Vandals target Magnolia Cemetery; crews repair damaged monuments

By TOM GUARISCO
Advocate staff writer

Dust from thrown bricks still reddens the marble statue faces of children at one of Baton Rouge's oldest cemeteries, evidence vandals left last week after they struck 19 graves.

The vandals hurled bricks at statues and snapped off some headstones at the Magnolia Cemetery, located at North 19th and Florida streets. The cemetery dates to the 1850s and was the site of the Civil War Battle of Baton Rouge in 1862.

Sylvia Duke, chairwoman of the cemetery's board of directors, said volunteers ranging from Boy and Girl Scouts to the Young Leaders' Academy of Baton Rouge have spent countless hours cleaning up and painting the cemetery, making last week's destruction all the more senseless.

“We had 77 people out there two weeks ago — those Girl Scouts worked their hearts out, and it means so much to them,” said Duke, whose own grandparents are buried at Magnolia. “I cried when I saw what those people had done.”

Some of the street lights within the cemetery have been burnt out for a while, leaving the heart of the cemetery darker than usual, Duke said. The board plans a letter to Entergy Corp., which owns the lights, asking them to replace them.

Entergy spokesman Bill Benedicto said no one reported the lights out until after the vandals struck. He said a crew will check the lights and replace them soon.

Officials believe a small group of vandals struck late on the night of Oct. 27 or early the next morning. Police have not arrested anyone.

The spree apparently began at the statue known as “The children,” a marble monument marking the graves of some of the first people buried there. The statue marks the graves of the Crenshaw children, Mattie Pike, Fanny Bell and an unnamed infant. The monument has been through a lot in its 140 years, from hurricanes to Confederate soldiers who took cover behind it in the Battle of Baton Rouge.

The children also withstood the vandals — although red brick dust is caked on their faces and broken bricks lie on the grass around them, the statue appeared to have suffered no real damage.

But many other headstones and statues were not so fortunate.

For example, the vandals struck the grave of Henry T. Hartner, buried since April 23, 1894. The top of an obelisk monument marking his tomb was broken off.

“I don’t know where the top is now,” said Bob Gilbreth, district maintenance foreman for the Baton Rouge Recreation and Park Commission, which cares for the cemetery grounds.

I cried when I saw what those people had done.

— Sylvia Duke, Magnolia Cemetery Board of Directors' chairwoman

The Daily Advertiser
Lafayette, LA
Bob Gilcrease, district maintenance foreman for BREC, picks up a piece of a broken headstone Thursday at Magnolia Cemetery. His crews have cleaned up most of the damage vandals did there last week.

Cemetery

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1B

Gilcrease said the vandals cut a destructive path through the cemetery's northern end, lopping off the head of one statue and snapping several headstones. His crews scrambled to clean up the mess and repair some of the damaged headstones before All Saints' Day Monday, when many people visited the cemetery, he said.

By Thursday most of the repairs were complete, but some headstones and statues remained broken.

Gilcrease said the damage was probably $15,000, even though it would be impossible to replace some of the pieces.

"You're dealing with marble — hell, they don't even make stuff like that anymore," Gilcrease said. "This is a very special place."

Carolyn Bennett, executive director of the Foundation for Historical Louisiana, said Magnolia Cemetery is on the National Register of Historic Places, mainly because it was the site of the Battle of Baton Rouge.

A total of 84 Union and 95 Confederate soldiers lost their lives in the cemetery during the battle.

The battle is commemorated every Aug. 5, the battle's anniversary.

Lt. Chip Landry of the East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's Office said it is hard to nab vandals who periodically strike cemeteries around the parish.

Magnolia Cemetery is hard to protect since its gate stays open even at night. Also, descendants of only a handful of families buried there are still alive, so there are fewer and fewer people who tend family plots and keep an eye on things.

"It falls on volunteers or someone who will take care of it," Landry said.