

Montgomery Graveyard Sale Is Questioned

By Keith F. Girard June 30, 1985

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."

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The graveyard is located on a hilly, wooded knoll at the end of Monroe Street in Rockville, about one mile south of the county courthouse. None of the graves is marked and the property, which abuts I-270, is heavily overgrown with trees and brush. The graveyard is littered with refuse, old appliances and even an old golf cart.

- The county filed suit in May in Montgomery County Circuit Court, seeking permission to exhume the bodies and bury them in another cemetery.
- In a separate affidavit filed two weeks ago, the county claimed that all reasonable efforts to identify the buried and to contact their next of kin had been exhausted. The county will begin running legal advertisements in local newspapers this week in the final step of its search for survivors.
- Under state law, the local state's attorney must authorize the removal of human remains from a cemetery. Montgomery County State's Attorney Andrew L. Sonner already approved the move, according to an affidavit filed with the court.
- Historic preservationists, meanwhile, are hoping the county will either renegotiate the sale to save the graveyard or allow a scientific examination of the remains.
- Both the Maryland state archeologist and the state historic preservation officer have advised the county that the cemetery is potentially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.
- William Owens, who is handling details of the sale for the county, said he will present a list of options to County Executive Charles Gilchrist within the next three to four weeks. One of the options, he said, will be to study the remains.
- Owens said that if the county sells the site, it is obligated to hire a funeral director to exhume the bodies and relocate them in a cemetery in Montgomery County that will provide perpetual care. He could not estimate the cost of the move.
- The pauper cemetery's historic significance lies in the archeological and anthropological clues it would provide about the lives of "a distinct segment of the population" whose health habits and characteristics are "otherwise poorly documented," the report states.
- "If we study them we are to a certain extent bringing them to life and allowing them to tell us how they lived," said J. Lawrence Angel, curator of physical anthropology with the Smithsonian Institution.
- The entire investigation would take three to five months and cost \$30,000 to \$40,000, according to the report.
- Once the remains were exhumed, physical anthropologists would study the bones to detect clues about nutrition, disease, physical development and cause of death, said John Pousson, a staff archeologist with the National Park Service. Archeologists would study buttons, buckles, clothing, casket hardware and any other artifacts found in the graves, he said.

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 Snowdon 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."

O Comments

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