

History enthusiasts searching for clues in 19th century Kirkersville cemetery mystery

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KIRKERSVILLE -- This small village is home to a decades-spanning mystery that involves the search for buried remains and two different cemeteries, one long forgotten.

To this point, not even ground-penetrating radar has been able to solve the mystery, but that has not deterred a band of history-minded people who are trying to answer the question, "What happened to the remains of two members of the Jackson family?"

Kirkersville-area residents and officials first started asking themselves that question in late 2011. That's when the village's zoning inspector, John Thomas, came across a survey of an old cemetery on the south side of U.S. 40/National Road, just east of the Kirkersville Post Office.

The cemetery once belonged to a family before falling under the care of the village, but in 2012 all that remains is the mostly-buried stump of an old cottonwood tree. There are no gravestones, no fencing, just a 16-by-16-square-foot patch of grass that supposedly stood as the final burial spot for two members of the Jackson family: Clark, who was 8 months old when he died in 1830, and Francis, who was 48 years old when he died in 1829.

Kirkersville Mayor Terry Ashcraft started investigating, and he discovered that in 1968 someone had moved the two gravestones that once stood in the small cemetery to the Kirkersville Cemetery, located on the opposite side of the village, next to gravestones belonging to other members of the Jackson family.

They also had thrown the iron fencing that once surrounded the cemetery into the creek that snakes through the woods behind the family's cemetery.

But why?

That's one of the mysteries.

Ashcraft said he heard rumors that someone did not like the cemetery, but nothing more than rumors since the person or people who removed the gravestones and fence are deceased.

"I guess they just didn't like it there," Ashcraft said.

Ashcraft, with the help of others, wants to change that.

"I just want to get (the gravestones) moved back up there like they should be," he said. "That's somebody's family."

First, Ashcraft and the dedicated group working on the relocation project need to find the remains of Clark and Francis Jackson.

To this point, that hasn't been an easy task, even with the group's impressive background. The group includes retired history teacher Ralph McConnell; Licking County Commissioner Doug Smith, who

helped pen a traveler's guide on the road and who currently serves as vice president of the Ohio National Road Association; the president of the same association, Dean Ringle; and a member of the Ohio Historical Society's Board of Trustees, Cathy Nelson, among others.

The group met Aug. 24 at Kirkersville Cemetery, where a company, Resource International, volunteered its ground-penetrating radar to see if the bodies also had been moved, along with the gravestones, in 1968. The radar failed to locate any trace of the remains.

A few hours later, the radar again failed to find any trace of the remains at the 16-by-16-square-foot former Jackson family cemetery next to the National Road. The group even used an old black and white photograph of the graveyard, taken from a 1950s newspaper, to try to determine exactly where the gravestones had stood, but the radar came up empty.

The next step, Ashcraft said, could involve asking archeology students and a professor from The Ohio State University to volunteer to conduct a mini excavation of the site. Ashcraft and the village are searching for volunteers, as they did with Resource International, so there is no cost associated with the project.

Ultimately, Ashcraft said he wants to see the two Jackson tombstones returned to the family cemetery, another fence erected around the cemetery and a plaque added to denote the family plot, but first the group must find out where the bodies are.

Asking surviving relatives for their input is not possible because the last living member of the Jackson family, from what the group has discovered, is living in a nursing home and suffering from dementia.

"The general feeling is the headstones should be reunited with the remains at their original place of internment," said Ringle, who has taken an interest in the mystery because both cemeteries are on the National Road.

For Smith, the mystery extends beyond the borders of the two cemeteries. He has pored over countless records trying to track down when and how the family moved to Kirkersville. He discovered Francis Jackson was born in Virginia and moved to Pennsylvania and then Tuscarawas County in eastern Ohio before locating the family to Kirkersville sometime between 1927 and his death. Little else is known.

"It's a historic mystery, and it's a story of some pioneers who settled here," said Smith, pointing out another member of the family, also named Francis Jackson, served with the Union forces during the Civil War.

For others, the mystery revolves around the location of the remains.

Two years ago, Nelson was part of a project at a New Straitsville cemetery that had been thrown into disarray. Ground penetrating radar helped a group at that graveyard reunite gravestones with their proper remains, and Nelson said there is value in doing the same thing in Kirkersville.

"It's overwhelming and spiritual to put the remains back," she said.