

The focus of this nomination is the Istre Cemetery Grave Houses, a set of three wooden grave houses located within Acadia Parish's Istre Cemetery. The latter is located in the far southwestern portion of the parish near the Vermilion Parish line. The area surrounding the cemetery is rural and consists of prairie land subdivided into farmsteads. The nearest community is Morse. The three grave houses range in age from c. 1900 to 1935. (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 tombstones was used, when possible, to date each grave house.) All the structures easily retain their historic appearance.

At 4.25 acres, Istre is a relatively large country cemetery that is separated from the surrounding countryside by a chain-link fence. A local group organized to administer the cemetery keeps it well maintained, with the result that its appearance is somewhat park-like. The current number of graves in the cemetery is not available. However, it contained approximately 840 named burials in 1999 when *Cemetery Listings: Acadia Parish, Louisiana, Volume V* was published. This book contains information transcribed from all readable tombstones in Istre and other nearby cemeteries. Graves are found in all parts of the cemetery except the far eastern portion, which is considered the newest part of the facility. It is the custom in South Louisiana to cover an in-ground grave with a slab of concrete or granite, creating something like a low-scale vault above each. The majority of Istre's burials have this feature. The majority are also marked by either standing or in-ground tombstones. None of the vaults and tombstones is large enough to draw attention away from the much-larger grave houses in the cemetery.

The grave houses are the only resources in Istre Cemetery that qualify for Register listing under Criteria Consideration D: Cemeteries. This conclusion was reached after research in local histories and the above-mentioned book of cemetery listings, interviews with persons familiar with the resource, and an on-site evaluation that included a specific inventory of burials between the grave houses. The findings of the research process are as follows:

- a) Istre Cemetery is not associated with any historic event or trend that contributed to the development of the parish, the state, or the nation. The Istre family donated the land to serve as a cemetery because they felt it could not be used for anything else. Most especially, they felt it could not be used for farming, which was and continues to be the major focus of the surrounding rural community.
- b) No one of transcendent importance (a person of exceptional significance in his or her field of endeavor or who impacted history in an important way) is buried there. Instead, the burials consist of a few somewhat wealthy Cajun farmers and many typical residents of the nearby agrarian Cajun community.
- c) Istre Cemetery does not meet the age exception for cemeteries dating to the founding of a community. Although it is somewhat old, it does not appear to date back to the original settlement of the area it serves. Acadians began arriving in Louisiana in the 1750s, but the oldest readable tombstone at Istre is dated 1864. Locals believe Istre to contain many unmarked graves that are even older but, unfortunately, the locations and dates of these possible graves cannot be documented. The group responsible for the cemetery received its charter in 1889. Additionally, the cemetery lacks the integrity needed to qualify under the age exception. The early graves that are visible do not dominate the cemetery. The facility has been in constant use since its founding, and people have usually laid newly deceased family members to rest near immediate family and ancestors who preceded them in death. The result is that modern graves are mixed in with older burials throughout the cemetery. Furthermore, because the cemetery has been in use for so long, it contains more twentieth century than nineteenth century graves.
- d) With the exception of the three grave houses described below, Istre Cemetery contains nothing that would qualify it for the Register under the exception for distinctive design features. There are no large and/or elaborately decorated tombs, and it is the grave houses that capture the attention of visitors.

The three grave houses are not grouped together within the cemetery. Because approximately 140 other burials separate the three, a general description of these resources is appropriate. Dates of these burials range from 1918 to 2007. Only thirteen of the 140 graves date to before 1940. All of the burials separating the three grave houses are below ground and most are covered by the low-scale vaults described above. Some feature in-ground tombstones; some have low, horizontal markers attached to the vault at its head; and others feature taller, vertical tombstones. Again, none of the vaults and tombstones is large enough to draw attention away from the grave houses. The result is a view-shed somewhat repetitive in appearance

Given the above data and following National Register guidelines, boundaries for this nomination have been chosen to encompass the three grave houses as tightly as possible while excluding the rest of the large, non-contributing cemetery. Because the additional graves that are located within the boundaries are not "substantial in size and scale,"

they are not being counted individually. Instead, that portion of the cemetery included in the nominated acreage is being counted as one non-contributing site.

