

Preparation

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This page: Record flooding in Louisiana caused caskets from many cemeteries in the southwestern part of the state to float to the surface. Opposite page: Numerous caskets were unearthed when torrential rains dumped nearly two feet of water throughout the area in August 2016. (Photos courtesy of Ryan M. Seidemann)

LOUISIANA'S Great Flood of 2016

What Cemetery Owners and Operators Need to Know to Prepare for the Next 'Big One'

Disaster impacts on cemeteries are nothing new. Indeed, the famous floating caskets in Louisiana are a classic example of the devastation that can be wrought by storms and other natural disasters.

The impacts of the Great Flood of 2016 in Louisiana are sobering: 71 cemeteries are known to have been impacted across a 13-parish, 8,043-square-mile area, with at least 763 graves damaged or compromised.

Recovery from a disaster of this extent is complex. This disaster has, again, brought into bold relief the need for cemetery operators to prepare for such disasters, to be aware of what assistance is available from various government entities and to understand the limitations of that assistance in order to plan appropriately.

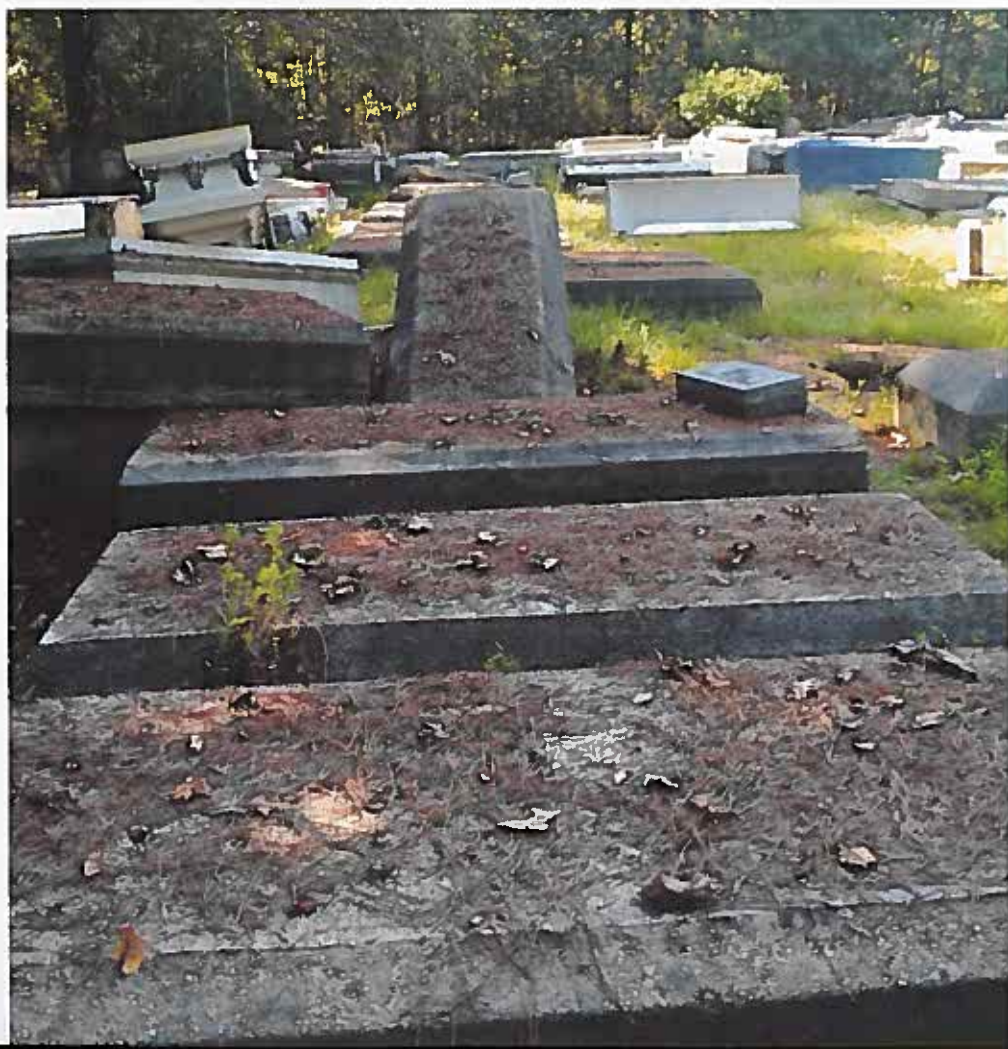
When disaster strikes, the first inquiry when cemetery damage occurs is whether there is insurance to cover

