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Ask McGehee: What is the history of Catholic Cemetery out in Toulminville?

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Mobile's original Catholic Cemetery or "Campo Santo" (Sacred Ground) was in the area now called Cathedral Square, a space stretching west from today's Saenger Theatre to the block beyond the current site of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. In the 1820s, as Mobile grew into an American city, the old colonial burial ground was ripe for development.

Graves dating back to the 18th century were moved to a specially designated and sanctified section of the city graveyard, which has long been known as Church Street Cemetery. A rise in population and, unfortunately, a series of yellow fever outbreaks helped fill that space to capacity by the 1840s.

Already sensing the inevitable in 1836, the City of Mobile bought 36 acres outside the city limits for what is today Magnolia Cemetery. It would be another 12 years before Catholic Cemetery was established.

The Move to Toulminville

In December of 1848, Bishop Michael Portier purchased five acres on Stone Street near Three Mile Creek. The cemetery was laid out in a unique circular pattern and fronted with carriage gates flanked by a pair of pedestrian gateways. At the center of the circle, space was set aside to honor the Sisters of Charity.

The cemetery was consecrated and then leased to a caretaker who would dig the graves, collect burial fees and maintain the grounds. In a surprising clause in that lease agreement, the caretaker was forbidden to "sell or retail spirituous liquors upon the property in quantities less than one quart or keep a tippling shop upon the said premises."

The five acres soon proved insufficient, and in 1866, adjoining lands were purchased, but the plots were arranged in a far more traditional "grid" pattern along straight paths. Lots were set aside for fraternal orders as well as the Sisters of Mercy, Daughters of Charity, Little Sisters of the Poor and the Brothers of the Sacred Heart. A section for indigent Catholics was also reserved.

Catholic Cemetery grew with Mobile, and additional property was purchased between 1910 and 1948. In 1963, a mausoleum was added for above-ground burials. A brochure at the time assured potential buyers, "No place is more peaceful, surrounded as it is by wooded areas protecting it from the busy city's noises."

Resting here are remains of Adm. Raphael Semmes, Father Abram Ryan, the Poet Priest of the Confederacy, plus some 18,000 others of the Catholic faith.

20th Century Problems

Vandalism at the cemetery was a problem as early as 1946 when Sheriff William Holcombe decreed that "vandals and picnickers who make an amusement center of Toulminville's Catholic Cemetery will be arrested." Teens had been using the old tombstones for tables he said, "scattering luncheon scraps and papers" while several markers had been pushed over.

As the 20th century progressed, conditions in the most historic portions of the cemetery worsened. While grave spaces purchased after 1948 included a fee for perpetual care, spaces sold over the preceding century did not.

Perpetual care was a 20th-century creation. Originally, owners of the older lots were expected to cut the grass themselves, but as families moved away or died off, this became a rarity.

By the 1980s many markers were obscured by weeds standing six feet high. The cemetery management explained that they simply did not have the funds to hire staff to keep all 160 acres mown, especially during the rainy summer months. The cemetery was expected to be self-supporting by operating from the collection of burial fees and the sale of lots.

The Cemetery Makes Some Friends

A decade later, a growing number of volunteers began organizing cleanup days in the cemetery, and local parochial schools sent students to help. Finally, in 2006, having observed the success at Magnolia Cemetery, Friends of Catholic Cemetery (FOCC) was formed.

FOCC is an active group, which offers support to the Catholic Archdiocese of Mobile in improving, preserving and maintaining the cemetery as both a historic landmark and an actively used burial ground. They have worked to get the cemetery listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and their regularly scheduled cleanup days have led to a marked improvement in the maintenance and appearance of the grounds.

The original carriage gates have been restored, and Archbishop Emeritus Oscar Lipscomb donated a new entrance gate. The group has begun the installation of a fence featuring memorial plaques paid for by charitable donations.

FOCC aggressively seeks to identify those with an interest in the upkeep of their ancestors' gravesites and have recently digitized cemetery records dating back to 1892. This has made it possible for long abandoned lots to be made available for adoption and restoration.

Catholic Cemetery, 1700 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Toulminville.