

Speculation puts graveyard near old farm house

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Donald Wilson has always wondered why some folks believed Gov. Levin Winder is buried on his farm near Venton rather than behind the Winder house site on the farm adjacent to his.

Separated by a ditch and gut, the Winder home in Somerset County along the Little Monie Creek was within easy walking distance to the high knoll of Wilson's land where it is thought members of the Winder family are buried. Both farms were then part of Bloomsbury, the Winder plantation, but became two farms when Winder's daughter, Marianna, sold her part of the inheritance in 1834.

Few researchers could believe that a family burial plot was reached by crossing a ditch and walking several hundred feet from the main house. Yet

a 1834 deed specifically notes that the Winder burial ground was not near the home place, but on the Wilson property which has been known as the Lewis Farm or Lewis Landing since the early 1900s.

Even more doubtful was that the Winders had buried their family members at random in a field or woods on Wilson's property. If there was a graveyard on the Lewis Farm, it was speculated that it was near the early 18th-century house that once stood on Wilson's farm, just yards from the banks of the Little Monie Creek. But it has never been conclusively determined who built the house or who lived in it.

It has been crucial to the search for the Winder graves to determine who lived in the house. A tax assessment in 1783 notes that there was "one small dwelling and kitchen in bad repair,

See HOUSE, page E2

Donald Wilson, owner of the farm where the grave of Gov. Levin Winder is believed to be located, shows pieces of clay pipe and iron and glass artifacts he has found near what may have been the home of Winder's father-in-law.



Times Photo by Brice Stump

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HOUSE, from page E1

spoke house and two barns, good, and one barn and sundry other houses with improvements on Little Morie Creek," on the property known as The Success (now the Lewis Farm) owned by Thomas Sloss, father of Winder's wife, from whom she inherited the land. Sloss in turned had married the daughter of William Stoughton, from whom he inherited the land.

"If this was the home of Winder's father-in-law, it may have been here that Winder lived while his stately home was being built.

"In the Baltimore Museum of Art's portrait of Winder, the governor is seated so that his home can be seen in the background. This view, showing the creek and gut, could only have been painted if Winder was in the house on the Lewis farm.

It is only conjecture, but it appears that Sloss was a man of means as indicated by his will, and

that his home, though modest, was sufficient.

When Sloss died in 1797, he left by will to his daughter, Mary Anne Stoughton Sloss, Winder's wife "... one halfe of my land with the dwelling house and all the houses round it except the barn as fare as the causeway the other side of the grandry and up the old causeway to the road ... I give and bequeth to my daughter Mary Winder my 2 looking glasses during her natural life and it's my desire they shall not gow out of the house as long as any of my ears holds the house ... I give and bequeth to my daughter Mary Winder Negro slave Lavy on condition she makes him dow all the work of my daughter Anne Gantt's plantation ..."

The "other houses" may have been slave quarters and work buildings.

Whether or not the "2 looking lasses" or mirrors left the house soon after his death isn't known, but an inventory of Winder's home notes several large and small mirrors.

Mirrors represented a considerable financial investment at that time, and according to antique expert Robert Withey of near Allen, the mirrors were probably expensive and elaborate, but certainly of substantial value to be included in a will.

It is not mentioned in the Sloss will any details relating to the graveyard as it was naturally assumed it would be protected by the family and was easily located.

Was it possible that an older graveyard already existed at the house on the Lewis Farm and had for years been used by the Stoughton and Sloss families, direct family members of Winder's wife?

The graves of Sloss and his wife, Mary Stoughton, have never been found. Historian Shirley Richards of Princess Anne believes they may have been buried on the farm, but their tombstones may have been stolen along with those of Gov. Winder and his family in the early 1900s.

It was this home that Dashiell

said Winder built for his daughter, but no document has yet surfaced to support that statement.

