

As a forgotten Prince William County burial ground is dug up to make room for a school football field, a family raises objections



In Va., ire over cemetery plan



PHOTOS BY LINDA DAVIDSON/THE WASHINGTON POST

TOP: Archaeologist Edward Johnson unearths a decomposing skeleton at a graveyard on a proposed site for a high school complex south of Manassas, Va. **ABOVE:** Archaeologist Craig Rose sifts the dirt removed at the site.

BY MICHAEL E. RUANE

There wasn't much left of the person in grave No. 10 — leg bones as fragile as ash, a well-worn tooth, a few milk-glass buttons from the burial clothing.

Grave No. 9 contained a set of rubber and porcelain dentures, a gold-plated ring and evidence of a large glass viewing plate in the coffin lid.

At first, when plans were made to move the tiny cemetery with the unmarked graves to make room for a Prince William County high school sports complex, no one knew who its occupants were.

But now, in a classic Virginia collision of past and future, re-

searchers have learned who the occupants might be, and a possible descendant contends that her presumed ancestors were hastily dug up to make way for the school football field.

"The football field!" said Carolyn Lynn, a Manassas genealogist who believes she is related to the cemetery's occupants. "It's not even the high school. . . . And that kind of adds insult to injury."

The story began in September, when the school district announced plans to move the cemetery, which it originally said had been discovered in July.

Then, last month, a school official revealed that evidence of

GRAVES CONTINUED ON A9

Plans for reburial of remains from 1800s are being protested

GRAVES FROM A1

the cemetery had actually been found in 2008 by contractors surveying the site, who, for unknown reasons, didn't tell the school system until July.

The site, on a remote ridge south of Manassas, was overgrown with dense woods. No one had been buried there in more than a century. And the graves, which dated from the 1860s to the 1890s, were marked only by rough fieldstones with no inscriptions.

It was not even clear how many graves there were, maybe a dozen or so.

But as the work on the site got underway Nov. 11, researchers poring over old deed books and microfilm quickly traced the land to a 100-acre farm occupied by a man named William Lynn, his wife, Cordelia, and their children in the mid-1800s.

And a likely scenario is that the graves — 11 have been found — are those of the Lynns.

The problem was that by the time that suspected connection was discovered Nov. 16, officials said, the dig had been underway for five days and couldn't be stopped.

At dusk on Nov. 21, despite complaints that it could have been paused, the work was finished.

And now there's a dispute over where the unearthed remains will be reburied.

"It's very upsetting," Carolyn Lynn said. "These were people who lived there, farmed there, had children . . . that expected to be there forever."

School officials said that when they were informed about the cemetery, it was too late to redesign the school site because nearby wetlands and other protected areas where the field would have been located were off-limits to construction.

"Had a redesign even been possible, it would have cost significant money and time that the school division does not have," Philip B. Kavits, a spokesman for the Prince William County public school system, wrote in an e-mail.

"We were not aware at the time (and have still not confirmed) the connection of the family to these graves," he wrote.

And for now, that connection is only through records.

The Lynn family has been in Prince William County, mostly in that same neighborhood, since the middle 1700s, said Don Wilson, the Virginia librarian at Bull Run Regional Library in Manassas.

"We know William Lynn got part of this land in 1845, and the family owned it . . . until they sold it in 1899," Wilson said of the parcel where the cemetery is.

William Lynn, who was listed on the census as a farmer, died in 1862 and left a widow and numerous children, the librarian said.

Two of them served in the Confederate army during the Civil War, according to research by Carolyn Lynn. Two died of tuberculosis in their 20s. At least two died in childhood.



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Archaeologists John Mullen, left, and Michael Smith prepare to photograph unearthed remains in an old family graveyard near Manassas, Va.



PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A metal coffin plate engraved "At Rest" was found in a grave that was exhumed at the site. The digging operation at the cemetery, part of a plan to make way for a high school football field, wrapped up Nov. 21.

And, Wilson said, they presumably were buried in the family cemetery up on the ridge.

A delicate mission

Archaeologists Andrés Garzón and Boyd Sipe leaned over the edge of grave No. 10, trying to figure out how to get the lower right leg bone out of the crumbling coffin where it had been for more than a century.

It was mid-afternoon one day last month in woods outside Manassas. Ten other graves lay open in a clearing. Around them, stands of young evergreens swayed in the wind.

The archaeologists, and other experts from Thunderbird Archaeology of Gainesville, Va., had the hands-on task of removing the remains and artifacts.

Grave No. 10 was more promis-

ing than some of the others. It contained bones, a tooth and what appeared to be remnants of a skull, all of which raised the possibility of recovering DNA.

