

Winder grave hunters may have been victims of hoax

As David Grier and Harry Dashiell pursued their hunt for the late Gov. Winder's grave, more and more people became aware of their project, and both men may have been victims of hoax.

According to Grier, the late Marshall Hill and the late Marion Blades claimed to have found the governor's grave years ago, not on the Little Monie, or where the Winder plantation was located, but on Big Monie Creek.

For \$35, Grier said, the two men agreed to show him the grave he so much wanted to find. At first Grier refused, then consented.

"I talked with Marion Blades, he seemed sincere, and I thought \$35 or \$50 wasn't much for what I, and others, had put into this thing, so I finally told him I'd get the money. I never heard from him again," Grier said.

"When Blades first told me they had found Winder's tombstone, I said if it wasn't on the place where we were looking, they hadn't found the right grave, but then I remembered hearing rumors that the stones were taken away, and maybe they had found them where they were hidden. It is quite possible they found the grave stones, but they never got back in touch with me," he said.

For decades Marion Blades was interested in Somerset County history, and collected many 18th century artifacts. In his search for the old and unusual, it is possible he discovered the governor's "lost" tombstone. Area historian John Jacob, who knew Blades, said it wasn't unusual for Blades to "sell" information, and he feels confident that Blades would have bona fide information prior to negotiating for its sale.

What the two men found, and where, remains a mystery to this day.

Ed Corbett of Crisfield who knew both men well said he believes Hill had seen the Col. George Gale tombstone at Tusculum (an early 18th century home site and graveyard of George Washinton's step-grandfather just a few miles from Winder's estate, Bloomsbury) as a boy and thought that it was the grave of Gov. Winder because of its size and because it bore a coat of arms, that to a boy could have been interpreted as an official state seal of some kind.

At various times in the history of the Eastern Shore, graves have been robbed, and old, private graveyards, often obscured by bushes and woods are still being desecrated as robbers searched for personal items, especially jewelry. It has been speculated that Winder's grave was looted, and whatever remains were found and were dumped into the creek or scattered in the woods.

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Dashiell even noted in one of his letters in 1948 that "I understand from the people down on Monie Road that at various times a great deal of digging on the Langford farm and on the Lewis farm has been done to try to locate these graves, but as I understand it they have never been located ..."

This was the first time that it was acknowledged that someone was digging on the Anderson farm, the site of the ruins of the Winder house and an early graveyard.

When Grier encountered lack of cooperation by local people in his search he was later told that the grave had been robbed and families involved did not want to be tied to the crime.

"Even if they did find the coffin or casket, I doubt if they brought the whole lead casket to the surface, and it may still be there," Grier said. Like the tombstones at Tusculum, the grave markers may have been broken and dumped into the old well shaft that served the ruined house on the Lewis Farm.

It is said the location of a graveyard on the Anderson farm was known to be marked by a flower bed in the early 1900s, but aside from tradition about graves being there, no markers were evident.

According to S.J. Disharoon of Salisbury Monument in Salisbury, it is not at all unusual for the deceased to be buried in one spot and have a marker in his memory at another location.

As far as the missing tombstones on both properties, Disharoon said "you would have a better chance hitting the lottery," than finding them now.

"It would be a sheer stroke of luck to find them if they have been stolen. They could have been buried or thrown into the creek. If they were made in sections, it would be even easier to have thrown them in the marsh or dumped them in the woods. It's a one in a million chance of finding them," Disharoon said.

One thing is sure — whoever took the tombstones didn't eat them and somewhere, someday, the stones or parts of them may be found.