Resting in Peace

St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery dates to 1824

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

When little Mary Lucile Barcelot died suddenly before Christmas, 1869, her heartbroken family marked her grave in the St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery with a stucco playhouse. She is one of many children buried in the old cemetery on Main Street.

Since its founding in 1824, many of the area's most prominent business and community leaders have been buried at St. Joseph Cemetery. However, most of the graves are of ordinary people who were placed there by their grieving relatives. Whole families devasted by yellow fever epidemics of the 19th century were buried with their deceased servants.

Located there, too, are the graves of two prominent black Reconstruction legislators, Augustus Williams and Robert Austin Long, as well as those of 25 to 35 Union soldiers, all Presbyterians.

St. Joseph Cemetery is the final resting place of Marie Adrien Favret, one of Louisiana's most significant artists of the 19th century whose works documented many of the state's plantations. Also buried there is Sophie Lachen, a former slave who was born in 1776 and lived to be 115.

"We have blacks and whites, Catholics and Protestants, Union and Confederates, religion and laymen," said Mary Anne Hynes Flemel, a member of the cemetery board of trustees. At least 15 of her ancestors including her great-great-grandmother, who died in 1837, are buried in the cemetery.

Even though St. Joseph Cemetery is more than 175 years old, it was not the first Catholic cemetery in Baton Rouge. The earliest Catholic settlers were buried in a Spanish cemetery, which was located on the present grounds of the State Capitol.

The area's first Catholic church is believed to have been near the Spanish cemetery. "Nobody knows where the church actually was," said St. Joseph Cemetery secretary Chip Landry, a history buff who has mapped the site.

In 1792, when Baton Rouge was still a Spanish colony, Father Carlos Barbe was assigned as the first pastor of Baton Rouge. Shortly after his arrival, the second Catholic church was built on the site of the present St. Joseph Cathedral.

The parish was known as Our Lady of Sorrows. A cemetery was established behind the church on North Street between North Fourth and Fifth streets.

"In the early 1800s, the cemetery became full and in a state of disrepair," Landry said. "Cattle grazing in the cemetery damaged the graves and markers, so the decision was made to move the cemetery."

In 1854, the board of works paid $500 for two arpends (about 1.23 acres) of property on what was then called the Omerie Road (now Main Street). Local citizens were asked to move their loved ones from the old cemetery within one year of its relocation. Our Lady of Sorrows is now the St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery.
Cemetery

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

The original graves dug from Our Lady of Sorrows had no mark,
Laundry said. These graves are in the far west section under other
groves. "If you start at the west end and move east, you will see a hum-
ny of the settlers in the area," he said.

Parishioners worked hard to maintain the cemetery. The ladies in the parish held a day for the dead in 1844 and raised $630.90, some of which they took to purchase a fence.

By 1868, the old Our Lady of Sorrows cemetery was in terrible condition and had almost been abandoned. Families were offered an equal amount of property in the cemetery on Main Street if they would move their ancestors.

"The church went to the town founders," Landry said. "They of-
fured to give the city the right to extend North Street if they would help move the bodies."

The mayor and councilmen agreed to open North Street from Front to 20th streets, right through the old cemetery, and to move the remaining bodies to St. Joseph Cemetery. The old ceme-
tery was permanently closed.

In 1893, the church paid $1,800 to the estate of James Callahan for the property at the east end of the cemetery.

A portion of the Civil War Battle of Baton Rouge took place in the cemetery, which also served as a hospital for soldiers. One grave-

Tombstone contains a bullet hole, probably from a stray bullet.

On Oct. 29, 1862, the Baton Rouge Daily Advertiser reported, "Saturday next, being the first day of the month of November, is sacred in the calendar to All Saints Day on our soil. It is noteworthy that since the last cere-
morial day our Catholic Cemetery, as well as Magnolia Cemetery, was the scene of one of the bloodiest conflicts of the

unnatural war." By the early 1920s, there were so few available burial plots remaining in the cemetery that the only burial permitted were for families who already owned lots.

At the time, Rosedale Memorial Park was being developed. Father Francois LeClerc, pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church, asked parishioners to move the bodies buried in one of lots of equal size in the new cemetery.

"Let St. Joseph's cemetery, after 100 years of usefulness, enter into a new state of uselessness by closing its doors to its successors, young, vig-
orous, growing, full of hope for the future," Father Casimir told the State-Times/Evening Advocate March 5, 1926.

