Registering resting places

Sue Deville, director of the Opelousas Museum and Interpretive Center, stands on a fallen tree at an abandoned cemetery in St. Landry Parish. Deville, along with archeologist Chip McGimsy, are working on a project to locate, map and document buried people in lost or abandoned cemeteries throughout the parish.

Archaeologist Chip McGimsy wipes leaves from the inscribed headstone of the young Dr. Daniel Quirk, whose dates read 1818 to 1841, on a fallen tree at an abandoned cemetery near Washington in St. Landry Parish. He is with the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's department of sociology and anthropology.

Opelousas woman working to locate 'lost' cemeteries

By Bobby Arobin
Special to The Advocate

Cemeteries

Archaeologists at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette have been mapping and recording details of abandoned cemeteries in the area.

McGimsy, who is a collaborative program assistant at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, said the project is focused on identifying and preserving these historic sites.

"We are trying to do a better job of mapping and preserving these cemeteries, which are often overlooked in the past," McGimsy said.

McGimsy said the project is being funded by a grant from the National Park Service, which is helping to provide resources and expertise to the team.

McGimsy said the project is also receiving support from the Louisiana Office of Historic Preservation, which is helping to coordinate the mapping and recording efforts.

"We are working closely with historic preservationists and experts to ensure that we are properly identifying and preserving these cemeteries," McGimsy said.

The project is expected to be completed within the next year, with the goal of creating a comprehensive database of abandoned cemeteries in the area.

"This project is important because it is helping to preserve the history of the area and the people who have lived here," McGimsy said.

Flowers such as gardenias and azaleas were often planted at gravesites to lessen the stench of decaying bodies, Deville said.

Although Deville is using the state and parish archives to obtain death records and land purchases indicating where cemeteries are, she said most of her discoveries are of a personal nature.

"I hear about cemeteries" by word of mouth more than anything," Deville said.

"Some of these are unfortunately gone forever. There are other people out there who know about them, but haven't said anything yet," Deville said.

"Sometimes you might hear of a graveyard, but the only evidence of where it might be a general location, along a road or in some woods," Deville said.

"Since many of these old cemeteries are on property owned no longer by the families whose remains are located there, proper maintenance is long overdue," she said.

There have been instances when Deville has discovered a cemetery after a farmer had plowed it up.

Of the unmarked cemeteries Deville has visited, Deville estimates 98 percent have been vandalized.

Many graves also once had wooden crosses that were decayed, making it difficult to discern who is buried there, she said.

"When settlers first moved here, some families set aside parts of their property for a cemetery," she said.

Usually family cemeteries are located at the rear of the property, making access arduous, she said.

"Now with the assistance of archeologist Charles "Chip" McGimsy, Deville could save many cemeteries from further oblivion," McGimsy said.

McGimsy, employed at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette through the state Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, said grant money is being used to identify the unmarked graves.

"What Deville is doing is providing a specific location of a cemetery. That allows us to put a dot on the map maintained by the state's Division of Archaeology," he said.

Deville said Evangeline Parish is included in the project, because it was originally part of St. Landry Parish.

McGimsy said the Department of Archaeology maintains records of cemeteries, but some of those locations don't always appear on existing maps.

"Right now we're basically relying on topographical maps used by the U.S. Corps of Engineers to know where a lot of these graves are. Some of the graves (Deville) has located were not on these maps that are being used," he said.

McGimsy said Deville's research and documentation efforts are significant.

"Federal law states that projects where federal money is involved requires a permit if the construction is near a gravesite. The state laws are not as comprehensive as federal law," McGimsy said.

McGimsy said projects generated with private money are not obligated by either federal or state laws to obtain permits even if there is a threat of environmental impact to graves.

"Deville's documentation requires an official declaration that a gravesite exists at a specific location before it is registered with the state, he said.

"After that state form is signed, there is an official record that the site is there; and at least now it will require the federal government or the state to deal with them and make plans," McGimsy said.

Deville said she also pinpointed coordinates of the cemetery's location and provides photographs as well as nearby vegetation.

Opposite/s photo by BRYAN FULK

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