Investigators face possibility the mystery may be solved

This concludes the six-part series on the search for the grave of Maryland's Gov. Levin Winder, who died in Baltimore in July 1819 and was brought back to his 840-acre estate, Bloomsbury, near Venton in Somerset County for burial.

The search for Winder's grave and that of his wife, Mary Stoughton Sloss Winder, and young daughter, Marianna, has been ongoing for almost a century.

The late Harry C. Dashiell, a Princess Anne attorney, spent most of his adult life searching for the grave and narrowed his investigation to a four-acre site on the farm of Donald Wilson on the Little Monie Creek.

For decades Dashiell struggled with the problem of Winder's house on one farm and the graveyard on another. Though both farms were part of Winder's estate, a ditch has always separated the two farms, one of which is owned by Wilson (where the grave is believed to be located) and the other by Samuel Langford Anderson, on whose farm the foundation of the Winder home can be found.

Despite years of media coverage, Dashiell located only one man who claimed to have seen the Winder's grave, but an investigation of that site ended in failure.

After Dashiell's death in 1975, Salisbury businessman David Grier has continued the search, which has gained momentum with the aid of landowner Donald Wilson.

HISTORIC LAND. An aerial view of Bloomsbury, taken in June, shows the marsh fields and woods of Gov. Levin Winder's plantation. The lost grave of Winder and his daughter and wife are said to be buried somewhere on the estate.

CLOSING IN. Leroy Jones, 83, of near Venton, left, shows Donald Wilson the approximate location where he saw a graveyard on the Lewis Farm in the early 1900s. The site is within a four-acre area where researchers believe the grave of Gov. Levin Winder is located. Wilson, owner of the property, hopes an investigation this fall will solve the mystery of the lost grave.
Researchers face possibility that grave may be found

WINDER, From page E2

certainly wasn't large enough to be the remains of a building.

Jones also remembered the old house near the graveyard, but he didn't investigate "because there were too many snakes back here in those days."

Like others, Jones said he never saw or heard of any other buildings on the Lewis Farm near the creek, which raises questions as to where the building was that the gravestones were said to have been leaning against.

Jones has a specific reason for remembering this farm as one of his boyhood friends drowned here back in the 1920s.

In the 1960s, Gus White told the late Harry C. Dashiell that the grave of the governor was also near the gate and along the fence, but instructed Dashiell to search the west side of the gate. Digging revealed nothing.

"Harry Dashiell never did dig on the other side of the gate that I know of," said David Grier who has spent years pursuing the search for the Winder grave. "It was pretty well grown up with bushes when we were there and he didn't think the grave was in that direction, so he never looked," he said.

Shirley Richards has also been searching for the Winder grave and said she picked up a clue years ago from a woman in Venton about the grave.

"She was an elderly lady and she said Gen. Winder was 'buried to the right of the gate.'"

When Gus White went to the property with Dashiell, he too said Winder was buried near the fence or gate, but indicated the grave was on the opposite side of the gate.

Changes in the topography, his age and loss of landmarks may have confused White, but he believed the grave was near the fence.

Remains of this fence can still be found, weathered posts still visible in the marsh near the land.

David Grier said that a woman called him years ago during his initial investigation on the location of the graveyard, and she told him she grew up in the area and visited friends who lived in the house on the Lewis Farm.

As a child she said she was frightened by the graveyard which she had to pass when going up to the house.

Wilson remembered that an old apple orchard once grew on the eastern side of the gate, near the northern side. Jones too remembers a few of the old orchard trees were said to have been leaning against the fence.

Remains of this fence can still be found, weathered posts still visible in the marsh near the land.

A 1988 aerial infrared photograph of the Lewis Farm shows an area that is not readily seen at surface level. According to Thomas Tiner, a photo interpreter for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources at Salisbury State University, the roughly 15 feet by 20 foot area is a "disturbed dry site, and the highest place on the farm," located just feet from where the old fence stood. The site is just north of the fence area southeast of the house site in an area that was not investigated by Dashiell.

It is the site that Jones has identified as being the graveyard he saw as a child.

Find a picture of Gov. Levin Winder shows him several years prior to his death in 1819. Winder looked less plump when he had his portrait painted years later, probably while serving as governor in 1812 and was in his 30s, above, when he had his portrait painted at his Bloomsbury home in Somerset County.
Researchers ready for new expedition

WINDER, from page E7

1975.

“If it’s on my farm, this new spot is the most logical place for it to be,” Wilson said, “and it has everything right going for it; the location is right and it’s high enough for a graveyard. If the grave hasn’t washed into the creek, we may find it here. I don’t know what I will do with it if we do find it, I’ve got plenty of time to think it over. Whatever I do, it will be to protect and preserve the remains.”

In just months an exploration of the site may end the century-long search or raise new mysteries. Success depends on tradition that a metal case enclosed Winder’s body. Without the metal to be picked up by the detector, no one expects the grave to be found.

Wilson said he vaguely recalls a story that a “window” was said to have been built into Winder’s casket, much like the iron “mummy” found at Wye Mills. A iron plate covered a piece of glass over the face of the deceased could be swung away, allowing a view of the face.

Yet the remains of two wooden caskets found last year near Fairmount dating from the mid- and late 1880s also had such windows. It was the windows and handles from the caskets that remained and nothing of the skeleton, casket or clothing remained in one of the graves.

Investigators can only hope that the Winder casket was not made almost entirely of wood with a glass window over the face. Nothing would remain to be picked up by the metal detector.

The final chapter of the search will be carried in The Daily Times this fall. It will be a case of history repeating itself, as many of those who have been involved with the search over the years are expected to be present. The Daily Times Managing Editor, Mel Toadvine, who covered the story as a reporter 25 years ago, said he expects success.

“I think the grave will be found this time, and I want to be there when it is,” he said.