Other graves in the cemetery bore only a kind of shadow on the coffin floor where the deceased had once been. There also was burial hardware — ornate handles and a coffin plate that read, "At Rest."

No. 9 had a bit of lace, from clothing or coffin lining, and a row of buttons, as if from a garment.

The person in No. 10 was probably an adult male, said Dana Kollmann, a bioarchaeologist at Towson University who was on site, consulting on the case.

There seemed to be little left of him, aside from the tooth and

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bone. But those might yield DNA. And DNA, via comparison with Lynn descendants, might yield, or rule out, an identification.

As he worked, Garzón wore a full-body hazard suit, a surgical mask and rubber gloves to protect against dangerous embalming chemicals such as arsenic and formaldehyde that might be present.

With a small trowel, he carefully removed the dirt around the leg bone, while Sipe, kneeling on the other side of the grave, prepared to lower a piece of aluminum foil to hold the bones.

"Here goes nothing," Garzón said as he began to work two trowels under the bone to free it. "All right, one, two — oh, shoot! It's already breaking," he said. "Think I'm getting a little bit of coffin with it."

Sipe, a project coordinator, lowered the foil. Garzón pried the bone loose. And the limb was raised from the damp earth where it had rested for so long.

Was it the bone of William Lynn?

Was it that of his son, John Henry Lynn, who Carolyn Lynn says is her great-great-grandfather and died in 1884?

Was it even a Lynn?

The Lynns were slaveholders, Carolyn Lynn said. But the graves seemed too fancy to be those of

slaves.

Sipe said these were rural people who probably had no way to acquire a carved tombstone but could afford nice coffins with windows and ornate handles.

The nearest stone carvers were in Alexandria, and many rural Virginia farmers used crude fieldstones to mark graves.

"Maybe it was a choice," he said. "They could afford a nice casket, or they could afford an engraved headstone. And this was the choice that they made."

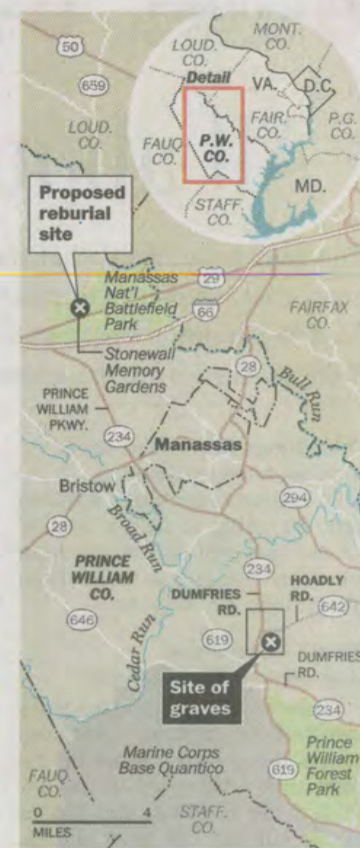
Dispute over reburial

As the dig concluded, the remains were taken to Kollmann's laboratory at Towson University, where she hopes to extract DNA. "I hold out hope, but I'm not too optimistic," she said last week.

The artifacts were taken to Thunderbird's lab, located in the headquarters of its parent company, Wetland Studies and Solutions, in Gainesville.

The remains, artifacts and even soil from the graves are tentatively slated to be reburied in Stonewall Memory Gardens, northwest of Manassas, where the school system has bought plots for them.

But Carolyn Lynn has protested, saying that cemetery is at some distance from the spot where the group was buried.



The map below, published Jan. 1, 1862, shows a W. Lynn occupying a property in the vicinity of where the graves were discovered.



Source: Library of Congress

GENE THORP/THE WASHINGTON POST

"We'd really rather have them put right back where they were," she said. "But if that is not a feasible option, they should still be on that land."

"I think we could probably come to an agreement, an amicable one," she said. "But the School Board won't talk to us. Right now, they're waiting for the report from the archaeologists."

Kavits, the schools spokesman, said: "While we could not respectfully stop an exhumation that was already in progress, we have expressed a commitment to consult further with the community . . . and to work with the Lynn family, if appropriate."

The school system plans to host a public meeting on the reinterment at 7 p.m. Dec. 16 in its administrative headquarters, the Edward L. Kelly Leadership Center, in Manassas.

Meanwhile, Sipe, the archaeologist, said the old cemetery has been carefully mapped and the fieldstone grave markers saved.

He said it's possible that the cemetery's original configuration — burial locations and stone markers — could be re-created with high accuracy elsewhere.

So whoever was buried on the ridge outside Manassas more than 100 years ago can rest in peace again.

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