Honoring the dead

Storm surges upend graves, destroy tombs and mausoleums

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Not even the dead were safe from the wrath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Storm surges pushed ashore by the storms damaged or destroyed countless tombs and mausoleums in Louisiana's 10 impacted Gulf Coast parishes.

Vaults filled with water.

Toms floated up to a half-mile away.

Graves were upended.

Corpses were found in sugar cane fields or wooded areas yards from their appointed final resting places.

And, some washed away never to be found again.

U.S. National Guardsmen can be found in several areas guarding the grave sites from would-be looters as federal, state, parish and local officials continue to discuss which agencies will be responsible for returning the dead to their plots, placing vaults and tombs back where they belong and identifying the bodies of those displaced from their graves.

In some areas, residents and officials refuse to wait for politics to play out.

PARISHES AFFECTED

The parishes reporting damaged cemeteries and mausoleums were:

Cameron, Iberville, Jefferson, Lafourche, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Mary, Terrebonne and Vermilion parishes.

Surveying the damage

Terri Theriot, 48, went to the Immaculate Conception Catholic Cemetery in her hometown of Grand Chenier days after Rita left her family with little more than they carried away the night they evacuated. Theriot walked amid upturned vaults, coffins strewn across the lawn and black holes filled with floodwater where vaults once rested.

"It's almost like you don't feel nothing," she said. "You're in the graveyard all alone, no matter who is around you. It's like the bodies tell you. I'm here. I'm OK, but what the heck just happened?"

Theriot sought the tomb of her father, Stephen Theriot, who died in 1991. He was 60. The walk mirrored the walk her father took after Hurricane Audrey when he returned from the Marines to search for his brother's tomb. It was never found.

"That's why it was real important to me that my dad was still in the ground," she said. "He was, but my uncle, Bill Kelley, wasn't. His coffin vanished. You gotta laugh about it. You can't cry everybody's in the same predicament."

Pamela Rushing, 36, of Maurice, and her mother, Lydia Luquette, 76, of Church Point, told a similar story about their return to the Landry Cemetery in Henry. Luquette stopped to point at her grandfather's tomb, which floodwaters had upended and left resting on its side.

"My God. This storm was a monster," said Rushing, whose home lost a few shingles and suffered minimal damage to the siding. "All that damage... The ones that were saved were..."
Grave

Taking action

About 90 tombs were damaged, upended or destroyed in five cemeteries near Louisa, Cypermort Point and other areas of St. Mary Parish, according to Dr. F.H. “Chip” Metz, coroner. Most of the damage occurred at St. Helena Catholic Cemetery on La. 183, just west of the rural community.

The storm surge pushed ashore by Rita inundated the area beneath up to six feet of water. Coffins floated across La. 183. Some drifted into nearby wooded areas and sugar cane fields, their departure stopped only by trees and cane stalks. Four bodies drifted out of their coffins.

Metz called in Mary “The Bone Lady” Manheim, a forensic anthropologist with LSU in Baton Rouge, who helped the coroner identify three of the bodies. The fourth, that of an elderly woman from the Free town area, and the identity of the bodies in nine unmarked coffins also recovered from surrounding wooded areas remain a mystery. But, it’s a mystery Metz feels confident he can solve.

“We took detailed photographs of the person and their clothing,” he said. “Mary helped narrow down the sex, approximate age, race and other defining characteristics from bone structure and other means. It’s quite a job, like putting a giant jigsaw puzzle back together one piece at a time with new pieces popping up all the time.”

A missing name plate on some crypts was the only damage noted. Volunteers were able to return the plate to its rightful tomb by matching the glue patterns on the tomb and the back of the plate, Manheim explained.

The St. Helena Cemetery president spent a few days walking around the cemetery with a plot map, Metz said. She wrote the name of the deceased on a wooden steak and drove the steak in the ground where the missing vault, tomb or coffin once rested.

“If bodies are found in the area a few months from now, I’ll have a better understanding of where it came from,” Metz said. “I think we have all the empty tombs accounted for at this point.”

Waiting game

Iberia Parish reported the least amount of affected grave sites. Most damage was reported south of La. 14 in Rynella, a rural community near Avery Island.

Parish officials continue to await word from FEMA, which was asked to clarify whether or not it is the responsibility of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the state, individual families, individual or the local or parish government to restore coffins to their rightful place in area mausoleums and cemeteries.

“I know it has to happen,” said Jim Anderson, parish Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness Office director. “I don’t know which one. Right now, Delcambre is about to go bankrupt. The future of 800 homes and businesses lies in the balance. My priority is to save that community.”

In fact, there is no clear-cut policy that identifies which agency is responsible, Manheim explained.

“Once the coroner signs the death certificate, that’s the end of his responsibility,” she said. “Some are taking matters into their own hands because they understand people are concerned about their loved ones. There is peace of mind in knowing that even though your loved one was disturbed, someone is working to set things right in a timely manner.”

To limit the impact on cemeteries, coroners, churches and individual family members in future storms, Acadia Parish coroner Dr. Mark Dawson suggested coffin manufacturers be required to affix a metal plate with a serial number on each coffin.

“It would make it possible to identify the deceased without having to disturb the remains within,” Dawson said. “Some companies currently provide the metal tag, but traditionally are not required to.”