Back on track

Wildflowers bloom in the Kugler Cemetery in the Bonnet Carré Spillway, in Norco. The ancestors of many local residents are buried there but for years the cemeteries have been largely unrecognized.

Memorial to remember long-forgotten cemeteries

BY JENNY HURWITZ
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KENNER — The unmarked plot of land, tucked away within the 7,623 acres of the Bonnet Carré Spillway, looks much like the rest of the spillway's terrain, sprawling and still covered with weeds and sprays of wildflowers.

Buried beneath its surface lies a little-known chapter of history.

The land, known as the Kugler cemetery, is one of two black cemeteries in the spillway in St. Charles Parish. The second one, Kugler cemetery, is less than a mile away.

The ancestors of many local residents are buried in this land, including some former slaves, but for years the cemeteries have been largely unrecognized.

Now, after years of delays, the Army Corps of Engineers, which oversees the floodway upriver from New Orleans, is ready to commemorate the sites.

"We do have the money in place now to really move forward to get this thing back on track," said Michael Stout, chief of the corps' National Resources Management Program.

Stout said corps officials have been aware of the cemeteries since the 1980s, when they embarked on a cultural resources inventory to determine the historical significance of the sites. But for years, fears of vandalism kept them from publicizing the locations, he said.

Now that the money is in place, the corps is preparing to finalize plans for the project.

In Stout's opinion, it's a move that is long overdue.

"What we did is disconnect these communities from the people," he said. "Now we need to restore that."

The Kenner and Kugler cemeteries, which contain an estimated 200 to 300 plots, began as parts of two adjoining plantations.

Jill-Karen Yakubik, an archaeologist who has worked with the corps to determine the cultural and historic significance of the sites, said they were used as black cemeteries from the mid-1800s until 1929, when the corps purchased the land.

The corps bought the land in response to the 1927 Mississippi River flood, which swamped areas surrounding New Orleans and killed hundreds of people.

The spillway's essential role is to divert high river water away from New Orleans.

Stout said corps spillway records do not indicate the presence of the cemeteries. But in oral histories, descendants said there were grave markers at the sites when the corps bought the land, he said.

"I believe these cemeteries were known," Stout said.

He pointed to historical context as a factor.

"We're talking 1929 in the Deep South. To the powers that be, it didn't seem important," he said.

When the spillway opened in 1937, river water deposited several feet of sediment over the site, and many descendants of those buried in the cemeteries lost track of the location of the graves, Stout said.

Over time, knowledge of the cemeteries faded away, he said.

Then, in the early 1970s, the corps dug a drainage ditch at what is now the Kenner cemetery. And during a spillway opening in 1975, water washed away excess dirt, revealing coffin pieces, part of a headstone and human bones.

After finding the artifacts, the corps hired archaeologists to survey the land, locate coffins and identify the site boundaries, Stout said.

In subsequent years, the corps established a buffer zone to prevent damage from the riders of all-terrain vehicles and four-wheeler trucks who use the spillway as a recreational riding area, he said.

They chose not to specify the locations of the cemeteries because of fear of vandalism.

Stout said the corps hasn't noticed erosion or damage to the sites as a result of the spillway openings.

The coffins, buried a foot or two below the surface at Kenner and about 6 feet below the surface at Kugler, are relatively safe, he said.

Because they're part of the spillway, the cemetery sites are susceptible to flooding and layers of sediment from the sporadic openings of the floodway.

Yakubik, based on a survey provided by her firm, Earth Search Inc., said most descendants did not feel the need to move the cemeteries out of the spillway.

New Sarpy resident Myrtle Jenkins, who believes her paternal grandparents are buried in the spillway, said it makes sense to leave the cemeteries as they are.

"It's been there so many years," Jenkins said. "Where would they dig that up and put it?"

Plans for the memorial include a monument or headstone displaying the names of ancestors buried at the sites, Stout said. Descendants would also like to include informational plaques, boundary markers, historic photographs and a visitors parking area, he said.

The corps plans to start work to mark the site this summer, he said.