

Montgomery Graveyard Sale Is Questioned

By Keith F. Girard
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A stone's throw from bustling I-270, in a Montgomery County field studded with rusting refrigerators and heaps of trash, Viola Schaefer's grave lies unmarked, overgrown and forgotten. But even ignoble death does not assure eternal rest.

Schaefer, who died destitute in 1983, is buried in a county-owned potter's field that dates to 1789. The county is planning to sell the long-neglected site for \$3.5 million to developers who want to build a hotel and office buildings there.

State and federal historic preservationists have urged the county to save the site, or at least allow the remains to be examined by a team of scientists before they are disturbed.

So far, the county has not responded.

"Who knows what's best?" said Assistant County Attorney Joann Robertson, who is handling the land sale. "Is it better to just move those who are buried there or is it better to allow scientists to examine their bones? . . . We just don't know."

The 50-acre tract which includes the pauper's graveyard was once part of the Montgomery County Poor Farm, established in 1789 as a place where the poor and homeless went to live, work, and, if they died, to be buried.

At the time, the farm was located well beyond the bounds of what was then the town of Rockville. But growth has caught up with the property. The farm house was razed in 1959 to make way for a county jail, and another chunk of property was dedicated for I-270. But the potter's field remained in use until Schaefer's death in 1983.

The poor farm would be included in a 200-acre parcel of land known as the Westmont tract. It is one of the largest undeveloped sites of industrially zoned land in the I-270 corridor. Westmont Associates, a partnership that wants to develop the land, has a contract to buy the property contingent on the county moving the graves.

At least 75 graves were identified during a 1983 survey of the property by state archeologists, but according to George R. Snowden, the funeral director who buried Schaefer, there may be as many as 500 people buried in the potter's field.

"If I said 500 people I'd be in the ballpark," said Snowden, who runs a Rockville funeral parlor founded in 1900 by his grandfather. "Back during the World War II era, we would go out there quite frequently."

Although the county's poor farm existed for almost 170 years, virtually nothing has been documented about it, said Jane Sween, a librarian with the Montgomery County Historical Society.

The property was deeded to the county in 1789 and expanded in 1825. After the Civil War, the farm's alms house was rebuilt, and until it was razed a century later it was home to an average of 40 indigent people, she said. The state paid for burial but did not pay for grave markers or upkeep on the property.

The state now provides funds to pay for a particle-board casket and burial, but not a grave, according to funeral directors. Most indigents today are cremated or buried in plots donated by churches or charitable organizations.

But Snowden said that the area could still be used as a burial spot by the county. "My grandfather, my father and I have all put people out there. I don't know how we're going to make do without it."

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