### Inventory

As mentioned above, the three grave houses do not stand side-by-side but are located within the same portion of the cemetery. Each is a rectangular, gable roof structure resembling a miniature house. Each house's roof ridge parallels the grave or graves beneath it. In addition to the gable roof, each has slightly overhanging eaves, four solid walls, one door, and multiple windows. Two of the houses cover one grave each, while the third contains two graves. More specific descriptions follow.

#### Henry Grave House (1935), Contributing Element.

This structure has a wooden sill foundation, clapboard walls, and an asbestos shingle roof with ridge tiles. Exposed rafter tails on each side and bracket-like beams on the façade and rear support the house's overhanging eaves. Entrance is via a vertical plank door on the west side. A drip mold above the plain board door surround diverts water away from the door. A similar molding is found near the bottom of the structure, apparently designed to divert water away from the foundation. This molding encircles the structure. Rectangular windows with single panes pierce the north and south sides of the house. The east (rear) wall has no opening. The interior is open, and the roof structure is visible. The miniature house contains one grave, that of Pirrie [sic] Henry (1872-1935).

#### Istre Grave House (1925), Contributing Element.

Smaller than the Henry Grave House, the Istre example has a wooden sill foundation, clapboard walls, and a corrugated metal roof. The front and rear gables feature geometrically cut boards applied as decoration. The front gable also features a horizontal beam upon which a plaque bearing the name of the deceased is displayed. The rear (west) wall has no openings. A drip molding encircles the structure just above the sill, and a larger drip mold is found above the structure's two rectangular windows. A stylized wooden cross stands at the peak of the front gable. Its ends are cut in a diamond shape. The cross also features a much-weathered bas relief carving of Jesus on the Cross. The interior is open, displaying the roof structure and diagonal cross braces that help support the walls. The door opening and two rectangular window openings (one on each side) are original, but they are now filled by Plexiglas panels. These are the only alterations to the structure. The grave house contains one grave, that of Azile Istre (1867-1925).

#### Unnamed Grave House (c. 1900), Contributing Element.

Although locals attribute this large grave house to the LeBlanc family and its construction date to c. 1900, the graves inside the structure have no tombstones or plaques providing facts. Given that no other information is available, a date of c. 1900 is being attributed to this grave house for the purposes of this nomination. The house is larger than the others because it shelters two graves. It consists of clapboard walls rising from a wooden sill and a corrugated metal roof. A drip molding encircles the structure just above the sill. A plank door pierces the eastern wall, and square shaped windows subdivided into four panes pierce the others. The north and south (side) walls have one window each, while the west (rear) wall has two square windows. A wooden cross rises above the eastern gable peak. Although it lacks a bas relief figure, it is otherwise identical to the cross above the Istre Grave House. Like the interiors of the other examples, the interior of this grave house is open to the roof, and the roof structure and diagonal wall braces are visible. This structure has not been maintained as well as the others, with the result that some of the windows have lost glass and muntins. There are also large holes in the clapboards on the west (rear) side.

### Integrity

The Plexiglas windows and door on the Istre example and damaged windows and wall of the unnamed example do not seriously impact the appearances of these contributing grave shelters. The Henry Grave House is unaltered. In all cases, it is the unusual miniature buildings themselves, and not their alterations, which stand forth. As rare representatives of unusual folk and architectural traditions, the Istre Cemetery Grave Houses are legitimate candidates for National Register listing.

Significant Dates: c. 1900 - 1935  
Architect/Builder: Henry and Istre families (builders)  
Third Grave House: Unknown  
Criterion: C

The Istre Cemetery Grave Houses are of state significance in the areas of social history as rare survivors to represent a distinctive folk tradition, i.e., the construction of small, house-like structures above in-ground burials. They are also significant at the state level in the area of architecture as rare examples of the type of structure associated with that folk tradition. The nomination's period of significance ranges from c. 1900, the construction date of the earliest shelter surviving in the cemetery, to 1935, the date of the latest structure.