Not all families were happy with the decisions to move the cemetery. More than 600 local residents with family members in the cemetery signed a petition urging that their relations remain in the old ceme-
tery. Speaking for the group, Joseph A. LeBlanc explained that all the old Catholic families in the area had relatives buried in the old ceme-
tery and that the removal of their remains to Rosedale seemed like a sacrilege to them.

A group of parishioners formed an organization to raise the funds to engrave perpetual markers on the last ceme-
tery of the sanctuary. King D. Landry and John McQuaid, J.A. Larue,立马, and Jules Lavoy were chosen as the board of trustees to administer the funds.


The parishioners won the battle, and the old cemetery was saved. Even so, over the years, family members found it difficult to main-
tain the cemetery in good condition. Many of the graves were not de-
terred or had been swallowed by their later cemetery artifacts.

"Over the years, the money wasn't put in as a great state of dispo-
sal," said Barbara H. Bart, president of the St. Joseph Catholic Cemetery Fund board. "There were times when the weeds were waist-high."

For years and years, nobody did anything," said Kitty Arthur LeBlanc, board treasurer. "LeBlanc's ancestors, Arthur and Baldwin families are among the most numerous in the cemetery. "With the exception of one great-grandmother, the rest of my father's family in that generation are buried here," she said.

One ancestor, Josephine LeBlanc, died in 1853 shortly after she arrived in Baton Rouge from Germany on a visit to her brother, Jacob LeBlanc, a furniture manufacturer.

"There was a story in my family that my great-grandmother used to offer money to anyone in the family who would be the last person to visit her grave," said Arthur. LeBlanc's said, "Of course, she had five daughters, and we didn't use the name."

Hattie O'Brien, William A. "Butch" Hart, has numerous family members buried in the cemetery, including two of her grandfather's brothers who moved to Baton Rouge. "Hattie's father, W.C. "Bill" Hart, was chief of the volunteer fire department in the town," O'Brien said. "The men at her disposal in 1910, after con-
tracing pneumonia while fighting a fire.

In the 1950s, a group of concerned citizens formed an organization trying to save the cemetery from destruction. Bill Hart and O'Brien, LeBlanc, like other family members, were allowed to bury their relatives in the city.

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serving the old burial lot.

The board of trustees sponsored work days in the spring and fall. Students from the Catholic High School and Our Lady of the Assumption High School helped with the work.

A group of volunteers, "the grave savers and fence and gate for the grounds," said Barbara Hart. This year, the board will sponsor work days in the cemetery. Brazil residents and cemetery caretakers will work on the grave and fence and fence for the grounds.

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Laundry and other members of the board continue to maintain groves that have been buried by dirt and debris for as long as they can remember. In some groves, people have thrown rocks and markers in the ceme-
tery of the cemetery," Barbara Hart said. They were surprised by them, but they said they were only people in the cemetery. Board members have located about 20 instances of vandalism.

"A lot of the mowers were found working late in the evening," said Landry. "They were left to neglect the ground in the cemetery when I started working there, but I believe there may be many more."

Laundry said, "The bodies were buried in the ceme-
tery to help their family.

"When we moved the bodies, we were trying to preserve the cemetery for the future," said Landry. "We don't have many relatives left but we are trying to preserve what we can."

Organizations of the cemetery, and in the future, will be taken care of if people don't take care of them," said Rutland. "This is a Baton Rouge history," Barbara Hart said. "It's important that people, including us, don't lose these relatives. They are part of our family history."

Kitty Arthur LeBlanc, cemetery board treasurer, stands by the caskets that will be placed in the ground. "I have been with this cemetery since 1951," said Landry. "I have watched the cemetery grow and develop.

Sophia Johnson, a former slave who was born in 1777 burying in the cemetery in 1891.

Advocate photos by Randy §

DEATH

DEATH, at 3 o'clock p.m. Sunday, October 1, 1957, WILLIAM HENRY HART, infant son of San M., and Sophia Hart, Baton Rouge, Tuesday, October 4th, 1957.

The friends and acquaintances of P.M., Sophia Hart, are respectfully invited to attend the funeral of infant son of San M., and Sophia Hart.

WILLIAM HENRY, from their residence on the morning of 1 o'clock.


Date: 1-29-01
Sec. C
pg. 1