

Separating fact from fiction

Grave hunter explores metal casket theory

In this fifth of a six-part series, the late Harry C. Dashiell of Princess Anne pursued a unique lead in trying to find out whether or not there was evidence to deny or confirm a legend that said Gov. Levin Winder of Somerset County was returned from Baltimore in July 1819 in a "metal" case.

Any hopes that Dashiell had of identifying Winder's grave as that of the governor centered on finding a metal casket.

Winder had been dead but 120 years when Dashiell began his intense search for descendants of Winder and local people who knew about Winder's Bloomsbury plantation. He found only one witness to the location of the graveyard, but that lead proved futile.

Dashiell found several descendants who could only confirm that family tradition held that Winder was buried on his plantation near Venton, but no particulars, save an 1834 deed, could pinpoint the location of the cemetery.

Joined by his search in the 1960s by David Grier of Salisbury, both men sought to find the grave, but their decades-long search failed.

Beset by conflicting and erroneous information, and even an apparent hoax, both men struggled to separate fact from fiction, but were no closer to reaching their goal than Dashiell

was when he started his odyssey in 1948.

Both men were sure they had the right farm and the right general area, but no grave was found.

By BRICE STUMP
Daily Times Staff Writer

Sleuth Harry Dashiell even wrote funeral homes in the Baltimore area in hopes that their company records would note the sale of a metal casket to the Winder family. But this lead proved futile.

In 1949 Dashiell specifically requested information from the Henry W. Jenkins and Sons Funeral Home in Baltimore, the firm which handled Winder's funeral in 1819 for information, but their records had been destroyed in a fire.

Not only is the company still in business, but it claims to be the oldest funeral establishment in the nation. A spokesman said that the firm was capable of providing a lead casket for the Winder family, and that the \$100 Dashiell said was paid to the "Henry & Co." funeral home in 1819 would have covered the cost of a lead or other metal casket.

In his letter Dashiell said "... From the administration account on his estate ... I find there were extraordinary expenses with his funeral and burial ... specifically the payment of \$100."

Dashiell was also aware that a payment of \$211 was made from the estate of Winder to John B. Morris, Winder's brother-in-law (who married Winder's sister Leah) for "funeral expenses on account."

A spokesman for the funeral home said the firm has traditionally catered to the "finer families" of the Baltimore area and it would have been able to handle a funeral for a former head of state.

When Winder's wife died in 1822, just three years after the governor's death, \$16.48 was paid to Samuel Leatherbury of Somerset County for making a "coffin for the deceased."

In light of the family's wealth, it can be surmised that the coffin, in all probability wood, still represented a top of the line model.

John Holloway of the Holloway Funeral Home in Salisbury said even by the early 1900s, a "total funeral package" in 1905 was \$50, and a wooden box (or coffin) made by hand could run \$15.

Apparently Dashiell could not provide more evidence for his theory that "extraordinary" funeral expenses specifically covered the cost of a iron or lead casket.

A breakdown of the individual expenses of the Winder funeral were not recorded in the

See WINDER, page E2

Metal casket theory explored

WINDER, from page E1

administrative accounts of the deceased, according to Greg Stiver, assistant state archivist at the Hall of Records in Annapolis. The expenses were lumped together, but the Winder family was able to bear the "extraordinary" cost of a metal casket, especially in light of the travel time and distance from Somerset County to Baltimore and the season of the year, and of course Winder's political place in state history and his Masonic status.

To locate the governor's grave, hunters can now only rely on the what might be historic fact or myth, that a coffin covered with iron, or lead is hidden beneath the ground.

It has been confirmed by a confidential source that William J. Lewis, owner of the Lewis Farm in 1900, removed the Winder tombstones, "leaning the stones against a building."

Lewis may, as tradition has always said, have moved the markers because he was irritated with

the curious trespassing on his land and bothering him.

In their book *The History of American Funeral Directing*, authors Robert W. Habenstein and William M. Lamers recorded the following: "... As our forefathers settled this section of the country, they set aside part of their own land for their families. It was God's acre, and kept as such. This little tract of ground so hallowed, was convenient and necessary — but later it was a handicap in the sale of property, for the next owner would not wish the first party's burial lot ..."

How many have heard horror stories of land being farmed increasingly closer each year to a family lot, then the stones disap-

peared and then the lot became part of the corn field?

Soon after the tombstones disappeared from the Winder family burial plot on the Lewis farm, the exact site became lost in vegetation and eventually farmed over, erasing whatever traces of a graveyard that remained.

With new information researchers are closing in on a site where the grave is thought to be located.

In the conclusion of this six part series, an 83-year-old eyewitness to the graveyard is found, and infrared photographs indicate that a site of "disturbed soil" may be the possible location for the grave of Gov. Levin Winder. A new search is being organized to find the grave.