

Old iron casket retrieved from watery Manokin River grave

By Brice N. Stump

If you thought the days of grave robbing were over, think again. Someone has broken into, and destroyed, one of the rarest caskets ever found in Somerset County -- a iron coffin dating possibly to the mid-1800s.

For years strong winds and waves have been eating away at a small graveyard near Fairmount, tumbling marble tombstones into the Manokin River. Years ago the erosion exposed the head and shoulders portion of a cast-iron casket. Mark Good of Crisfield, who owns the property, said he saw the casket being washed out of the graveyard in the early late 1980s, head first.

"I didn't know what it was, because I have never seen anything like it. There was a window over where the face would be located and I looked inside and saw a skull. The glass was discolored and I couldn't see in too well, but there was no evidence of any clothing, but I could see other bones," Good said.

Sometime after the head and shoulders of the casket were exposed, someone broke the glass.

"Even before the casket appeared, I asked the government to do something to protect the graves, but nothing happened. That was years ago. Every time we had a storm or strong wave action, I would move the tombstones away from the edge but the bones were falling on the shore and people started stealing the old tombstones," he said.

Where were family members of the deceased?

"No one did a thing to save the graveyard. Everybody that came down here to see what was happening said they were heirs, and believe me there were a lot of 'heirs,' but no one did a thing," he said.

Meanwhile, tombstones and bones littered the beach. Good's wife, Doris, said a brick vault, a traditional protection chamber for a coffin, was also exposed by erosion and it too tumbled into the river.

"I tried to save the iron casket from falling onto the beach, but I

couldn't move it. I didn't want to get in trouble for tampering with a grave, but I knew it was just a matter of time before it washed into the river," he said.

Two years ago the casket ended up on the beach, and again, Good tried to move it to higher ground, but wasn't successful.

"Sand and water got in through the broken glass window and a big tree fell on it," he said.

Good said a falling tree may have cracked the case and it eventually broke into two sections. For two years the iron casket has been washed by waves, even oyster spats and barnacles found a home on the corroding surface.

For years the curious have been taking "mementos" from the graveyard, including gravestones and bits and pieces of the iron casket.

"Seems like people will take anything that is old. I guess if the family wants a tombstone, what can you do? But other than taking things, no one has been interested in protecting the remains," Good said.

The 7-foot long casket may be more than 140 years old, but parts of the casket, if wire-brushed, appear almost new, including several of the clamps and screws used to seal the upper and lower sections.

It appears that the seal of the casket failed years ago, and by the time Good and others saw it, the body had decayed. But careful examination of the corroding iron in the base of the casket showed very small imprints of a quilted-type fabric. The fabric rotted, but the imprint was retained by the iron and debris in the casket.

For an extra fee, expensive fabric was used by the undertakers in lining the casket.

Often iron caskets of this type had a plate bearing the name of the deceased over the chest area, but this part of the casket has been destroyed. Good said there was no plaque when he saw the intact casket. That casket was broken into by robbers hoping to find gold necklaces or rings.

While the coffin is broken into several large sections, the bottom on which the body laid, oddly enough, survives intact as if separated from the casket by a large can opener.

Good has saved small pieces of the casket including a handle and what appears to be part of the iron cover that once concealed the glass window. An absolute stranger to everyone who may have been buried in the cemetery, Good has collected whatever he could of the tombstones and remains to protect them. The question is, he asked, is what do you do with all of these things?

"I have some bones from the iron casket, but what do I do with them, I just can't let them stay in the water," he said.

A section of the coffin over the chest area may have had a plaque attached with the name of the deceased, but grave robbers broke through the casket at this location and that section has been lost or stolen.

Earlier this year a tombstone was found just feet from the broken iron casket in the water. The marble marker, bearing the inscription "In Memory of Lipporah Evans, Died October 9th, 1854, Aged 46 years" may identify the remains found in the casket, but wave action and close proximity of graves may have shifted the markers around.

Even the glass window of the casket found here has been smashed to pieces, except for a section about the size of a quarter, which was found earlier this year, still attached near the top of the window opening.

Not only did this type of case represent the Rolls Royce of caskets, but was also the most expensive casket of its day, well beyond the means of the average worker.

Bob Bradshaw, of the generations-old funeral firm of Bradshaw and Sons Funeral Home in Crisfield, said a casket of this type has never before been found in Somerset County.

