

The focus of this nomination is the Talbert/Pierson Grave Shelters, a set of fifteen wooden grave shelters located within Vernon Parish's Talbert Cemetery. (Members of the Talbert and Pierson families, who were related by marriage, are buried beneath the shelters.) The cemetery is located next to the Pine Grove Methodist Church in an isolated, wooded, rural portion of the parish's southeast corner. (The church was moved next to the burial ground at least 70 or 80 years after the cemetery's founding and has no historic relationship to it. The cemetery is not being nominated because the majority of its graves are non-historic.) The nearest community is Sugartown in adjacent Beauregard Parish. The thirteen contributing shelters range in age from 1889 to 1949, with most being early within that range. (Because it was the custom to build grave shelters before sunset on the day of the burial (see Part 8), the death date on the accompanying tombstone was generally used to date each structure.) Two shelters are classified as non-contributing due to alterations/replacement of original materials. Some of the contributing structures have received slight alterations designed to keep them standing; however, they easily retain their historic appearance.

The house-like structures stand in three rows toward the rear of the cemetery. The first row contains seven wooden shelters, the second has six (three on each side of an open space), and the last row contains only two. Each shelter covers one grave and consists of a gabled metal roof with overhanging eaves supported by squared wooden posts at each corner. Each shelter's roof ridge parallels the grave beneath it. Tombstones accompanying the graves are located beneath the shelter's roof and, when a fence is present, inside the enclosure it creates. Five of the earliest grave shelters include fences with hand cut wooden pickets enclosing the rectangular space beneath the roofs. The pickets display Victorian era motifs. Some of these fences are placed atop wooden sills, but others lack them. All five of the fenced shelters have small gates in their eastern elevations. Four of the other contributing shelters display Victorian motifs to a lesser degree. As time passed, the builders reduced the amount of decoration, and the latest shelters have none.

Inventory

Shelter No. 1 (1889, grave of James Talbert, Sr., contributing). Gated fenced shelter with sills below its pickets. Each picket is decorated by a diamond shape at its top. The roof's gable ends are filled by three wide flush boards. Original wooden foundation blocks have been replaced by squares of concrete. Diagonal braces have been added to reinforce the structure.

Shelter No. 2 (1894, grave of James Silas Talbert, contributing). Gated fenced shelter without sills. Each picket ends in a diamond shape rising from an arrow-like shape. Shorter versions of these pickets outline the roof. The roof's gable ends are filled by three wide flush boards. Diagonal braces have been added to reinforce the structure. Original wooden foundation blocks have been replaced by squares of concrete.

Shelter No. 3 (1897, grave of M. F. Talbert, contributing). Unfenced shelter with sawtooth decorative motif outlining the roof's edges. The roof's gable ends consist of flush boards. The original wooden foundation blocks survive. Diagonal braces have been added to reinforce the structure.

Shelter No. 4 (1901, grave of J. P. Talbert, contributing). Unfenced shelter, originally identical to Shelter No. 3. The sawtooth decorative motif has been lost on one side. Original wooden foundation blocks have been replaced by squares of concrete. Diagonal braces have been added to reinforce the structure.

Shelter No. 5 (1900, grave of Elijah Pierson, contributing). Gated fenced shelter. Each fence picket is decorated by a diamond shape at its top. A sill survives beneath the fence on one side of the structure. A sawtooth motif outlines the roof's edges. It is also used to form a bargeboard to decorate the roof's gable ends. This shelter is unusual because it contains a wooden ceiling beneath its roof. Diagonal braces have been added to reinforce the structure.

Shelter No. 6 (1905, grave of Seny Ann Willingham, wife of Elijah Pierson, contributing). Gated fenced shelter almost identical to Shelter No. 5.

Shelter No. 7 (1948, grave of Mrs. Mattie Sellers, non-contributing due to loss of integrity). According to members of the Talbert family, this grave shelter once resembled a house with a door and window. However, much of the original fabric has been removed due to termite damage. All that remains is the metal roof supported by four corner posts and the wooden ceiling beneath the roof. Concrete squares have replaced the original wooden foundation blocks and diagonal braces reinforce the structure.

Shelter No. 8 (1925, grave of John Wesley Talbert, contributing). Unfenced shelter with sawtooth decorative motif outlining the roof's edges. It is also used to form a bargeboard to decorate the roof's gable ends. The latter

consist of horizontal beaded boards. One original wooden foundation block survives. Diagonal braces have been added to reinforce the structure.

Shelter No. 9 (grave of Saphronia Talbert, non-contributing). Unfenced shelter without any decoration. Although the grave beneath the structure dates to 1947, the corner posts and flush boards within the roof's gable ends appear to have been replaced.

Shelter No. 10 (1913, grave of Louis N. Talbert, contributing). Gated fenced shelter with sills below its pickets. Each picket is decorated by a diamond shape at its top. A sawtooth motif outlines the roof's edges and is also used to form a bargeboard to decorate the gable ends. Rocks are used to form corner foundation blocks. Diagonal braces have been added to reinforce the structure.

Shelter No. 11 (1948, grave of John D. Talbert, contributing). Unfenced shelter without any decoration. The roof's gable ends consist of flush boards. Diagonal braces have been added to reinforce the structure.

