

# CLUES TO THE PAST

## Metal casket theory intrigued researcher

By BRICE STUMP  
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Harry C. Dashiell knew that his only hope to find Gov. Levin Winder's grave in what was at first a lawn and then later a field, was to locate it with a metal detector. It wasn't nails in a coffin that would produce the tell-tale whine of a detector, but a mass of metal (lead Dashiell thought) which encased the remains of the governor.

In an age that relied almost solely on wooden caskets, Dashiell had, from the start, been intrigued by the tradition that Winder was brought back from Baltimore in a metal case.

Recently, archaeologists in St. Mary's located what they believe to be the lead coffin of Philip Calvert, governor of Maryland 1660-1661. The coffin, found with two others also made of lead, dates to the second half of the 17th century, at least proving that lead caskets were used and available in Maryland more than 150 years before Winder died.

Henry M. Miller, director of research for the historical group, Historic St. Mary's City, said he suspects the larger of the three coffins might hold the remains of Philip Calvert, Philip, who died in 1662, was Maryland's first chancellor and half-brother of Cecil Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore.

The second coffin may be that of another Cecil Calvert, son of Charles Calvert and grandson of Cecil, Lord Baltimore. He died in 1681 at the age of 14. The third coffin is considerably smaller and might contain the remains of an infant child of Charles Calvert.

According to a story in the *Baltimore Sun*, (Dec. 5, 1990), lead coffins are extremely rare in Colonial Maryland, only two having been found before the Calvert graves, that of royal Gov. Lionel Copley and his wife, buried in 1692.

The best lead that confirmed Dashiell's hunch of a metal casket came from a discovery in Caroline County.

In 1965 members of the Caroline County Historical Society sought the grave of Charles Dickinson. Dickinson, born on Wiltshire Manor in Caroline County in 1780 was killed in a duel with President Andrew Jackson in Kentucky in 1806.

The search centered on locating Dickinson's lead casket. It was said to have been moved from Kentucky to Caroline County on a wagon by a family servant. This legend was not supported by any written record. Members of a historical society in Kentucky strongly argued that Dickinson was buried in their state, and was never moved to Maryland.



Times Photo by Brice Stump

Dora Mitchell of the Caroline County Historical Society shows where vandals have recently torn a piece of the original lead from the top of the Charles Dickinson casket that she and others located on a farm near Preston in 1965. Dickinson was buried in 1806 and his lead-sheathed wooden casket may be identical to one used to bury Gov. Levin Winder of Somerset County in 1819. The lead coffin is in the yard in front of the society's headquarters in Denton.

Twenty-five years ago the hunters found the lead casket, buried on the Maryland farm where old timers said they had heard the graveyard was once located.

Like Winder, Dickinson was said to have been buried at one spot, though in Dickinson's case, his casket was found where tradition said it should be located. Like Winder's graveyard, the stones were also removed from the Dickinson plot, and like Winder, the grave became lost in a field. Dashiell faced similar

tantalizing leads, but never found his elusive metal casket.

Dickinson was buried in a lead coffin about four feet below ground level. The casket was placed in a wooden box which in turn was sheathed with sheets of lead and sealed with copper nails. When found the lead top had caved in slightly, as the wooden box supported the lead shell had deteriorated. But inside, pieces of bone were found.

If such a lead case existed in the mid-1600s and was used on the Shore in 1806, it is quite possible

Winder was buried in a similar case in 1819.

Ironically, the man who found the Dickinson grave, Robert W. Lord of Easton, is also the one who combed the lawn on the Lewis Farm in the late 1960s with the same metal detector. It was also Lord who found the iron Civil War-era Fisk iron burial vault or casket near Wye Mills in the 1970s.

The detector, used to find pipe, was provided by the Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Co. This See COFFIN, page E2



## Lead coffin theory is intriguing

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unit, then called a "Electronic Witch," is capable of finding metal to a depth of 15 feet.

"We went over the farm pretty well, but there were so many bushes and brambles in the yard that we couldn't even get through," Lord, 74, said in a telephone interview.

"If there is a piece of metal the size of a license plate in the ground, this machine can find it," Lord said.

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. To locate the governor's grave, investigators 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.