Restoration of a Cemetery

The one cemetery listed officially as part of next Sunday's tour is the McCausland family cemetery not far from St. John's Episcopal Church. The gravestones in the cemetery tell a story of before-the-Civil War wealth and after-the-war poverty. There is an aftermath.

Beginning in 1959 the cemetery was restored insofar as was possible by Mrs. Walter E. Haase of South Riveroaks Avenue and her sister, Mrs. Joseph A. Minton of Scottsdale, Ariz. As Mrs. Haase phrases it, her sister, Bessie, was unable to be here in person but furnished the money for the restoration, and Mrs. Haase, with the help of her husband, saw to all the details.

Most illustrous of those buried there was Gen. Robert McCausland, born in Ireland in 1773, an Indian fighter and a great patriot who helped lead the defense against the British in the War of 1812.

Monument Sent

When he died in 1851 and was buried on the McCausland plantation, the United States government decided to mark his grave with a tall marble shaft on which his full length portrait in uniform was carved, and which was topped with an eagle guarding a nest of marble eggs. The monument was shipped down the Mississippi River and then hauled by oxcart to Laurel Hill. It is said to have cost $10,000 at that time.

One of the markers in the old cemetery displays the Harp of Tara and was a tribute to the musical talent of the general's young daughter, Eliza McCausland, who died in a yellow fever epidemic. Another on the grave of a child shows a marble cradle-bed at the foot of which there was originally a marble lamb, long since gone.

Hidden by Trees

No one was buried in the McCausland cemetery after the 1870's with one exception, and it fell into complete disrepair. Mrs. Haase said that it was so overgrown with large trees one could pass up and down the road before it time and again and never see it. Roots of the trees had tipped the old gravestones and what was left of the fence was laid flat.

It was a major clean-up and repair job, and before it was done the project involved the handling of hundreds of old slave-made bricks, and the manufacture of enough new fence for three sides of the half-acre plot. And when it was done in 1961, Mrs. Haase, the former Mae Domonique, and her sister arranged to have the body of their grandfather, Robert Emmett McCausland who had died in 1890, removed from New Orleans where it had been placed in a vault at the old St. Louis No. 1 cemetery.

Burial Arranged

Robert Emmett McCausland was buried in McCausland cemetery next to his wife who had died in 1875. Because by 1875 there was no money in the South for elaborate markers—and if one was placed on the grave it was probably of wood and rotted away—Mrs. Haase chose a simple marble stone for the two graves, typical of the period of their deaths.

"The destitution was unbelievable," said Mrs. Haase, whose mother was Sarah Harriet McCausland, later married to John Ernest Donahoo of East Feliciana Parish. In 1910 the Donahoes moved to Baton Rouge and lived here in a home in the 8th block of Main Street.

Bricks Considered

When the Haases planned the preservation of the cemetery, they found enough of the old cast iron fence panels to go across its front. They thought they had solved the problem of how to enclose the other three sides when they realized they had on hand a goodly supply of old red bricks.

The uprooting of the cemetery fence and holes left by the trees revealed the fact that the fence had been constructed on a deep base of the hand-made bricks, all sun-baked, and some, amusingly enough, recouns Mrs. Haase, showing pig tracks. As the ground slopes here, the brick foundation was in some places six feet deep and always, it broadened out toward the bottom.

Duplicate Desired

The bricks were topped with marble slabs and to this the fencing was attached. Well, Mrs. Haase informed Mrs. Minton that there were enough bricks to enclose three sides of the cemetery, but Mrs. Minton said no—she thought it should be restored as it originally was and suggested having the old fence duplicated.

The much-corroded fencing had been cleaned and patched and welded and wired and set up across the front. But now a panel had to be replaced to be used as a pattern.

Working with a Baton Rouge iron works, the Haases then sent the panel to Birmingham, Ala., where it was copied.

Arches Repeated

The manufacturer was fascinated by the fence which, Mrs. Haase said, he considered so beautiful that he asked for the privilege of copying it for other customers. It consists of a series of Gothic arches, each with a cross. The iron worker said that it is a design recurring in Presbyterian churches and he has already reproduced it several times for Presbyterian restorations.

There is one change from the original, Mrs. Haase explains. Originally the McCausland name arches high over the gate, joined to the gateposts at either side. The iron worker advised that a reproduction of this would be too heavy to be supported by the old fencing which was already in place at the front, so a smaller arch was used and the McCausland name placed on the gate.

Mrs. Haase has compiled the history of the cemetery and those buried there, a biography of General McCausland, and finds genealogy an interesting hobby.