Shelter No. 12 (1949, grave of Johney E. Pierson, contributing). Unfenced shelter without any decoration. The roof's gable ends consist of flush boards. Diagonal braces have been added to reinforce the structure.

Shelter No. 13 (1902, grave of W. Talbert, contributing). Unfenced shelter with sawtooth motif outlining the roof. The roof's gable ends consist of flush boards. The original wood foundation blocks survive. Diagonal braces have been added to reinforce the structure.

Shelter No. 14 (grave of James S. Talbert, contributing). Unfenced shelter without any decoration except vertical beaded boards above beams resembling entablatures in the roof's gable ends. Although the grave beneath the structure dates to 1870, the shelter is later – presumably a replacement of the original. Its beaded board gables give every indication of being over 50 years old, although the supporting posts appear to be non-historic.

Shelter No. 15 (1938, grave of Mary Ann Pierson, contributing.) Unfenced shelter similar to Shelter No. 14. Posts also appear to be non-historic.

Integrity

The alterations outlined above (the addition of diagonal braces and the replacement of wooden foundation blocks) do not seriously impact the appearance of the contributing grave shelters. It is the unusual shelters themselves, and not their alterations, which stand forth. There are only two non-contributing shelters and they are similar in appearance to the simpler contributing shelters. As a rare representative of an unusual folk tradition associated with Upland South cemeteries, the Talbert/Pierson Grave Shelters are legitimate candidates for National Register listing.

SIGNIFICANT DATES: 1889 - 1949
ARCHITECT/BUILDER: Talbert and Pierson families (Builders)
CRITERION: C

The Talbert/Pierson Grave Shelters are of state significance in the areas of social history and architecture as rare survivors to represent a distinctive folk tradition associated with Upland South cemeteries. The nomination's period of significance ranges from 1889, the construction date of the oldest shelter, to 1949, the date of the last historic structure.

Farmers from the Upland South were the principal settlers in northern Louisiana, parts of west-central Louisiana, and sections of the Florida parishes. The Upland South landscape is best known for its widely disbursed settlements and log construction. Less well known are the distinctive grave shelters that scholars feel were once quite common in areas of Upland South settlement.

Scholars have not yet agreed upon a consistent name for these unusual structures. The term "grave shelter" has been chosen for the purposes of this nomination. (Other names include grave shed, lattice hut, grave box, board mausoleum, shelter house, spirit house and gravehouse.) Experts believe that grave shelters may once have been the norm in Upland South cemeteries. If so, the vast majority have been lost to deterioration and demolition, for surviving examples are rare. Although comprehensive surveys of the type are few, the shelters have been found throughout the South as well as in Texas. The work of folklorist Marcy Frantom illustrates the current rarity of the phenomenon in Louisiana, and her findings may reflect the survival rate within other Southern states as well. Frantom notes that only

three percent of the 236 North Louisiana cemeteries she examined in the early 1990s had one or more surviving grave shelters.

One of the mysteries about the grave shelter is its reason for existence. Scholars recognize the erection of grave shelters as part of the Upland South practice of decorating graves. (This custom also includes the placing of shells upon graves -- a practice seen in the treatment of the Talbert and Pierson grave sites.) Beyond this, however, they are uncertain concerning the origin of the unusual folk tradition. One theory points toward the above-ground burial practices of some Native American tribes as the basis of the custom, while another traces its ancestry to the lych-gates found in English cemeteries. (A lych-gate is a rectangular, wooden, house-like structure, located at a cemetery's entrance gate and used to protect the coffin and mourners from the weather until a priest leads the procession into consecrated ground.) Today's descendants of Upland South families cannot explain why the structures were built, except to say that the deceased persons requested it before their deaths. The general consensus is that fenced shelters were needed to prevent animals from damaging graves in the days before fenced cemeteries became common, and roofed structures were intended to keep rain from eroding the graves. Associated with the latter belief is the folk concept of keeping rain out of the deceased person's face. Whether decorative or practical, the grave shelter apparently became a significant aspect of Upland South burial practices, with custom demanding that the deceased person's family build the structure before sunset on the day of the burial.

According to folklorist Frantom, descendants of Uplanders may have constructed grave shelters in Louisiana as late as 1980. However, the tradition waned after World War II as older shelters disappeared and few new ones were built. Possible reasons for the tradition's decline include 1) the fact that families no longer buried their own dead; 2) the modernization of cemeteries (especially the trend toward mowed landscapes with tombstones lying flat within the ground); and 3) the ability of funeral homes to provide modern burial vaults. And, of course, by this time, cemeteries were fenced and stock laws had been passed prohibiting cattle and hogs from freely roaming the countryside.

According to family tradition, the Talbert family came to what is now Vernon Parish from Arkansas in 1820. The structures their descendants built for their family members are significant in two respects. First, they are rare illustrations of a recognized Upland South folk tradition. In her now ten-year-old survey of North Louisiana's 236 Upland South cemeteries (Frantom includes Vernon Parish as part of North Louisiana), the researcher found only fifty-one authenticated grave shelters. And given the fragile character of the resource, this number surely is lower today. The Talbert/Pierson collection is also important because it is highly unusual to find a relatively large number (fifteen) of grave shelters surviving in one cemetery. As Frantom points out, most occur singly, or at most in pairs. Thus, the set of Talbert/Pierson grave shelters is an excellent candidate for National Register listing.

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