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## Old cemetery has sign, but graves have no markers

By [CHARLES S. EWRY](#)  
Staff Writer

Without ever knowing it, a passerby might walk over the grave of Earl Langsdon's grandmother. Her remains, and those of others, rest somewhere in a woods south of Elizabeth. It's accessible only by a logging road.

Forty years ago, most of the individual graves could be located by markers. Now the location of Old St. Peter's Cemetery is the only thing visitors can be sure of. Lacking gravestones, a fence or groundskeeper, it is marked by a lone sign.

A log church was built at the site of Old St. Peter's in 1849. It burned around the turn of the century and its members moved to St. Peter's Catholic Church in Buena Vista. Some of those members had the remains of their relatives removed to St. Peter's Cemetery as well.

Decades of neglect followed for the secluded gravesite at Old St. Peter's.

Sometime between 1960 and 1966, the headstones (some of which date to around 1800) were removed. The ground was leveled so it could be maintained easier.

"Some empty graves were open. (Some gravemarkers) were just a piece of wood, and you couldn't read who it was. What it looks like now is what it looked like then. It wasn't like little saplings. It was a big mess," said Jerome Bierly, St. Peter's Cemetery caretaker.

The clearing was organized by the late Rev. Ernest Strahl, who rented men and machinery from the county with the approval of then-Commissioner Lewis J. Miller Jr.

Renting equipment and operators from the county used to be a common practice. The cemetery was private property, and there was no law determining how it was to be maintained. Miller said he didn't object to the work. He said he heard that some did, but that was "just hearsay."

Bierly, a member of Strahl's congregation at the time of the work, said, "At that time, back 30 years ago, you didn't question the priest, and he pretty well did what he wanted to do. The people in the congregation were in agreement, but there were probably people who weren't in the congregation who weren't asked."

Heavy machinery cleared the area of obstructions, including tombstones. Some stones were dumped over a hill, the rest otherwise damaged or displaced.

Now, "tombstones are all over the hillside, buried, in sinkholes, up against trees, and a lot of them have been carried off," Earl Langsdon's wife, Betty,

said in a WHAS-TV News television broadcast.

Miller's great-grandmother, Catherine Miller, had been buried at Old St. Peter's, but, he said, her remains were moved to St. Peter's Cemetery sometime before 1920. Given the time frame, the removal of the remains and the clearing of Old St. Peter's grounds could not be related.

There is no record to indicate the exact date of the transfer of the remains. "If (the body) is in the same cemetery system or cemetery organization, you do not have to get a state permit" to transfer remains, said Deputy Harrison County Coroner Paul Cesar.

The Langsdons say one memorial was supposed to be erected for all those buried at the forgotten cemetery. The epitaph was to list the names of those known, and for the unknown, there was just these words: "other poor souls." But the priest responsible for the grounds died, and the Langsdons were told the list of names was lost.

"Everyone at that time was in agreement that there would be a marker put up, and a lot of us (at St. Peter's) were very disappointed when it didn't happen," Bierly said. "A lot of people felt that if Father wasn't going to put up a marker, he shouldn't have done that to it."

Without the list, there is no way to determine who is buried at Old St. Peter's. There is no record of transfers made to St. Peter's, and that cemetery has a section also without gravestones and accurate records.

"The records were kept so poorly, we will not bury anyone in the old part now (of St. Peter's)," Bierly said. Bierly has attempted to obtain the missing information for both cemeteries but has been unsuccessful.

Father Mauro Rodas, pastor for St. Peter's Catholic Church at Buena Vista, Most Precious Blood at New Middletown and St. Joseph Church in Corydon, said he doesn't know why Strahl had the land cleared. "I am sure he had good intentions," Rodas said.

Rodas said Strahl asked parishioners to let him know if they had anyone buried in the cemetery, and no one came forward.

For years the Langsdons have been trying to get someone to take action at the cemetery, and for years, they say, they've been getting the runaround. Now, it seems they're getting a response.

Rodas said: "We've already been discussing this for three or four months. I can't say next week or in two weeks. I have to talk to the parishioners of St. Peter's and ask for their input on this idea of having a monument."

Something will be placed at the site "remembering those who are buried there," Rodas said. He added that St. Peter's will maintain the grounds and that the Catholic Church has a policy that a cemetery, once created, is never sold and stays a cemetery forever.

From the beginning of their crusade, the Langsdons said all they want is for the grounds to be maintained and a monument erected. They claim they offered assistance in restoring the grounds but were refused.

"If they are offering right now, I will be willing and happy to know that," Rodas said.

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