In 1750 Thomas Sloss married Mary Stoughton. Sloss is believed to have lived on and owned the property which today is owned by Donald Wilson. Sloss had two daughters, Mary Stoughton Sloss Winder and Ann Stoughton Sloss, who married Edward Gnatt in 1768. It is likely that Winder inherited the house with the property through his wife. Their daughter may have been afforded the use of the home, but this living arrangement is doubtful. It has even been speculated that Winder let his sister Leah live here with her husband, John B. Morris, but that too has never been proved by the records.

Area residents recall that the building was in ruins by the 1940s and much of the lawn was covered with briars, weeds and bushes. When Dashiell investigated this four-acre site in the 1940s, it was used as a cow pasture.

Wilson believes that the house was of wood, with a cellar.

"I remember seeing the cellar, the walls were made of brick. I think the house had two stories, with two rooms and a hall on each floor, but they were small rooms," he said.

The brick cellar was only under the kitchen section of the home, which was at the east end of the house. Coincidentally, the location of the kitchen is consistent with the tradition that an occupant of the house in the early 1900s was able to point out the back door of the kitchen to the graveyard and tell his sons, "That's where the old governor is buried boys."

The main part of the house was built on unusually high brick piers, Wilson said, and explains why children were able to run under the house and the cellar under the kitchen would account for the seemingly contradictory account of free passage under the structure.

The cellar may have been used as a cooking facility or as storage for meat and produce. By the late 1940s though, Wilson said that folks were bringing their garbage to the

farm and throwing it into the open cellar.

Could the tombstones have been concealed in the cellar?

"Of course it's a possibility, but I don't think so," Wilson said. "The story says they were hidden behind a barn or building here, but I have never heard anyone say there was any other building up here except for the house, but it's possible too that other buildings were here."

The location of the barn where the stones were said to have been hidden may help locate the general area where the tombstones might be concealed. If the building was

See HOUSE, page E7

Is graveyard near old house?

HOUSE, from page E2

near the marsh on the eastern side of the farm, it would be probably that the tombstones would be in the marsh on that side and not all the way across the field on the western side. Even so, Wilson said, the tombstones could have been covered with dirt when a bulldozer was clearing brush from the four-acre lawn.

Dashiell leaned heavily on a notation of a graveyard within this four-acre plot as mentioned in *Historic Graves of Maryland and the District of Columbia* by Helen W. Ridgely in 1908 which said "The burial ground of the Winder family in which rests the remains of the late Gov. Levin Winder and Mrs. Winder on Little Monie Creek is now owned and if I am correctly informed, is occupied as a woodpile by a man who is a stranger to the family and without respect for the honored dead who lie there."

Dashiell sought a woodpile that was almost half a century old when he started his search.

Over the years Wilson has found fragments of 18th-century bottles, Chinese export porcelain, pieces of early iron pots and even a corner of the foundation of the house.

On the western side of his land, but south of the fence that bounded the four-acre lawn, Wilson said he had found more brick piers that suggest a barn or even another house could have been south of the gut.

"I have found a lot of broken glassware and iron in that place, and it looks there could have been a house there too," he said.

Could it have also been the site for a barn and could the 18th-century artifacts Wilson is finding have been from a dump?

Wilson has also found the upper portion of a large serving spoon, with hallmarks on the reverse side. The handle appears to be made of pewter and has what appears to be the initials "JAP" on the handle. These initials appear to be those of James A. Phoebus, owner of the Wilson farm in the early 1800s.

The handle was found near the site where Wilson believes another house or barn may have been located.

Earlier this year Wilson centered his search for artifacts in a small area in the field where he had been finding pieces of iron, brick, oyster shells and glass. Digging a hole just a few feet deep, Wilson found more artifacts mixed with small pieces of charcoal, an indication, Wilson believes, that he has found an early 19th-century trash pile or that fire (which may have destroyed the barn) was near the site.

Throughout his period of farming Wilson has kept an eye out for tell-tale signs of subsoil structures.

"I thought maybe I could find bricks from the grave, but I haven't so far," he said. But like Winder's home, much of the history of early Somerset County is tied to the Wilson farm.