Scholars have not yet agreed upon a consistent name for these unusual structures. Although the term "grave shelter" was used for Vernon Parish's Talbot/Pierson shelters (nominated to the National Register in 2003), "grave house" is appropriate in this instance because the three candidates have walls, windows and doors. Thus, they form structures that fully enclose the graves within. (The Talbot/Pierson grave shelters are open on the sides.) In this narrative, "grave houses" will be used when referring to the examples in the Istre Cemetery, while "grave shelters" will be used to designate those associated with the Upland South Culture (see below). Other names for this type of resource include grave shed, lattice hut, grave box, board mausoleum, shelter house, and spirit house.

### Background

The discussion of the social history and architectural significance of grave shelters and grave houses cannot be easily separated and is combined in this narrative. The folk tradition is surrounded by mystery, with the unanswered questions revolving around its origin and reason for existence. Scholars generally recognize the erection of grave shelters as part of the protestant Upland South culture's practice of decorating graves. 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.

Experts believe that grave shelters may once have been the norm in America's Upland South cemeteries. They came to Louisiana with Uplanders who settled North Louisiana, parts of west-central Louisiana, and sections of the Florida parishes (southeast Louisiana). According to folklorist Marcy Frantom, who has studied the grave shelters of North Louisiana, people may have constructed them in the state 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. Today few grave shelters survive, and little is known about those that do.

### Istre Cemetery Grave Houses

Acadia Parish, the site of the Istre Cemetery grave houses, is located in the south central portion of Louisiana and is generally identified as one of the state's areas of Cajun French settlement. (There was also a significant influx of Midwesterners in the late nineteenth century.) Yet as late as 1983, according to photos in *The Louisiana Experience* by Mary Alice Fontenot and Julie Landry, Istre and a few other cemeteries in the parish had surviving grave houses. In addition, local residents confirm that grave houses once existed in cemeteries located in Cajun French parishes adjacent to Acadia. Thus, it is appropriate to ask why a burial tradition generally associated with the Protestant Upland South appeared in a Cajun French Catholic area.

Unfortunately, research on grave shelters/grave houses focuses upon their strong Upland South association, and no published theories have been uncovered that provide more than speculation as to why this unusual crossing of cultural traditions occurred in Acadia and surrounding parishes. As is often the case concerning Upland South grave shelters, no one now living remembers why the Istre Cemetery grave houses were built except to say that the deceased persons requested them before their deaths. In an attempt to shed light on the question, the Louisiana National Register staff consulted parish histories, a geographer, and two South Louisiana folklorists. The results of this research follow.

In *Acadia Parish, Louisiana, A History to 1900*, published in 1976, authors Mary Alice Fontenot and Paul B. Freeland recognize the Istre Cemetery grave houses as examples of an unusual burial custom and even include a photograph of one in their book. However, according to the authors, "No one knows why or when the custom originated." Fontenot and Freeland offer two theories concerning their origin. Their first suggestion concurs with the possibility that grave houses were "a more elaborate modification of fencing" designed to protect the burials from animals. Their second theory is that the structures were meant to imitate the above-ground vaults found in the old cemeteries of Catholic New Orleans. John Laudun, a South Louisiana folklorist, also aligns the Istre Cemetery grave houses with the Catholic tradition of above-ground tombs.

Folklorist M. Marcia Gaudet suggests that Acadia Parish families may have copied the grave shelter/grave house tradition from Anglo-American settlers who migrated to the area after the arrival of the railroad in the 1880s. While most of these individuals migrated from the Midwest to grow rice, Gaudet states in a letter to the Division of Historic Preservation that some of the newcomers came from "other parts of the South," where the Upland South Culture might have been strong. Geographer Greg Jeane, who has studied Upland South grave shelters extensively, suggests that intermarriage between Cajun and Upland South families may have produced a "cultural blending even in matters of death ritual."

