

Fairfax County's Dreary Graveyard For the Destitute, Adrift or ...

By Mike Sager Washington Post Staff Writer
The Washington Post (1974-Current file); Mar 25, 1983;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post
pg. A1



The Rev. Wallace Hale, who has buried many persons in Potter's Field, stands between two recently filled and settled graves.

By Joel Richardson - The Washington Post

POTTER'S FIELD

Fairfax County's Dreary Graveyard For the Destitute, Adrift or Anonymous

By Mike Sager
Washington Post Staff Writer

Potter's Field in Fairfax County is 10 rows of flat gray stones, a ceramic lamb without a nose, a vase of plastic flowers and six azaleas, all within a chain-link fence within five acres of gravel.

The grass is matted, and where the graves have sunk, muddy water collects in pools. On a warm day the moisture rises, mingling in the air with the odor of exhaust and the din of engines from the buses and trucks in the county maintenance yard to the north.

Gathered in these paupers' graves are people from a different Fairfax County, a place of violence and misfortune amid comfort and affluence, a place where people die and have no one to bury them and no insurance to pay the cost.

In Potter's Field, a biblical term for a paupers' graveyard, are the fallen like Charles B. Degges, Washington Evening Star reporter and school board member, and the criminal like Thomas Lafayette White, tough and knife-scarred from the streets of Baileys Crossroads. They are immigrants like Ibolya Jenes, who served up daily specials at a cafeteria in Tysons Corner; the destitute like Wallace Gill and his two daughters, who lived in Chantilly in a shack without plumbing, and local characters like Andy Smith, who waved to commuters each morning from the edge of Pickett Road.

"They're the kind of people you hear about but rarely see in Fairfax," says the Rev. Wallace Hale, a retired infantry chaplain who has buried many in Potter's Field. "People who

See GRAVEYARD, A18, Col. 1

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Potter's Field: Fairfax's Dreary Graveyard for the Destitute

GRAVEYARD, From A1

are adrift, people with no home, people who lost touch with a certain stability that seems so important in the suburbs. They are the ones who are buried in Potter's Field."

Today, 149 persons are in Potter's Field, also called Fairfax County Cemetery, the most recent buried on Feb. 4. Dedicated in 1946 to the drifters found dead along the highways and train tracks of a county just blossoming after the war, the graveyard was isolated then, forest and meadow off Jermantown Road near the old county Poor House, across from the old county dog pound.

The first to be buried there was John Doe. Two John Does and two Jane Does followed, as did Christine Marie Doe, Infant Unknown. Though the others there have names duly recorded on small granite headstones, the histories of nearly all have been lost in the shuffle of paperwork and time.

Until 1969, there were neither headstones nor fence, and school buses and abandoned cars were parked atop the graves. The vehicles were moved and the headstones, azaleas and fence were placed only after the public learned that the field was such a mess that the county had rejected a boy's request to visit his mother's grave.

The azaleas were planted by two women who saved the bushes from tractors clearing land for the county office building. A man now buried in the field helped build the fence. Since then, five to 10 people have been buried there each year.

When people die in Fairfax without

money or survivors or friends, they are handed over to the county, becoming the "Indigent, Unknown, or Unclaimed Human Bodies" of Procedural Memorandum No. 67. Seven agencies are responsible for each burial, paid for through prearranged blanket purchase agreements. Costs total \$925, up from \$825 in 1981.

Death without money in Fairfax includes transport in a black Chevy station wagon to Everly Funeral Home in Fairfax City, which is managed by a man who wears a tie tack in the shape of a shovel. There is standard embalming and cosmetic work if needed, and burial garments from Louis Drygoods in New York City. A man's suit without belt loops or pockets costs \$75. A woman's dress with a false slip is \$45.

If the deceased has family or friends, a one-hour viewing can be held. If not, the pine or pressed wood coffin is closed and driven in a hearse to the grave, dug four feet deep. Hale delivers a 10-minute service, usually in the presence of only two maintenance men and the tractor they will use to push the pile of uncovered dirt back into the grave.

Thirteen years after Katherine Gill saw her husband and two daughters buried in this way, she cannot recall the color of her daughters' hair or the place of her husband's birth.

"After a while, though you don't want it to be that way, you kinda lose the picture of someone in your mind," says Gill, who has no photos of her family. "You change your ways and you stop going to see them. But I guess they don't never change. They'll always remain what they were."



By James A. Parcel—The Washington Post

Potter's Field, or Fairfax County Cemetery, was fenced in 1969 with the help of a man now buried there. Citizens had complained of vehicles on the graves.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.