

Five months after Katrina, a city buries two anonymous storm victims

Article from:AP Worldstream Article date:February 2, 2006 Author: MICHAEL KUNZELMAN, Associated Press Writer More results for: body found in pascagoula

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AP Worldstream

02-02-2006

Dateline: PASCAGOULA, Mississippi

No names will adorn their headstones, no family will be here to mourn their passing. They are anonymous victims of Hurricane Katrina's deadly fury.

Five months after the hurricane took their lives, a man and woman whose identities remain a nagging mystery are to be buried next to each other Thursday in a city-owned cemetery.

Nobody came forward to claim the bodies, which were found in different places about a week after the Aug. 29 hurricane. With fingerprints, dental records and DNA tests failing to yield any results, Jackson County Coroner Vicki Broadus decided the time has come to let them rest in peace.

"I think five months is long enough to keep the bodies," she said. "It's time to give them a proper Christian burial and put them to rest."

The graveside ceremony may be the first of many to come. More than 100 other unidentified victims of Katrina _ mostly from New Orleans _ still await burials. In all, more than 1,300 lives were lost in the powerful storm.

In Harrison County, just west of Jackson County, the coroner's office has identified all but two of 97 bodies. Three others have been identified but haven't been claimed by relatives. Burial plans for the two unidentified victims have not been announced.

In New Orleans, Mayor Ray Nagin is seeking federal money to build a mausoleum for unidentified and unclaimed bodies. As of Tuesday, officials in Louisiana had 114 unidentified bodies and another 118 that have been identified but not claimed.

Kevin Stephens, New Orleans' health director, said many residents displaced by the hurricane don't have the means to return and look for missing relatives. "We should take every reasonable measure to identify our citizens," he said. "Perhaps that justifies taking a little additional time."

Meanwhile, Thursday's service has become a rallying point for residents of hard-hit Jackson County, where 13 died in the storm and thousands lost homes and businesses.

A funeral home has donated the white fiberglass caskets. A florist is furnishing free flowers. The city has set aside two cemetery plots. The Rev. Rex Yancey, pastor at nearby First Baptist Church, volunteered to officiate at the service.

"Even though we don't know their names, God does," Yancey said. "They're not friendless because there are people standing with them. We identify with their suffering."

The granite headstones will not be ready in time for the service. Michael Graham, assistant manager of Holder-Wells Funeral Home, said he and others are trying to come up with an appropriate epitaph for the victims.

"Everyone kind of feels a kinship because of what's happened here," Graham said. "People still find it hard to believe they can't be identified."

Both bodies were badly decomposed when they turned up in different parts of Ocean Springs, a coastal city west of Pascagoula.

The man's body was found in a marshy area. He's described as a black man in his early 60s with a bald spot and a close-cropped mustache. On his left forearm, just above his wrist, was a tattoo with the number "8" inside a heart shape.

The woman was found between the slabs where two houses once stood. She's described as a black woman, about 5-foot-3 (1.6 meters), 150 pounds (67.5 kilograms). She was wearing black pants and a University of Michigan T-shirt with gold lettering.

Broadus said her investigation will not end with the burials. She hopes the victims' genetic profiles can yield fresh clues once they're run through various DNA databases.

"Just because they're buried," she said, "isn't going to mean they're forgotten."