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Tombstone stolen from Swedesburg plot

Thursday, November 19, 2009

By Gary Puleo

UPPER MERION — The person who stole a gravestone from the Christ Church-Old Swedes cemetery in Swedesburg may have thought they were walking off with a valuable Civil War artifact.

Although the stone marks the grave of Sarah Priest, who nursed soldiers during the Civil War, her gravestone only dates back as far as 2007, when the Daughters of the American Revolution decided it was time that Sarah's previously unmarked resting place be recognized.

"Whoever stole it may think they have a piece of Civil War memorabilia, but they don't," said Donna Kent-Croushore, a vestry member of the church, located at 740 River Road, Swedesburg.

"Unless maybe they're keeping it in their own backyard for their own decor. It's so sad that someone would do this."

The headstone was discovered missing on Saturday, during an impromptu tour that Kent-Croushore's husband, Rick Croushore, was conducting in conjunction with a craft fair that was going on at the time.

"We've been trying to have different functions to raise awareness of the dire straits the church is facing," Kent-Croushore said. "We're very proud of Sarah, so my husband wanted to show her grave to these people but came running back to tell me he couldn't find it. I told him he probably just got confused and went to find it myself."

What she discovered instead was a spot of dirt amidst the grassy area where Sarah Priest's gravestone had been installed.

"It was one of those stones that lays flat in the ground, probably about 15 to 18 inches," Kent-Croushore said.

A brass marker, which had been placed next to the stone, was also missing.

The last time anyone remembered seeing the gravestone was back on Oct. 10, when the church conducted a Grave Tales tour of the cemetery, with Civil War re-enactors.

Now Kent-Croushore is concerned that the tour may have inspired someone to come back and steal the stone.

"We do these tours and point out certain graves. If you didn't know her grave was there, you'd never have found it.

Because the cemetery is 250 years old, it's bumpy and hilly, not flat. There are many stones that have been uprooted. Some have fallen over and cracked and some you can't even identify. So someone had to have this pointed out to them to know that it was there."

Through research, church members learned that Sarah Priest probably suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, though her family apparently just thought she was crazy.

"When she came back from the war, she probably had the disorder but nobody knew about it then," Kent-Croushore said.

"Sarah just kind of lived out her days being what everyone thought was crazy, and her grave was never marked because her family was so embarrassed about her."

Two years ago, the Daughters of the American Revolution helped restore Sarah's dignity by surmising that she was buried near her family and giving her a proper stone memorial at last.

The gravestone theft is not the first time the church, which was built in the early 1700s, had been robbed, Kent-Croushore said.

"In the last couple of years, people have stolen the iron fences that surround some family plots. We figured it was recyclers, which was pretty sad."

A few years before that, someone broke in to the church and made off with a set of brass wall sconces and a donation box containing a few dollars.

"It's a fairly remote section of town, and it's not well lit at night. But you need money to put good lights up, and we don't have the funds," Kent-Croushore said.

Part of the money raised at Saturday's craft fair may now have to go toward replacing Sarah's stone, she added.

"We worked really hard to raise money over the weekend, and now if we can't recover the stone we'll have to spend the money to have her grave marked again before we lose sight of where Sara is buried."

As she scours eBay and any Internet site where someone might try to sell Civil War memorabilia, Kent-Croushore is hopeful that whoever stole the stone will return it if they realize it holds very little, if any, monetary value.

"No questions asked," she said.