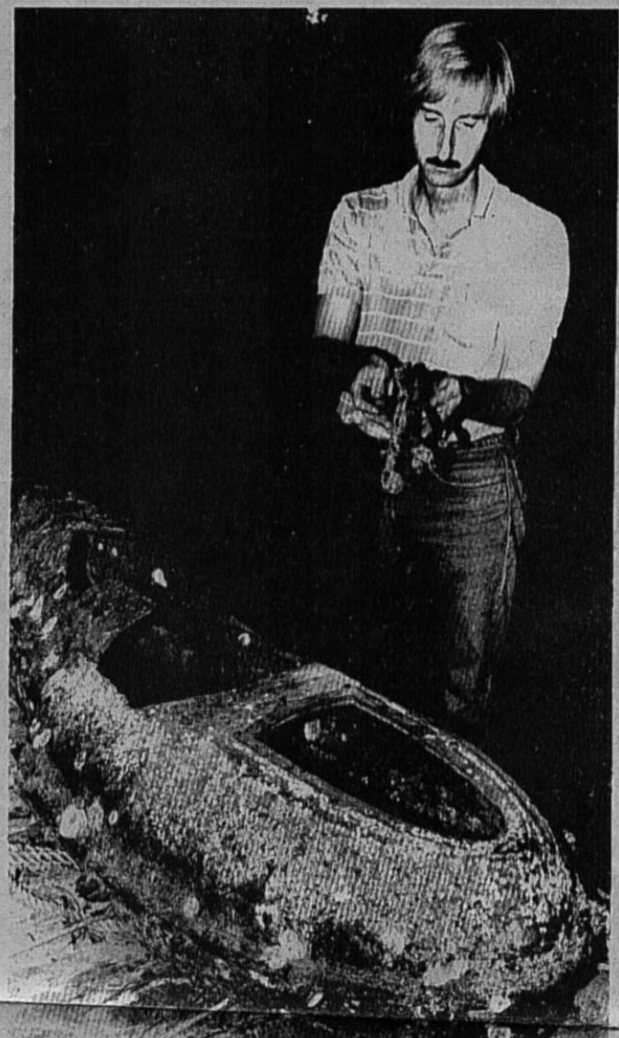
It has been speculated that iron caskets of this nature were used to either transport a body over a long distance or were used to preserve the body, without odor or decay, so that family members would have ample time to travel to a funeral and see the deceased, thus the need for glass, which was at least a quarter of an inch thick.

The thick glass was needed to withstand the pressure created by a vacuum. Usually a iron plate that could be slipped away from the glass attached to the casket, and case found bears evidence that a plate was once attached.

Just whose casket this is may never be known. The casket Good found is shaped like a mummy case, the upper and lower sections were bolted together at close intervals around the casket which appears to resemble a Fisk burial case developed in the 1850s.

The Fisk case, of iron and likewise bolted together, was considered a "revolution in burial methods."

Once closed the case was airtight,



Herald Editor Richard Crumbacker holds several bones recovered from an iron casket washed years ago from a graveyard near Fairmount. Grave robbers hoping to find jewelry smashed through the glass window and then broke the 7-foot cast iron casket into two pieces. It is not known who was buried in the coffin. (Photo by Brice Stump)

and a vacuum could be created within the case or a liquid injected to preserve the body. And like the Fisk burial case, the iron casket found here also featured a glass window directly above the face of the deceased.

Almond D. Fisk, inventor of the casket said "...the air may be exhausted so completely as entirely to prevent the decay of the contained body of principals well understood; or of preferred, the coffin may be filled with any gas or fluid (alcohol, or wine) having the property of preventing putrefaction."

Fisk patented his design in 1848, the authors wrote, but "metallic coffins had been patented earlier," and James A. Gray of Richmond, Va., in 1836, received the first American patent on a metallic coffin...

Where the graveyard was once located is now under the Manokin River at High tide. So quickly has the land eroded that a piece of earth-moving equipment, once on land, is now almost 60 feet in the river.

At one time, according to life-long resident Bertha Ford, 78, there was a canning house at the site.

"As a child I remember that there was a big old farm house where William Smith lived. He grew tomatoes on land that has become marshland now and Tom Holland hauled tomatoes out of there with a double team of horses. Later the old house became vacant and goats

stayed in there and eventually it just fell down. There was an unusual house built over a well there too, and during the hot summer months the food they wanted kept cool was lowered into the well, but that's gone too," Ford said.

"I don't remember any of the names of the people that were buried in the graveyard. I'm about the oldest one left down here now, the rest have all gone, but I don't ever remember anyone being buried there, and the funeral procession would have had to go right by my front door when I lived near that farm," she said.

Ford recalled hearing of a bizarre incident that happened almost 30 years ago. "I heard that a man was oyster tonging several hundred feet from where the graveyard was and pulled up his great grandfather's tombstone, a Meredith I believe it was. Since I've been around I know that there has been at least 200 feet of land swept away, but its probably a lot more than that," she said.

Bureaucratic red tape has allowed years and lots of lands to slip by, yet Good hopes that approval may be given for construction of bulkheading around his rapidly eroding property.

But for the graveyard and those so lovingly buried, it is already too late.

The site is privately owned and not open to the public.



Marble tombstones surround two sections of an iron casket, as shown in this photograph taken in January of this year. Over the years erosion tumbled the markers, casket and bones from a graveyard on high land into the Manokin River. While the coffin has been recovered, the tombstones have either been covered with sand or stolen. (Photo by of Mel Smith)