New gravesites under way for Port Hudson Cemetery

BY JAMES MINTON
Baker-Zachary bureau

PORT HUDSON — The final resting place for generations of military veterans since the middle of the Civil War, the Port Hudson National Cemetery, soon will run out of room for new burials.

Now Louisiana's only national cemetery with space remaining for new graves, Port Hudson averages about 400 burials a year, said Rex A. Kern, director of the Port Hudson and Baton Rouge national cemeteries.

But the National Cemetery Administration is finishing a project that will keep Port Hudson in use for a little while longer, Kern said.

After that, the cemetery arm of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs hopes to open a satellite cemetery on property in the Port Hudson area, although it won't be a site linked to the original cemetery.

About 325,000 military veterans live in Louisiana, said Tom Burbank, undersecretary of the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs.

The state agency opened the first state veterans cemetery in June 2007 near Keithville in Caddo Parish.

Twenty-six of the 100 acres are developed, with room for 6,800 burials initial-

Gerald Johnson, left, and Paul Lobell, in backhoe, cemetery caretakers and equipment operators at Port Hudson National Cemetery, prepare a gravesite Tuesday in the cemetery’s recent expansion area, which is about 95 percent full. The cemetery will be using vaults, allowing the Civil War-era cemetery to accept burials of veterans and their spouses for the next two years.

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Port Hudson National Cemetery director Rex Kern stands with some of the vaults to be set underground, then covered with sod. The cemetery is working to extend its capacity, as it fills up its property. The vaults, placed closer to each other than traditional gravesites, will allow more burials while a new site of expansion is prepared.

Cemetery
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By and eventually about 40,000, Burbank said.

Louisiana's veterans department also is working with its federal counterpart to open a second state cemetery in Vernon Parish in the near future.

Others could follow in later years in Jennings, Rayville and Covington, Burbank said.

The national VA funds 100 percent of the construction costs for eligible state cemeteries.

Meanwhile, burials will continue at Port Hudson.

"We call it our crypt project, an additional 800 burial sites that will be finished by the end of July. That will expand Port Hudson's burial time for approximately two more years," Kern said.

Port Hudson now uses the "traditional burial" method: digging graves in undisturbed ground as they are needed. Each grave is 5 feet wide and 8 feet long, taking 40 square feet of cemetery surface area.

"We're down to about 120 burial sites left prior to the 800 being installed," Kern said.

Space for the 800 new burial locations was carved out of the existing cemetery by moving sidewalks and using a "spoil" site where loose earth was stored.

The project began with an archaeological survey of the site, followed by an excavation of the property and the installation of concrete vaults in 3-foot-by-8-foot spaces.

The boxlike structures were then covered with 1 to 20 inches of soil and new sod, Kern said. When a grave is needed, workers will cut and remove the sod and the earth above the vault.

"We're going to gain probably 30 percent more burials per acre than we normally would by doing traditional sites," he said.

"That is a quick fix, a short-term fix to give us the ability to purchase some land close by to establish a new cemetery," Kern said, adding that the VA is "100 percent committed" to developing a nearby cemetery.

One potential site is on U.S. 61 south of the Georgia-Pacific Corp. mill access road, and the other is on La. 64 in the direction of Zachary, Kern said.

The VA wants to acquire 100 or more acres.

"Considering that this is 20 acres, and its been here for 147 years, I think a hundred and something acres will last a long time here for Louisiana," Kern said.

Georgia-Pacific Corp. land donations allowed the cemetery's expansion in 1978 and 1994, but the National Park Service won't allow VA to expand again.

"Since we are in a National Historic Landmark boundary, the National Park Service doesn't want any more excavations," Kern said, adding the park service "is taking a stand because they're trying to preserve what little is left."

The first burials in the cemetery were by necessity during the 48-day siege of the Confederate stronghold as Union soldiers were killed on the battlefield in 1863.

Mike Fraering, curator and interim manager of the nearby Port Hudson State Historic Site, said today's cemetery was a "no man's land" between the Confederate and Union positions.

Often, men were buried where they fell during brief flashes, but Congress designated the site as a national cemetery in 1867.

A detached section of Confederate earthworks also was in the cemetery site, Fraering said.

La. veterans cemeteries
STATE
Northwest La Veterans Cemetery
7970 Mike Clark Road
Keithville, LA 71047
Phone: (318) 925-0612
FEDERAL
Alexandria National Cemetery
Visitation only
209 E. Shamrock Ave.
Pineville, LA 71360
Baton Rouge National Cemetery
Visitation only
220 N. 19th St.
Baton Rouge, LA 70806
Port Hudson National Cemetery
20978 Port Hickey Road
Zachary, LA 70791
(225) 654-3767

MEMORIAL DAY PROGRAMS
Port Hudson National Cemetery:
today, 11 a.m.
Baton Rouge National Cemetery:
today, 3:30 p.m.