Records yield secret buried 76 years

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After years of searching for his mother, J.S. Day found her Saturday morning.

Day never met his mother, Mary Oma Landry, because she died in October 1917, four hours after delivering him into the world.

Finding her grave Saturday was the closest he’ll ever get to her. And when he stood at her crypt for the first time Saturday, 76 years worth of tears flowed out.

He’d searched for her tomb in St. Joseph’s Cemetery twice, but failed to find her grave.

So when he contacted Bunny Heroman, president of the St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery Board, Thursday, she examined old burial records and confirmed

the location of his mother’s grave.
That piece of information led Day to the grave where she lies.

Day was one of several volunteers who showed up at St. Joseph’s Cemetery on Main Street Saturday to clean up and search for lost loved ones.

“I feel like I should have known it before,” he said, wiping tears from beneath his black-rimmed glasses.

He stood silently gazing at the tomb.

Standing in front of the 4-by-8-foot cemented grave, Day discovered a list of people buried inside.

Although Day’s mother’s name was not on the list, he is certain his mother is among those buried in the 168-year-old cemetery.

It was not uncommon for early locals to bury 10 to 20 bodies in one crypt without listing all the names, said Heroman, who conducts research on the buried.

Volunteers who came to clean graves and pull weeds say the cemetery has some unique qualities.

“People of all races and religions were buried here, and I like that sense of community,” said Vernon Bahlinger, a board member whose great-grandparents are buried in the cemetery.

St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery is not limited to people of the Catholic faith. Its inhabitants include early settlers, French migrants, blacks and whites and Civil War veterans.

Heroman said the group’s latest project is to find the grave site of Southern University’s founder, who is believed to be buried in the cemetery.

“We’re interested in finding descendants and repairing the tombs,” said Heroman, who led several other volunteers to prune trees, cut weeds and clean up some of the graves.

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Vernon Bahlinger pulls weeds out of a crypt bearing the name of the Menard family Saturday at St. Joseph’s Cemetery. In the background is a crypt that has been whitewashed and recently restored.
Cemetery

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Heroman said she receives about one call a week from families interested in finding a loved one's whereabouts in the cemetery.

Heroman often begins her search by reading newspaper obituaries and an old custodian's record book that details about 47 years of early burials.

Many of the headstones, some six to eight feet high, have sunk into the ground because of south Louisiana's soft ground and heavy rains, she explained.

"If they're not supported, they sink by their own weight," she said.

That's why she urges family members to maintain the graves.

If she's lucky, she sometimes runs into family members who want to maintain and spruce up otherwise dilapidated tombstones.

Several families have repainted and restored the tombs, she said.

Heroman wound her way through nearly every grave on the burial site and seemed to know something about each, including one of the oldest portions of the cemetery where 11 family members of Col. Philip Hicky are buried.

Hicky is referred to in certain Louisiana history books as the "Paul Revere" of the 1810 West Florida Rebellion, in which a group of Anglo-Saxon landowners overthrew the Spanish fort in Baton Rouge.

Heroman can only estimate how many bodies are buried in the cemetery and in some of the larger above-ground tombs.

"That's an ongoing thing. I think there are literally thousands," she said.

Intriguing to Heroman is the striking attention to detail early Baton Rougians gave to burying their dead.

"These days people tend to put just the facts on tombstones, but back then, people would tend to get descriptive," she said.

"It was just a part of the era. Everything was flowery and Victorian..."

Gravestones range from 10 feet to less than one foot, in all shapes and sizes. Several gravestones resemble stacks of logs.

Heroman said the log-shaped gravestones were made for an early fraternal society called Woodsmen of the World, many of whom fought in the Civil War.

Heroman hopes to stop new burials in the cemetery because some tombstones have been erected on top of historic gravestones.

Before leaving the cemetery Saturday, Day paused to stare at his mother's tomb. He said he's optimistic he may find other relatives buried there.