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Hudson Police Sgt. James Delaney takes a photograph inside a woodchuck hole in Cedar Park Cemetery Saturday, assisted by Investigator Chris Filli, left, and Officer Rodney Waithe. Lance Wheeler photo.

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BREAKING: Police identify suspect in cemetery flag thefts By John Mason and Lance Wheeler
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HUDSON — Hudson Police believe they have identified the perpetrators of a rash of flag thefts in the Grand Army of the Republic section of Cedar Park Cemetery. It appears to have been an inside job: All signs are now pointing to some underground residents of the cemetery itself.

Around 75 flags have been reported missing from Civil War graves in the days leading up to and following our nation's Independence Day celebrations.

The culprit?

Woodchucks.

"I think for the most part we've confirmed that's the case," Mayor Bill Hallenbeck said Saturday. Police used pole cameras to check woodchuck holes. "They confirmed there are flags down there."

The pole camera images are not in color, he said, but the white-and-black images were close enough to identify the flags.

While that evidence could be circumstantial, the police also have still photos from a motion-activated camera that showed a gopher at a flag, the mayor said.

“Shortly after this, another one showed the flag was gone,” he said.

Hallenbeck said he was happy to hear it wasn’t a resident.

“I’m glad we don’t have someone who has taken it upon themselves to desecrate the stones and the flags in front of them,” he said.

Apparently, some flags are now coated with a substance that attracts woodchucks, Hallenbeck said. Lt. Richard Paolino learned via a Google search that other municipalities have been having the same problem and this may be the cause.

Police Commissioner Gary Graziano was out of town, but he said via telephone, “What I heard is there appeared to be remnants of a flag or flags in a hole next to that area (the Grand Army of the Republic section), and a woodchuck or groundhog was confirmed to be on the scene.”

Cemetery volunteer caretaker Vincent Wallace participated in the investigation. Although he said he had seen no definitive evidence, “right now it looks like the woodchuck is the culprit. He was right there where the flag was gone.”

In addition, Wallace said, “the mechanics of removal from the pole indicate that an animal had removed them.”

Investigators observed that flags had been pulled down with the flagpole still in the holder, Wallace said.

“The flag is only a foot to 18 inches off the ground,” he said. “A human would have ripped it upwards.”

Wallace said the woodchuck dens, with their twists and turns, were presenting some problems to the pole cameras, which are rigid.

Woodchucks, he said, are “all over” the cemetery, burrowing under stones and under tree roots.

“The police did a great job,” said Wallace, who assists the cemetery crew in taking care of the Grand Army of the Republic section. “They did stakeouts, they did bike patrols, they had at least four officers on this.”

“We patrolled the daylights out of that place since it was going on,” Graziano said. “We can all rest a little easier knowing that it was a critter and not a human defacing our flags, especially those of the veterans. Now I just need to figure out where to send the bills.”

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