On Dec. 29, water is shown washing around and against the tombs of those buried in a Leeville cemetery. What’s left of the old Leeville cemetery is only accessible by boat. Some headstones are barely visible above the water, and waves lap at the bricks and concrete surrounding caskets buried at the site since the late 1800s.

PHOTOS BY DAVE MARTIN/AP

La. cemeteries sinking

By Stacey Plaisance
Associated Press

LEEVILLE — As a young adult, Kathleen Cheramie visited her grandmother’s grave in a tree-lined cemetery where white concrete crosses dotted a plot of lush green grass just off La. 1.

Now, the cemetery in Leeville is a skeleton of its former self. The few trees still standing have been killed by saltwater intruding from the Gulf. Their leafless branches are suspended above marsh grass left brown and soggy from saltwater creeping up from beneath the graves.

“It was a beautiful place to visit,” said Cheramie, 67, who lives in nearby Golden Meadow. “It hurts to see it now.”

Cheramie’s small family graveyard is among at least two dozen cemeteries across the southeast Louisiana coast that are rapidly sinking or washing away because of erosion and subsidence accelerated by the tropical punch of storms such as Katrina, Rita, Gustav, Ike, Lee and Isaac.

Local residents say 11 cemeteries in Jefferson Parish have repeatedly flooded since Hurricane Katrina. In Lafourche, Terrebonne and Plaquemines parishes, more than a dozen others have succumbed to tidal surges.

A small family cemetery lies along the bayou near Leeville. Some 11 cemeteries in Jefferson Parish have repeatedly flooded since Katrina, and in Lafourche, Terrebonne and Plaquemines parishes, more than a dozen others have succumbed to tidal surges.

Lafourche, Terrebonne and Plaquemines parishes, more than a dozen others have succumbed to tidal surges. Some have more than 300 gravesites.

Officials say not much can be done to save the cemeteries or the sinking communities that surround them, though some towns have tried pouring concrete slabs to build up the burial sites and hold headstones in place. They’ve also anchored above-ground caskets to the slabs to keep them from floating off.

“When I was a kid, you didn’t see graves floating away and going under water,” said Timothy Kerner, 53, mayor of the fishing town of Jean Lafitte, where schools, restaurants and homes have flooded at least four times in the past seven years.

Kerner said all 11 cemeteries in the area were under water during Hurricane Isaac, which struck Louisiana in August. Although many caskets had been anchored to concrete slabs, dozens still floated away, finding new resting places under and between houses.

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In some cases, human remains became separated from the caskets.

“It’s horrible,” said Kerner, shaking his head as he flipped through photographs taken as officials recovered the caskets and remains. “It’s sad, and it would be sad in any circumstance, but in this case you have families that have been here for 300 years, for generation after generation.”

Kerner said his community has about 1,500 gravesites — some dating back to the early 1800s, when the town’s namesake, pirate Jean Lafitte, used the bayous for smuggling.

Along the Louisiana coast, towns like Jean Lafitte watch the Gulf march closer each day, threatening wildlife habitats and a way of life.

Coastal Louisiana has lost about 1,900 square miles of land since the 1930s as canals dug for oil exploration allowed salty water to intrude into marshes and a succession of powerful hurricanes sucked marsh muck that protects populated areas out into the Gulf.

Archie Chaisson, coastal zone manager for Lafourche Parish, said about 90 percent of one Leeville cemetery dating to the 1800s has been swallowed by a wide bayou that empties into the Gulf, and two other burial sites have been submerged in recent years.

What’s left of the bayou-side cemetery is accessible only by boat. Some headstones are barely visible above the water, and waves lap at the bricks and concrete surrounding caskets.

Chaisson said that as recently as 1920, the cemetery was several feet above sea level, surrounded by orange groves, cotton fields and cattle farms. Much of the ground has subsided to barely sea level, and during Isaac, about seven feet of land washed away in the tidal surge, he said.

“The bodies just lay abandoned because there’s nothing we can do for them now,” he said.

South Lafourche Levee District General Manager Windell Curole, who also serves on the state’s Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority, said saltwater from the Gulf is causing a crippling subsidence problem.

“We did not bury people in marshes,” Curole said. “We buried them on high ground. This was high ground, and now it’s subsided to the point of being wetlands and open water.”

Curole said Louisiana’s coastal erosion problems started with the cutting and dredging of canals for oil and gas exploration, which allowed saltwater to work its way into freshwater marshes. The damming of the Mississippi River in the early 1900s also prevented the river from re-depositing freshwater sediment.

“We created the problem, and now we have to be smart about fixing the problem,” Curole said.

In Lafourche Parish, some of the earthen levees are as high as 16 feet to protect the communities within, and the parish is creating “apron marsh” by pumping sediment from inside the levee out to the broken marshes just beyond it for added buffer from the Gulf.

Curole said there isn’t much that can be done to save communities like Leeville, which sits beyond the levee system and today is about two-thirds open water.

“It’s so strange to not see any trees,” Cheramie said, adding that she rarely makes the short drive from her home inside the levee system to the family cemetery just beyond it. Her grandmother’s gravesite today is surrounded by saltwater-soggy ground and patches of dead marsh grass, with open water nearby. “It makes me feel sad.”

Cheramie said that about 10 years ago, a concrete slab was poured to try to raise the ground and hold the cemetery’s crosses in place, but with repeated hits from storms since 2005, sand and mud from the marsh have begun taking over the slab.

“It’s just disappearing,” she said. “It’s a shame to say, but you stay away because it’s too much. It’s too hard. We’re losing so much so fast, and it’s out of our control.”