

African-American Descendants Sue to Save Revilletown Cemetery

Written by Susan Buchanan
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Former residents of Revilletown—an African-American community torn down 25 years ago in Iberville Parish—are trying to preserve a cemetery founded by ancestors there in 1874.

The cemetery, started by ex-slaves, is now within the grounds of a vinyl-resin plant owned by Georgia Gulf Corp., based in Atlanta. The plant is in the city of Plaquemines, 17 miles below Baton Rouge.

The Mount Zion Baptist Association is exploring legal channels to maintain its original keep on the cemetery and prevent it from being swallowed by plant operations. The group says it was formed in 1874 and continues to own the cemetery, built on land purchased by its forefathers. Georgia Gulf, however, claims it owns the land.

Revilletown residents first sued the company back in 1987 after the plant contaminated their homes. “We raised our food there, and our vegetable gardens, chickens, grass and our health were all harmed by chlorine from the plant,” said Janice Dickerson, who was forced out and has lived in Brusly, La. ever since. She is a spokeswoman for the Mount Zion Baptist Association.

In a 1987 settlement sealed by the Iberville Parish Court, Georgia Gulf relocated about 30 households and leveled Revilletown. “They gave us 30 days to get out and then bulldozed the community,” Dickerson said. “All that’s left of Revilletown today is the cemetery and another piece of property, neither of which are owned by Georgia Gulf.”

Revilletown residents are scattered now but they’re still burying loved ones in the Revilletown

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cemetery, which is owned by the Mount Zion Baptist Association, Dickerson said.

“Georgia Gulf gave management authority for the cemetery to Mount Zion Baptist Church Number One, which was never affiliated with our association and was formed after the association,” she said. The church, located in Plaquemines, and the group are at odds over burial matters.

“We filed an injunction against Mount Zion Baptist Church No. 1 in Plaquemines in early October,” Dickerson said last week. “They’re burying people from outside our former community and charging \$600 for it.

They’re burying members of their own church there for free, however.” She said “we’re running out of room at the Revilletown cemetery to bury our own people. And we’re wondering what the church is doing with all the money they’re charging.”

Dickerson continued “Our association bought the cemetery in 1874 and has been in possession of it since it was purchased. The association was formally incorporated in 2009.”

“Georgia Gulf intervened in November and engaged us in a court battle for ownership of the cemetery,” she said. On Jan. 14, Judge William DuPont at Iberville Parish Court will try a case pitting the Mount Zion Baptist Association against the Georgia Gulf Corp. plant in Plaquemines. The company asked that the court date be extended from early December.

Last week, Georgia Gulf spokes-man Alan Chapple gave a different version of events than Dickerson. He said “Georgia Gulf is the owner of the cemetery, and either it or its predecessors have been in physical possession of the cemetery grounds for several decades.” Chapple didn’t explain how the company or predecessors ended up possessing the cemetery, however. Georgia Gulf was formed in 1985 after acquiring most of Georgia-Pacific Corp.’s chemical assets.

Chapple continued, saying “this issue really is a dispute among factions of local churches over burial rights at a cemetery located on the edge of our property in Plaquemines. Since the

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cemetery is within our industrial fence line, we also manage access to the cemetery but we don't manage the activities and decisions concerning its operation. That is accomplished through an agreement we have with Mt. Zion Baptist Church No. 1 of Revilletown Park that allows them access to bury their deceased and visit the graves of their loved ones."

Regarding the legal wranglings, he said "the church is being sued. The apparent issue is that a group calling itself Mt. Zion Baptist Association is demanding access to the cemetery, and they are at odds with the Revilletown church—which controls the rights to the cemetery. Georgia Gulf only involved itself because the plaintiff in the suit, Mt. Zion Baptist Association, is claiming ownership of Georgia Gulf's property."

Last week, Reverend George Barrett II, pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church No. 1, said he had no comment about the Revilletown cemetery though he has presided over recent burials there.

As for the association, Dickerson said "we hope that Georgia Gulf will be declared non-owners of the cemetery, which has been in our possession for 137 years. My ancestors, former slaves, bought the property nine years after the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed slavery in 1865. No one was giving away property then and it had to be purchased. Before that, slaves were buried on plantations."

Dickerson said "our members have searched local government records and seen no evidence that the company or its predecessors ever bought the cemetery. And our association's oldest member, 89-year-old Mrs. Mary Craig—whose husband Reverend Eli Craig was the Mount Zion Baptist Church pastor for 36 years—is absolutely certain that neither the church nor Georgia Gulf ever bought or owned the cemetery."

Dickerson detailed some of the problems with the cemetery's location within the plant. "We have to go through Georgia Gulf security gates to visit our ancestors, and we're required to give the company two days notice before a burial," she said. And she fears that access might be further restricted after an incident involving a security lock that the plant says was broken on the day of a burial in December.

"The company has deep pockets but we have mustered the resources to fight back," Dickerson said. The association has two co-counsels now, including Dickerson's daughter, Marla, a lawyer

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in Addis, La. For lead counsel, the group hired attorney Jerome D'Quila, based in New Roads.

"We will fight the company nip and tuck for the cemetery," Janice Dickerson said. "All my ancestors on both sides are buried there, and I refuse to allow Georgia Gulf to expand its plant over them or to put a tank of chemicals on top of them."

Dickerson said she's worried that a nearly-completed merger between Georgia Gulf and Pittsburgh, Pa.-based PPG Industries might result in an expansion at the Plaquemines facility. She noted that shares in Georgia Gulf, traded on the New York Stock Exchange, dwindled in value in 2010 but are much higher now ahead of the merger.

Last week, Jeremy Neuhart, spokesman for PPG Industries, said "we currently expect the merger to be finalized in late January. PPG has not announced any plans for a presence in Plaquemines." PPG operates a chlor-alkali and derivatives plant in Lake Charles, producing chlorine and caustic soda.

Dickerson said "the Georgia Gulf plant in Plaquemines is landlocked, and it goes back several miles west of the river. If the plant decides to expand, the only way it can do so is over the cemetery."

Revilletown is one of several African-American river towns—including Morrisonville in Iberville Parish—that had to be abandoned in the 1980s and 1990s because residents were harmed by chemical pollutants. After a 2002 settlement, the predominantly Black community of Diamond in Norco in St. Charles Parish was bought out and dismantled by Shell Chemical.

"My ancestors would be very disappointed in me if I didn't try to preserve the Revilletown cemetery for them," Janice Dickerson said last week. "We hope that going to court and drawing attention to this company's land grab will stop others from seizing property from Black folk." {jcomments on}