Searching for History

Bob Melia, left, of Real-Time Thermal Imaging uses thermal sensing video equipment to confirm old grave sites found by Joe Day, warden of the St. Helena Parish Jail. Day uses an attached viewer to look at the images focused on by Melia.

Long-lost cemeteries found in St. Helena

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GREENSBURG — When Joe Day searched for his roots, they were hard to find, but not far away. Myrtis Johnson’s search took her back to her native St. Helena Parish, into its woods and into the homes of some of its oldest residents. Day, a descendant of Confederate soldiers, and Johnson, a descendant of slaves, have marked 82 graves in a slave cemetery that had disappeared in woods and underbrush early in the last century.

After a year of searching through thick woodlands, Day also found a lost family cemetery that includes the graves of ancestors who fought in the Civil War, the War of 1812 and the Revolutionary War.

Identifying the 82 individual graves in a slave cemetery on one of the area’s former cotton plantations appears impossible, but Johnson has managed to learn many of the names of the plantation’s slaves likely to have been buried there. She plans a single monument in their honor.

Historian Sam Hyde of Southeastern Louisiana University said the finds of the pair appear to have rich historical significance. They provide further documentation of the prevalence of slavery in the piney woods, help explain the current demographics of St. Helena Parish and provide a rare memorial to a group of people important to the area’s development.

During their search, Johnson and Day found mutual respect for each other and their separate but intertwined branches of history.

“We have two different backgrounds,” Day said of Johnson. “But, more importantly, she’s all about history and I am, too.”

“History is a reality that we all have to acknowledge … even when there are cases of human injustice,” Day said. “The main thing is that we should learn from the mistakes of the past.”

“It’s a history which neither of us lived.” Johnson said, but there’s a force that connects us to do this.”

She said a friendship has grown between her and Day, the warden of the St. Helena Parish Jail. They met when Day provided inmate workers for Johnson to clean up a post-Civil War cemetery where some of her ancestors are buried at Venable Chapel in the community of Liverpool.

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Cemeteries

Day told her about his search for his family cemetery and that he'd learned of a slave cemetery from an elderly area resident. They went searching there together.

"Even before his cemetery searches began, Day's research had revealed that seven of his eight great-great-grandfa-
mothers had lived in the Cemetery District. That's pretty interesting for a member of Sons of Confederate Veterans, who is one of the oldest, largest, and most re-nowned groups of descendants of Civil War veterans."

But when he learned several generations of his family went back to a man who had fought in the Revolutionary War, it led him to be interested in slave cemeteries. Day began a mission to find one.

"I was determined," he said. "I knew if I didn't find this cemetery it may never be found."

Correspondence from a distant cousin in Texas that he never met provided the first information. The cousin had found documents showing that Day's great-great-great-grandfather was the first slave, and great-great-great-grandfather was buried in a large family cemetery in St. Helena Parish.

The question was: Where?

The cousin, who subsequently died, attempted to find the cemetery without success in the 1970s. The information she left to Day indicated only that the burial had taken place on a north bank of a stream that runs to the sea.

In 1985, Day attempted to find the cemetery and found a "unknown" in the Saltwater Cemetery that matched the description.

In 1987, Day's efforts led him to the site of the Saltwater Cemetery that matched the description.

When the group turned at angles to form a square with seven graves, they eventually found the cemetery. Day said he knew he'd found the cemetery.

"I was determined, I knew if I didn't find this cemetery it may never be found," said Day, history buff.

Just Day, history buff. Bob Meola, left, found additional graves, like the one marked in the foreground, in a recently discovered cemetery where ancestors of Joe Day, second from left, are buried. Archeologist Kathryn Lintott marks the graves while archeologist Heather Apolonio prepares a report on the cemetery to be sent to the state.

The tradition in Southern family cemeteries was to buy each generation in a separate line starting at the west side of the cemetery, with heads to the west and feet to the east. Women lay next to their husbands to the north, he said.

Since he knew the dates of his ancestors' deaths, Day said he feels fairly sure he placed the gravestones on the correct graves.

"It's a discovery," he added. The government provided military headstones for his ancestors who fought in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812 and the Civil War. He put the other graves with wooden crosses and plans to eventually replace those with headstones.

Meanwhile, Johnson has marked with simple stones the 82 slave graves found in another overgrown cemetery a few miles away. He thought he had found a few, but it turned out to be a lot, she said. After Meola surveyed the area with thermal imaging equipment, Day and inmates from the prison camp cleared away the brush.

Johnson talked at length with several older natives of the area, including Pearl Knighting, 99, who provided her names of the slaves who lived on the plantation based upon what her mother and grandmother had told her.

Day is determined to find which of the many slaves lived there, the names of the slaves they owned and where they were buried. He's set up a non-profit foundation that will pay for erecting monuments and keeping the cemetery open. He's also been active in the state's effort to list the cemetery on the state's register of historic places.

"If my family was here and you were to build a church on their graves, you'd have to start building a stadium," he said. "I'm doing everything I can do to help preserve the cemetery."

He said he's been working on the project for about 10 years.

"I've learned so many things about my ancestors, I think it's important to keep the cemetery open," he said. "It's a great place to go and learn about your family history."