Although their origin remains unclear, the Istre Cemetery grave houses are important and worthy of National Register listing. No matter which culture they represent, they are rare examples of a historic folk burial custom (Criterion A) as well as of a historic structure type (Criterion C). Although experts believe they may once have been the norm in Upland South cemeteries (of which Louisiana has a large number), and local residents confirm that a fairly large number once existed in the area of South Louisiana centering on Acadia Parish, the vast majority have been lost to deterioration and demolition. Although her research did not include the Cajun French Acadia Parish examples, the work of folklorist Marcy Frantom illustrates the current rarity of the phenomenon in Louisiana. In her now eleven-year-old survey of North Louisiana's Upland South cemeteries, Frantom found that only three percent of the 236 cemeteries she examined in the early 1990s had one or more surviving grave shelters, for a total of only fifty-one authenticated Upland South grave shelters. And given the fragile character of the resource, this number is surely lower today. Concerning possible losses of grave houses in Acadia and nearby parishes, we must rely on the personal knowledge of Josh and Jeremy Broussard, brothers who grew up in the area and studied the phenomenon locally before bringing the candidates to the SHPO's attention. Jeremy, the older brother, is aware of forty grave houses that once existed in the area. Josh asserts that, ten years ago when he was a teenager visiting grandparents who live near Istre Cemetery, around a dozen grave houses still stood there. Together, these observers confirm that at least thirty-seven grave houses have been lost in Acadia and surrounding parishes in approximately the last twenty years, leaving only the three candidates in the Istre Cemetery to illustrate the tradition as it developed in Cajun French South Louisiana.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cantrell, Brent. "Traditional Grave Structures on the Eastern Highland Rim," *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* 27 (3) (1981): 93-103.
- Fontenot, Mary Alice and Freeland, Paul B. *Acadia Parish, Louisiana: A History to 1900*. Baton Rouge, LA: Claitor's Publishing Division, 1976.
- Fontenot, Mary Alice and Landry, Julie. *The Louisiana Experience: An Introduction to the Culture of the Bayou State*. Baton Rouge, LA: Claitor's Publishing Division, 1983.
- Frantom, Marcy. "Gravehouses of North Louisiana: Culture History and Typology," *Material Culture* 27 (2) (1995): 21-48.
- Gaudet, M. Marcia. E-mail message to Patricia Duncan, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation; copy in National Register file.

Gremillion, Irma H., editor. *Cemetery Listings: Acadia Parish, Louisiana, Volume V, Esterwood, Mermentau, Morse and Surrounding Area*. Church Point, La.: L'Acadie Publishing Co. for Pointe de l'Eglise Genealogical and Historical Society, 1999.

Interview with Jeremy Broussard. Conducted by Patricia Duncan, December 13, 2007.

Interview with Josh Broussard, Conducted by Patricia Duncan, February 13, 2007.

Jeane, D. Gregory. "Southern Graveselters and English Lych-gates: The Search for Culture Trait Origins," [http://www.samford.edu/schools/artsci/geography/lych\\_gates.html](http://www.samford.edu/schools/artsci/geography/lych_gates.html).

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Upland South Cemetery: An American Type," *Journal of Popular Culture* 11 (1978): 895-903.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Upland South Folk Cemetery Complex: Some Suggestions of Origin." In Meyer, Richard E., ed. *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989.

\_\_\_\_\_. E-mail message to Patricia Duncan, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation, February 16, 2007; copy in National Register file.

Laudun, John. E-mail message to Patricia Duncan, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation, February 3, 2007; copy in National Register file.

Jordan, Terry G. *Texas Graveyards: A Cultural Legacy*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982.

National Park Service, *National Register Bulletin: Guidelines For Evaluating And Registering Cemeteries And Burial Places* ([www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb41/](http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/nrb41/)).