that would excite the most jaded of television viewers.

For instance take Anthony Peniston, "stabbed by a pognard and survived the blow but ten minutes" in a dispute over an election. He was only 30 years old.

Or consider the romantic tale of Josephine Favrot, whose sweetheart, Louis de Grand Pre was shot defending the Fort of Baton Rouge in 1810. Josephine rushed to his side in time for him to die in her arms. The poem she wrote following his death is immortalized on a plaque on the wall of the Favrot family plot.

The oldest existing cemetery in Baton Rouge, located on Oxford Avenue between Amherst and East Parker, is the final resting place for many of the city's forefathers. A walk around the small burial ground is like taking a brief course in the history of Baton Rouge, thanks to the many informative markers placed by the Friends of Historic Highland Cemetery.

Established around 1815 on what was once a part of the plantation owned by George Garig, Highland Cemetery was legally donated to the congregation of the local Roman Catholic Church of Baton Rouge in 1819.

Following Garig's death in 1825 his plantation was divided into two sections, half being purchased by Robert Penny. Although the cemetery was consecrated by the Roman Catholic Church, in 1849 Penny, a Protestant, was conveyed a 16-acre piece of the Garig Plantation, which included the cemetery. In the agreement he requested a 30-square-foot plot for himself and his family. This corner of the cemetery is known as the Protestant section.

The cemetery is maintained by the Friends of Historic Highland Cemetery, an auxiliary board of The Foundation for Historical Louisiana.

"Before the last burial, which took place in 1939, the cemetery fell into disrepair," said Larry Firmin, president of the trustees and leadership of Dr. and Mrs. James A. Thom, and the dedication of many volunteers, beginning in 1968/69 the cemetery was reclaimed and gradually restored to its present state.

Firmin said one of the biggest problems in maintaining the cemetery is cleaning up after vandals.

Many of the names etched on the faded headstones are names seen today on streets and businesses around Baton Rouge and southern Louisiana.

Here lie the remains of Jean Baptiste Kleinpeter, a veteran of the War of 1812 who fought with Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans, and later became a planter and banker.

Gabriel Armand Duplantier, born in France and who served as aide-de-camp to General Lafayette, left military service, married and became owner of Magnolia Mound plantation. The Duplantier family sepulcher fell into ruins and was replaced by an obelisk.

The final resting place of Charles Daniel Comeaux, a veteran of the War of 1812, is noted by a marker near the Favrot plot. Comeaux was killed by a stray bullet while sleeping. He had just returned home from the Battle of Port Hudson and flung his cap on one of the posts of his four-poster bed. A bullet hit the bed post, pierced the cap, then ricocheted, hitting and killing him instantly.

Not only does a walk through the cemetery conjure up scenes from early Louisiana history but it also reminds the visitor how fragile life was in the days before modern medicine and sanitation.

Many tombs are inscribed with messages that echo the sorrow of parents who mourned the loss of their children: "Budded on earth to bloom in heaven," or "He lived as lived a peaceful dove. He died as blossoms die."

During the time of George Garig and Robert Penny, Historic Highland Cemetery was larger than its present size and extended over to what is now Amherst Avenue. When College Town was being developed in 1927, the developer drew an inaccurate map of the cemetery, omitting certain measurements when he filed for a new subdivision. As a result of the inaccuracies of many of the tombstones were lost or built over during the construction of homes. A wrought-iron gazebo was erected in the cemetery in 1976 dedicated to the memory of the more than 200 people who were buried there, but whose graves have been lost.

Information about walking tours of Historic Highland Cemetery or about becoming a member of Friends of Historic Highland Cemetery can be obtained by calling The Foundation For Historical Louisiana in Baton Rouge at 387-2464.