the necessary repairs. Generally, governmental assistance should be considered a last resort, and if insurance exists, it must be exhausted first. Further, because governmental assistance is never guaranteed to be available, maintenance of appropriate insurance is critical. Moreover, it is shortsighted to assume, as did many cemetery operators in Louisiana last year, that flood insurance was unnecessary because the



property was not located in flood zones and was far from the common coastal flooding areas in the state. As the upland floods of south-central Louisiana proved last year, cemetery floods and other disasters can happen anytime and anywhere.

Whether governmental assistance from entities such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency is even going to be available after an emergency depends on political decisions from local, state, and federal officials, and FEMA funding is only authorized in presidentially-declared disasters. If insurance is insufficient or lacking, then the next inquiry is what sort of government assistance is available. If the cemetery is publicly-owned property, then necessary response and repairs are generally to be borne by the relevant public entity. That public entity, in a declared disaster, is then eligible to seek reimbursement from FEMA at a percentage (usually 75-90 percent) of actual response and repair costs through the Public Assistance program.



After insurance is exhausted and publicly-owned cemeteries are under control through the PA program, the real complicated work of funding disaster impacts begins – the Individual Assistance program. Most uninsured cemetery damage is going to be subject to the convoluted and often counterintuitive IA program. In Louisiana’s recent disasters, this program has been used to accomplish restoration and reinterment work in small-to-medium-sized religious, family, community, and abandoned cemeteries. What is counterintuitive about this program is that, by law, FEMA cannot pay groups, corporate entities, or associations that may own the impacted cemetery. Rather, IA funeral assistance (the mechanism for funding such repairs under the IA program) is only available to individuals. In other words, specific individuals must apply to FEMA for relief for individual graves; assistance cannot be granted on a cemeterywide basis. Before jumping to the conclusion that this assistance, which is issued in the form of grants (as opposed to the more common FEMA loans), is only available to statutory descendants of the deceased, it must

be borne in mind that the federal government does not follow such logic. Instead, all FEMA requires to receive IA funding is that a good Samaritan step up and agree to use federal money to repair someone’s grave. That someone may be a relative or a friend of the deceased, or, as was the case in many instances recently in Louisiana, a complete stranger to the deceased.

However, while the “good Samaritan” option exists, family members, if they can be timely located, generally are interested in maintaining the responsibility for their loved ones, and they should be exhausted first before other community members step up. Those willing to participate as good Samaritans are most useful in their capacity when there are no family members and there are minor disruptions toward the end of cleanup after the disaster. Another crucial matter to keep in mind is that FEMA does not wait forever for individuals to register for IA. In the case of the floods in Louisiana, the period for registration was open for three months. This is another saving grace of the good Samaritan option, as some families cannot be located

during the FEMA deadlines. In this case, cemetery or funeral home employees may be pressed into service as these good Samaritans. In Louisiana, employees of the Departments of Justice and Health, the Louisiana Cemetery Board, and other governmental entities were used to bridge this gap to ensure that IA assistance was reserved during the FEMA registration period.

In severe disaster events, such as the 2016 floods, the use of the IA program to repair cemetery damage is often complicated by the inability to identify displaced remains within the time limitations to register applicants for IA. If you do not know who the deceased is, how can you get family to register for IA?

