

Visions of buried riches brought out grave robbers

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Grave robbing is a crime seldom associated with life on the Eastern Shore, but hard times at the turn of the century and the Depression opened doors into a side of life through which few thought they would ever pass.

For decades rumors circulated that the lost grave of a governor was being sought by a number of people.

It was just a matter of speculation that such an important grave might hold a person of wealth. Could the tomb hold rings, diamonds and other treasures?

Not far from Bloomsbury is the historic estate of Tusculum, and it was here, some speculated, that Winder was buried, because here was an unusual tombstone and a rare, large vaulted tomb.

The family renting the Tusculum farm at the turn of the century may have heard of folks looking for the lost grave of Gov. Winder, and through a series of strange coincidences, thought the lost Winder grave could be found in the burial ground at Tusculum.

The grave of Col. Levin Gale, step-grandfather to President George Washington, is at Tusculum. On the once full-length gray slab covering his grave was his family coat of arms, a seal that the early tenants may have misinterpreted as being an official seal of Maryland.

Even in the late 1880s Tusculum was the source of interest to the curious and researcher alike.

In 1898 Somerset County historian Levin Water wrote: "Among the few private burying grounds in Somerset of which there remains

any positive knowledge and in which marks are to be found are the following: At Tusculum on Monie Creek in Somerset County which was formerly the estate and residence of the Gales' there are several stones and a brick vault. One of these stones marks the grave of Col. George Gale, who died in 1712 age 41 years and bears the Gale coat of arms ... the vault in this graveyard has fallen into decay and some years ago when last seen by me some of the bones of those within could be seen on looking in through an aperture near the top."

Gale was active in county and state politics and his merchant business is said to have brought prosperity to Whitehaven, a village that came into being because of Gale's shipping business.

Earl Long, 82, of near Princess Anne and his wife, Florence, and family lived at Tusculum in the 1930s, and recalled that the tenants at the farm before him destroyed the graveyard in search of treasure.

According to Long, the family of immigrants desecrated every grave that could be found, especially Gale's grave which had to be broken into sections to allow entry into the ancient vault. Others claim that dynamite was used to blow open graves, which would account for the small pieces of flat grave stone which at one time weighed a ton or more.

Driven by visions of finding a body decked with gold, silver and diamond jewelry, no grave was spared, including that of a child.

"There was a small grave near Col. Gale's that had been busted and you could see a small skull laying above ground near the broken stone. I put it back. I heard the other grave with the rounded top held

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two caskets set on some type of bier, but all I could see was a mess of bones. The people who did all these awful things were told that aristocrats were buried at Tusculum, including Winder, that's who I think they were looking for," Long said.

Small and broken tombstones were dragged from the graveyard, Long said, and dumped into an open well to fill it up as well as conceal the stones. Another large vault close by that of Gale's had a round, brick top, and was entered by smashing a hole through one end.

This grave, because of its location near a field and fence, was seen by a number of visitors to the farm.

"When I was farming up there at Tusculum in the '30s a lady and a man came up there one day to see the graveyard. The lady said she had family buried there. The graveyard was overgrown and there was trash thrown in there. The man said it was a shame to have to bring a lady to a place like that, meaning I should have kept it

up, but I was a tenant farmer. I didn't have anything to do with that graveyard. Babies were coming thick and fast, and I was trying to keep me and my family from starving to death. I didn't have time for tending a graveyard," Long said.

Retired Judge E. McMaster Duer, 80, of near Allen, is also familiar with the happenings at Tusculum.

"I remember when my father bought the farm back in the '20s that there was a partially opened tomb with a lot of skeletons inside. I was just a boy then, but I remember that scene. My father had it bricked up. The home there (destroyed by fire in the 1950s) was a magnificent place, and later was used as a girls' school. The late Edie Gale, of Princess Anne attended school there years ago as a child," said Duer said.

"I never heard Winder was buried at Tusculum. I know old man Harry Dashiell looked for the grave for years at the old Lewis place and never found a damn thing, but I think he concluded the governor was buried in some kind of metal casket," Duer said.

But Long said the late Jim Lochner told him that he knelt at the grave of Winder at Tusculum, and "swept the leaves right off the grave and read it."

"I lived there but I never saw it, but the people who tore up the graveyard may have destroyed the tombstone," Long said, "I know they went into the cellar and tore it all to pieces, looking for treasure. We moved there in 1933 and stayed for seven years, but I never heard of anybody finding anything up there, except some kind of copper thing that the family that tore up the place told a girl at the time came from a plane or something,

but I never did know what they found."

Among local residents the "copper thing" attracted quiet attention as some speculated it was the remains of a destroyed antique metal coffin, a belief which persists to this day.

Another persistent rumor is that landowners years ago put a drain-age ditch right through the center of the graveyard which is said to have contained almost 100 bodies,

breaking and burying tombstones as a plow cut open a ditch.

As for the Gale tombstone, which doubtless came from England, it has been reduced to small chunks, few large enough even to contain a single word from the hand carved inscription. The pieces are still mixed in with rusted cans and other debris from a trash pile used for years at the site.

The large brick vaulted tomb is no more than a depression filled with tree limbs and vines.