

Researchers narrow hunt for Winder grave in late 1940s

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second in a six-part series on the century-long hunt for the grave of Gov. Levin Winder of Somerset County who died in 1819. The series also covers the history of Winder's Bloomsbury plantation near Venton.

By BRICE STUMPF
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Even as early as 1948, Harry C. Dashiell of Princess Anne had narrowed his search to a 4-acre lawn on the Lewis Farm near Venton in Somerset County, which comprised part of an older tract known as Pennywise before it became part of the Bloomsbury estate.

Upon his death in 1819, Gov. Levin Winder left his estate to his wife. She in turn divided the estate among her three children. The property now owned by Donald Wilson was left to Winder's wife by her father Thomas Sloss. Upon her death it was to go to her sister, Ann Gantt, but Ann and her husband Edward relinquished their claim to the Sloss farm, selling it to Winder and his wife. It was this property that was given to their daughter, Mary Anne Winder.

While searching records in the Somerset County Court House, Dashiell came upon a deed from Mary Anne Winder, the governor's daughter, who married Thomas A. Emory of Centreville prior to 1834.

In January 1834 she and her husband sold to James Phoebus the tract of land she inherited from her mother (now owned by Donald Wilson). In December of that same year Phoebus sold back to the Emorys, by deed for \$20, a lot of land 26 by 26 feet, "theretofore known as the burial place of the Winder family," and being part of a larger tract previously conveyed by the Emorys to Phoebus.

It was because of this deed that Dashiell completely abandoned his search on the Anderson farm.

It has never been explained why Phoebus charged such a high price for such a small plot of land. Nor had it been explained why Phoebus entered the following covenant in the deed: "Upon condition nevertheless that the said lot of ground is to be used only as a burying ground and for no other use or purpose whatsoever."

Why would Phoebus insist that lot which was already being used by the Winders as a graveyard have no other use but as a cemetery?

Dashiell knew precisely the location of the tract the Emorys sold and its boundaries, but no survey noting courses of the graveyard which was sold back to the Emorys was ever executed.

In 1880 the heirs of James Phoebus sold the land to William J. Lewis "excepting the burying ground." By this deed Dashiell had narrowed even further the location of the graveyard, and further reduced the scope of his search to a 4-acre

See WINDER, page E8

• Inventory reveals unique look at Gov. Winder's personality.

Page E2

Search narrows for Winder grave

WINDER, from page E1

lawn on which the ruins of what may have been the 18th-century home of Thomas Sloss, Winder's father-in-law from whom he inherited almost all of Bloomsbury.

It was this deed and the tantalizing tale of an "iron, steel or lead casket" that fueled Dashiell's decades-long search.

A legend says that owners of the property in the late 1800s or early 1900s became irritated with visitations by the curious wanting to see Winder's grave, and removed all the tombstones from the plot and hid them behind a barn. Thus the location of the graveyard was lost to all but the members of the family attending the farm.

The gravestones have never been found. They may have eventually been thrown into Little Monie Creek or hidden in the marsh. Not even fragments of the stone are known to exist.

This 4-acre site in many respects filled all of Dashiell's expectations. The land was high, attractive, on the shores of Little Monie Creek, and part of Bloomsbury. The lawn was obviously the remnants of a well-manicured site and near Winder's home.

All Dashiell had to do was determine where the graveyard was hidden. As far as he knew he was looking for the grave of two adults and one child. Even though he had determined that the graves were

