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730 East Beach Boulevard
Long Beach, MS 39560
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November 4, 2022,

Dear Tangipahoa Historical Society:

I am writing to offer evaluation of the **Oak Grove AME Cemetery** in Kentwood, Louisiana using a GSSI Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) on June 16, 2022 to ascertain if there is evidence of an unmarked mass grave based on historical accounts of actions taken for the deceased following a 1903 train wreck near Kentwood, Louisiana (Photo 1).

Much of the information surrounding the trainwreck of 1903 is from several newspaper reports and primary source interviews conducted by the Tangipahoa Historic Society (THS). Conclusions reached by the THS were relayed to me at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) with target areas identified in the cemetery. Historical accounts of the area of interest included the use of approximately 21 pine boxes buried in a trench excavated by Kent's sawmill, who supplied the timber. The trench was initially dug too shallow according to accounts, so the site was exhumed and deepened. Kent's sawmill billed out for over 50 graves, likely because of the secondary burial. Boxes or coffins were constructed from cut 12-foot boards, implying 6-foot coffins. The THS concluded that the trench would be north/south oriented toward the road, near cedars, likely 6 to 10 foot wide, and 25 to 60 feet long. Anecdotal information received by Dr. David Holt of USM upon arrival at the cemetery gave targets to the west of the church and the back of the cemetery behind the church either to the southeast or southwest.

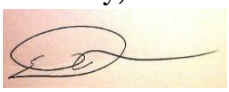
Upon arrival USM surveyed the target area to the west of the church where there were several cut cedars (Photo 6). Our GPR survey returned several strong returns indicative of unmarked graves in the area near existing mausoleums and tree stumps, but these returns were not in sequence or aligned and did not fit the signature of a trench burial. We flagged the areas of strong returns.

USM then GPR surveyed the entirety of the cemetery that was not overgrown. Note: the cemetery may continue deeper into the thicket to the south southeast of the church, but if a trench burial would have been dug there, we would not be able to GPR survey, and it would not be a convenient location to access from the road as described in by the THS report. This area remained inconclusive due to a lack of GPR survey.

During the full GPR survey one area of interest was revealed to the southwest of the church (Photos 2 and 3). This area had a ground return of about 1.5 meters down, 5-6 feet wide, and 20-25 feet long with the strongest of the returns along the southern portion of that feature. An immediate survey of the area included a natural drainage that runs to the west of the property, suggesting a relatively high water table that would not be conducive to deep burials due to the water table but also would support the concerns about a shallow burial due to flooding conditions near that stream (Photo 1). We also found cedar stumps, standing dead cedars, and a felled cedar further to the south (Photo 3). The feature the GPR located was a north-south feature. We also found 2 weathered headstones that pre-date 1903 just to the east and south of the feature (Photo 4 and 5).

The placement of these 2 headstones could indicate that the feature we located would have been dug just west of the existing graves in 1903 in a direct line from the road at the back of the property. Because of these pieces of evidence, we determine that the most likely position of the mass grave indicated from a GPR survey and information provided from the THS is where we flagged. We provide a photograph of this location as the second image appended to this document. Further, with the exception of the wooded area that we could not survey, we found no evidence of a trench or mass grave in any of the other sections of the cemetery including the open area near the east bank of the stream. We conclude that the most likely burial site of the victims of the 1903 train wreck based on the GPR survey is the flagged area in Photo 2.

Sincerely,



David Harms Holt, Ph.D.,

Associate Professor of Geography

Support Images:

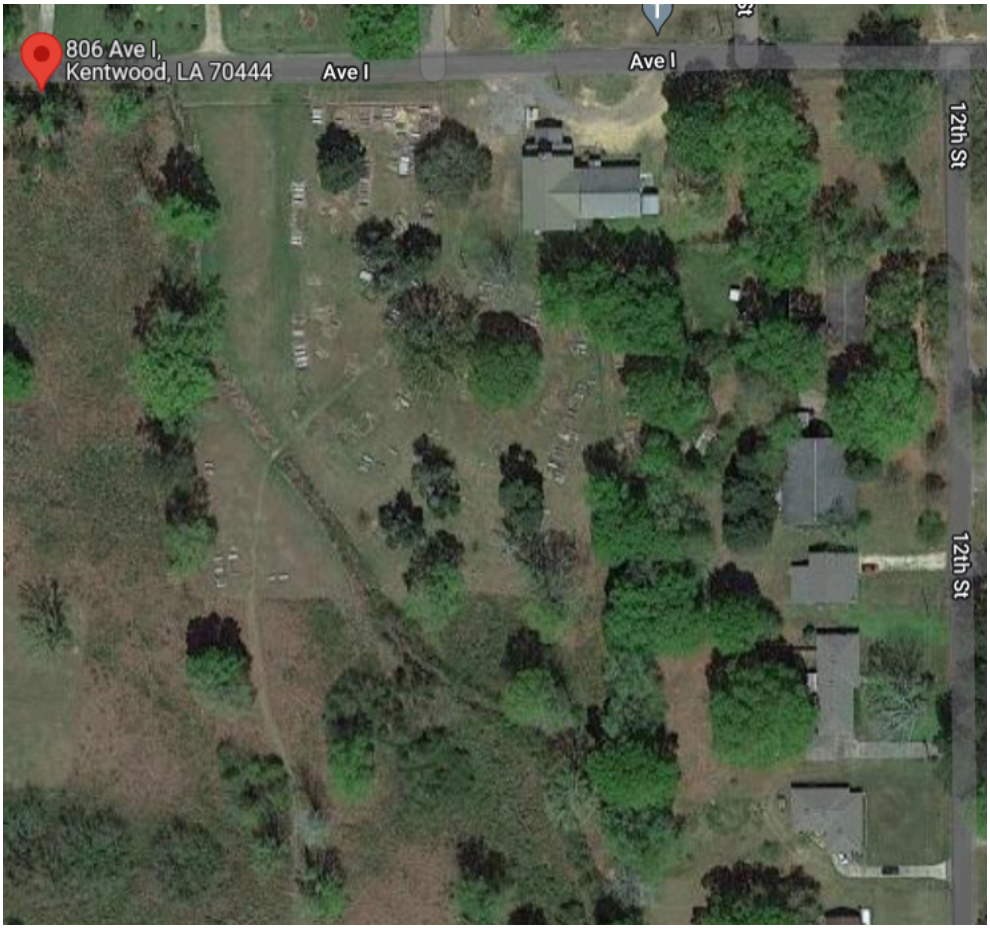


Photo 1: Google screen capture of location as sent via email showing the church, cemetery, and creek.



Photo 2: Flagged area of the GPR revealed feature that fits similar readings of a trench burial with strongest returns in the south portion of the disturbed layer (furthest in this image – photo taken from the north facing south). Note the light-colored mausoleum to the immediate east of the site of interest.



Photo 3: showing cedars, cedar stumps, cedar snags to the south of the area of interest. Note the headstone to the left. Photo taken looking south.

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Photo 4: showing one of the period headstones with a death date of 1901 that could be a corner marker for the cemetery at the time of burial for the mass grave in 1903.



Photo 5: showing headstone dated to 1899 death date that could be corner marker of the cemetery at the time of the 1903 burial.



Photo 6: showing the original area of interest. Note the cut cedars. There was evidence of returns in this area but not likely a trench burial.