St. Landry gravesites reveal tips for families

Genealogists building database on residents

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OPELOUSAS — St. Landry Parish graveyards are yielding forgotten clues that genealogists hope will connect present and past.

"The best way to see who lived here is to find where they are buried," said Estelle Perrault, president of the parish's genealogical and historical society.

In the Bellevue community south of Opelousas, the society is searching for a lost family cemetery in a wooded area between a parish road and state highway.

They are also attempting to find several antebellum plantation graveyards that lack tombstones. A graveyard south of Eunice, obscure and inaccessible because of underbrush and weeds, is making grave identification there arduous, said Perrault.

For the past several months, Perrault and the society's volunteer members have created databases of people who have died in St. Landry.

Perrault said their graveyard research could eventually create a catalog of all St. Landry graveyards and a census of who is buried in them. The information could ease families' searches for information about their ancestors, she said. "Births, marriages and deaths are all vital records in genealogy. People inquire all the time, and this is just one more tool they can use," Perrault said.

She said descendants seeking information about ancestors dating back to the 1700s can use the information obtained at Myrtle Grove Cemetery in Opelousas.

One of the most ambitious tasks the group has undertaken is mapping Myrtle Grove, begun in the early 19th century as eastern and northern Protestants began migrating to the predominantly Roman Catholic parish.

Despite her research, Perrault has been unable to document exactly when the city donated the land for the cemetery on U.S. 190.

"Judging by the dates on the graves that are there, it would have to be during the 1820s, but we're not sure. It could be prior to that," Perrault said.

She estimates thousands of former parish residents are buried in the cemetery, which spans several acres.

Perrault said land for a Jewish cemetery lying adjacent to Myrtle Grove was donated by the city in 1879.

The main challenge to identifying occupants of the Myrtle Grove graves is the lack of records, the one complaint she has with the city's control over the cemetery.

"Those records have to be somewhere, but no one seems to be able to locate them," she said. "I will say this administration (of Mayor John Vallien) has been very helpful. They seem to want to do things right."

Accurate city records date back only to 1983. The remainder of clues are obtained as volunteers wander the graveyard, copying names and dates of births and deaths of graves.

Many of Myrtle Grove's dead are buried in graves that do not contain headstones.

Most graves had identification markers, she said, but city workers who maintain the cemetery often remove the markers to make upkeep easier. Other graves are nothing more than brick rubble, eroded by weather or damaged by recurring vandalism.

"The way the cemetery is laid out, there are no rows, no sections. When plots were bought, they were identified by which person was buried south, east, north of west of them. Those graves we've identified have been placed in the database as a start at locating who is there," she said.

Some graves were originally marked with wooden crosses, which long ago rotted, she said.

Aerial mapping performed earlier this year has helped locate some of the gravesites. State Department of Transportation and Development maps also were created about 50 years ago when the highway was widened on its eastern approach into the city.

She said the Myrtle Grove tombstones offer a lucid picture of the parish just after the start of the 19th century.

"After the Louisiana purchase, people from Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia and the Carolinas came into St. Landry Parish," she said. "This is your community as it was 200 years ago. The graves in many cases tell you who people married and what they did."

Rows of graves tell the story of a family for generations, she said.

While doing the Myrtle Grove research, Perrault uncovered some clues about the social composition of Opelousas and the parish during the early 1800s.

"One grave says that buried there is Elizabeth Preston, wife of General John Preston of Virginia, a Revolutionary War hero," Perrault said. "Her son, Edward Carrington Preston, moved here, and she came with him. Next to her grave is his, which said he died of yellow fever."

Victims of various epidemics and diseases that swept through the parish are buried in Myrtle Grove.

A walk through the cemetery reveals names on tombstones, such as Bickley, Splane, Northup, Catlett and Thompson, who came to the parish after the main wave of Acadians came.

One grave is built like a table. The legs have been damaged by roots from an oak tree, Perrault said.

One of the saddest discoveries for Perrault at Myrtle Grove is a section containing the Foster family graves. "There is this row of little graves, five or six of them. They are for children who didn't die at the same time, but were victims of epidemics or sicknesses in their childhoods."