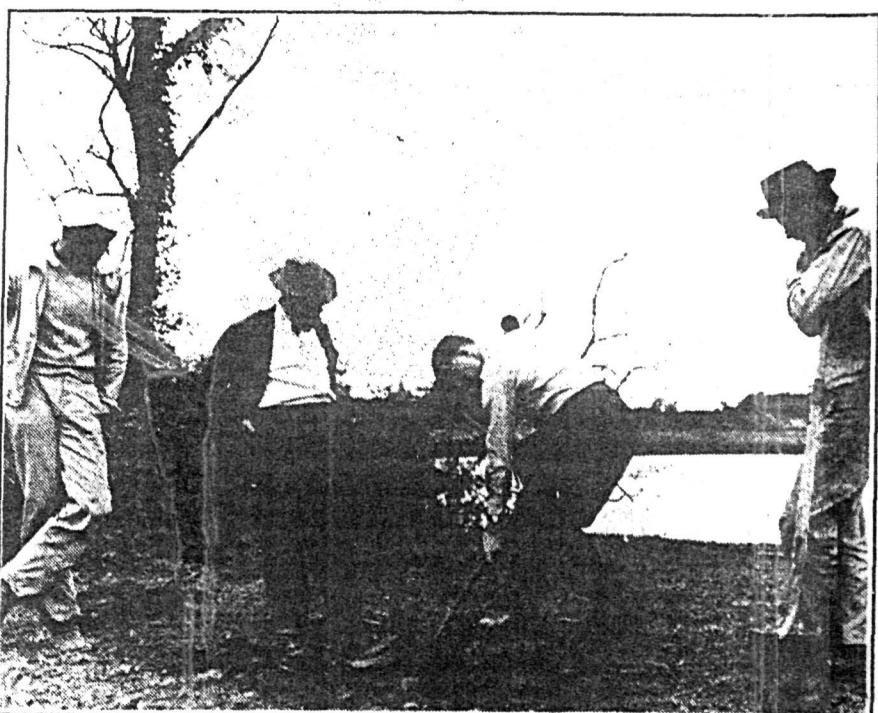


Photo by Dick Moore

SEARCHING. The late Princess Anne attorney Harry C. Dashiell, second from left, watches Capt. Buckner Creel begin digging for what he hoped was the metal coffin of Gov. Levin Winder on a farm near Venton. Lindy Bromley, left and William Fitzgerald, right, accompanied Dashiell to aid in the digging in October 1948.

within a 4-acre site, it would be difficult to find the graves, especially if the coffins were made of wood and buried at least five feet down.

Dashiell hoped there was truth to the tale about the governor being buried in a metal casket and he hoped metal detectors would locate it.

Why the 4-acre lawn was kept

out of agriculture production for so many years remains a mystery. The old house that stood on it and the presence of a marked or known graveyard close by may have discouraged turning the yard into a field. The one clue that would have helped Dashiell pinpoint the probable location of the graveyard may have escaped him.

According to Wilson, his mother, the late Hilda Bozman Wilson, told him that a small girl had been buried on a part of the lawn near the creek in the early 1900s. Wilson has never found this grave nor the tombstone that may have marked it. Yet it is likely that the child was buried in an established burial plot and not randomly buried on a spot near the creek.

There are still several people living who recall that a house stood on this lawn in the early 1900s. A 1938 aerial photograph shows the rectangular house, but by the late 1940s it was either in complete ruin or was leveled.

It is remembered for having a unique brick foundation that was high enough from the ground that youngsters could run freely under

the first floor of the wooden structure, though Wilson said the house had a cellar.

Using the house as a reference point, and the remains of an old fence with a gate, Dashiell was able to focus his search, but he needed someone to tell him where the graveyard should be located.

Dashiell found that eyewitness in Augustus W. White of Oriole around 1961. White, who celebrated his 105th birthday in 1967, was born a slave on the Winder plantation, Bloomsbury.

According to a newspaper account of the ongoing search, Dashiell said, "We had nothing to go on for a while, nothing at all ... Then we thought we had some luck. We found ... Gus White. Gus was born on this place in a slave cabin. We brought him over here one day, because he remembered seeing the grave ... Old Gus looked and got his bearings and pointed to a spot ... and we dug. And we dug. And we didn't find a thing."

Several of the men accompanying Dashiell on his search are still alive, and recall the attorney's disappointment when the earth yielded no clues. Even when they were digging, the men wondered why Dashiell had selected that particular site on the Lewis farm. While the graveyard was said to be on the property, it was just a 26-by-26-foot lot lost in 15½ acres.

Writing to request aid in his search from Gov. W. Preston Lane Jr. in 1948, Dashiell informed the governor that "Tradition further states that he (Winder) was brought back in a metallic casket or case, which probably was correct, as he died in the summertime (July 1) and it required two weeks to bring his body back here..."

In October 1948, around Halloween, Dashiell began coaxing the earth to yield the hiding place of the grave of Gov. Levin Winder. With aid from the Army and the Maryland National Guard, provided by Gov. Lane, the search party combed the 4-acre lawn with metal detectors, shovels and ground probes to find what was hoped to be the metal casket of the governor.

In next Sunday's third-part in this six part series Dashiell tackles the problem of locating the graves with a bulldozer. As earlier historians searched for Winder's grave, grave robbers literally blew up the tomb of another prominent Marylander apparently mistaking it for that of Winder.