Historic cemetery restored

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Bernard Chaillot
Vermilion Bureau Editor

ABBEVILLE — The voices of the dead whisper in the trees at the Old Masonic Cemetery, where for years old tombs of red brick crumbled and weeds grew thick among the headstones.

But a concerted community effort over the past two years has restored the historic burial ground to its former place of honor and reverence, a sacred and well-kept final resting place.

A dedication ceremony will be at 10 a.m. Saturday to recognize the contributions of many who gave their time and effort to rescue the hallowed ground from decades of decay.

Community historian Ken Dupuy, who donated more than 1,000 hours researching the site and compiling obituaries, said the South Main Street site next to the railroad tracks was the first of three Masonic cemeteries in the city.

Virtually unused since 1905, the earliest date on a tombstone here is 1868. Veterans from the Texas War for Independence from Mexico, the Civil War and the Spanish-American War are buried here, Dupuy said.

"Sawyer White was the chairman of the committee that restored the cemetery and was the literal workhorse, spending many hundreds of hours actually restoring tombs and coordinating the restoration," Dupuy said.

White said his goal was to "demonstrate individuals can make a difference and encourage and motivate property owners in town to maintain our historic sites and structures. We have so much, but there is so much to be done."

White's grandfather was John Calhoun White, a member of the extended family that descended from Dr. W.D. White, first master of the Masonic Lodge 192 F&AM, who was buried here along with several of his children.

Dr. White's remains and those of his wife were moved to Graceland Cemetery long ago, but as one walks through the small Masonic graveyard here, the headstones of the children of W.D. and L.R. White tell a tale of woe brought on by death too soon.

First there was Willie, born Oct. 22, 1864. He died Aug. 21, 1868, just before he turned 4. The epitaph reads "Too good for earth, God called him home." Joseph was born Nov. 10, 1866, and died Nov. 28, 1870, just after his fourth birthday: "Our darling one hath gone before to greet us on that blissful shore."

Maggie was born Nov. 23, 1868, and died Nov. 22, 1870, the day before her second birthday and six days before her brother Joseph passed away: "It was an angel that visited the green earth and took the flower away."

Next came Nannie, born Dec. 1, 1879, died Sept. 9, 1884, age 4: "Sleep on dear child and take thy rest. In Jesus' arms forever blest."

The last White child in a marked grave is Walter, born Aug. 28, 1886 — 22 years after Willie — and died less than three months later, on Nov. 8, 1886: "Budded on earth to bloom in heaven."

Many buried here, including John Calhoun White, are in unmarked graves. A plaque has been placed to acknowledge them. White said Otha Morgan, George Eldredge and Donald Hudson worked with him month to month to restore the cemetery.

Many others helped from time to time, he said. Albert Steen, Menard Marble, the city, the Greater Abbeville-Vermilion Chamber of Commerce, the Main Street program, Masons and many other groups and individuals also did their parts, "and now it is a site to be proud of, a place for meditation and reflection," White said.