With a disaster, even well-marked graves are difficult to identify, as remains can become separated from grave markers and other such problems. Further complicating the identification problems is the reality that the process does not and cannot progress as it does on television. Primarily, DNA testing of identity is not available. Current FEMA regulations do not authorize funding for DNA testing of unidentified remains



(Hurricane Katrina and 9/11 are notable and extreme exceptions to this rule). FEMA will compensate for basic anthropological examinations to aid in identification of human remains but only at minimal amounts (generally on the order of less than \$100 per individual). Louisiana was fortunate to have donated time by LSU's Forensic Anthropology and Computer Enhancement Services laboratory and to have qualified anthropologists on the state's staff to undertake this work. This will not be available in all states. Even with this gracious assistance, the process of identification work is only as good as the information available from cemetery professionals and family members.

One massive obstacle encountered in the recovery efforts in Louisiana was the lack of documentation associated with the displaced individuals. This problem included cemeteries not maintaining interment records and maps, caskets without any identifying information on the exterior and funeral homes without adequate records. Repeatedly, response teams found that identifying materials that had been on the outside of caskets


were missing. Records retained by funeral homes and cemeteries often were inadequate to correlate the remains within caskets to anyone who was buried in the cemetery. Where proper (and often legally-required) documentation is lacking, tremendous efforts must go into the identification processes, including mapping cemeteries, meeting with descendants to identify plot locations of loved ones, recalling or finding receipts of casket purchases, or unique identifiers such as personal additions to the caskets (e.g., photographs, hats, stuffed animals, cards, tobacco, embroidered objects with family names). In the absence of this information, family members' remembrances of what decedents were wearing may not be enough for a positive identification. However, complete identification in mass disasters such as this are virtually impossible, and more elusive when there are inadequate predisaster records.

As the substantial efforts to repair the damage done to Louisiana's cemeteries from the Great Flood of 2016 continue, the state braces for another hurricane season. This problem will happen again – maybe not in

Louisiana, but it will happen. How can cemeteries be better prepared to respond to these issues in the future?

Data are key to this response. Cemeteries must obtain and retain mapping and identification data, and they must do so in a secure and redundant manner. Funeral directors need to keep track of precise information regarding the deceased; a name and a death certificate are not sufficient. Clothing, jewelry, identifying scars and surgeries noted during the preparation process, and, ideally, photographs of the individuals in their caskets prior to burial need to be collected and transmitted to the cemetery where the person will be buried. Most of all, documentation provided by a variety of casket providers needs to be completed and appropriately replaced on the casket for later use.

Alternatively, external identifiers can be placed on any caskets even if not provided by the casket company. These identifications can come in the form of laminated paper in a bag zip-tied to the handles of the casket, which genuinely does preserve the information often required by law and for response efforts. These identifiers



Opposite page: More than 70 cemeteries were impacted by The Great Flood of 2016. This page: Officials believe that more than 750 graves were damaged or compromised because of rain and subsequent flooding. (Photos courtesy of Ryan M. Seidemann)



During natural disasters, even well-marked graves are difficult to identify, as remains can become separated from grave markers. (Photos courtesy of Ryan M. Seidemann)

are exceptionally important as they allow caskets to remain intact, and there is no need to breach the casket to obtain a positive identification. These are simple and inexpensive voluntary fixes. Other options include legislative fixes to mandate central state repositories of such data rather than relying on

individual funeral homes and cemeteries to retain such records. With this option there is, no doubt, a chance of new fees to the death-care industry to support such new governmental functions – an unpopular option.

Ultimately, as operators of cemeteries look to prepare for potential

disasters, it is useful to become educated on the potential disasters that may impact your cemetery. Furthermore, data collection of gravestone information, including maps, plus contact with funeral homes that operate within the cemeteries in order to obtain additional information regarding the deceased, can substantially ease the pain of identification and recovery operations following a disaster. If a disaster does strike, it will also be important to know who in the community should be contacted regarding the damage. Developing a preparedness plan, and remaining vigilant through the identification of caskets with exterior markers, will reduce the time and hardship following a disaster similar to what was experienced in Louisiana due to the Great Flood of 2016. •

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