

Picking up the pieces

Bones become the clues in search for ancestor

By Michael Wentzel
Evening Sun Staff

GLENN DALE — In the small, brick office where Gabriel Duvall practiced law, the clues to his identity seem meager and haunting.

The long shinbone hints at a tall man. The gold filling in the molar in the well-preserved skull could indicate wealth. The knob on an arm bone might mark a broken arm. The brass buttons, pieces of green velvet and chunks of mahogany suggest the casket of a respected man.

Gabriel Duvall, comptroller of the United States and justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, had wealth and respect. His descendants hope to give him a proper grave.

"We're not sure how tall a man he was," said David Duvall, who has organized the search for his ancestor. "But we have other clues that lead us to believe this is Gabriel Duvall."

David Duvall is president of the Society of Mareen Duvall Descendants, the group that has decided to bury Gabriel Duvall, the great-grandson of Mareen Duvall, at Gabriel's estate, Marietta.

Construction of Glenn Dale Boulevard recently cut

See DUVALL, A6, Col. 1



By James E. Smallwood—Evening Sun Staff

off the old family graveyard in an overgrown grove of trees, from Marietta, a historic site near Bowie owned by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

"The society has wanted to find Gabriel for more than 30 years," said Duvall. "Construction of the highway clinched it."

Born in 1732, Gabriel Duvall became clerk of the General Court in Annapolis at age 20. He served as clerk to the first session of the Maryland House of Delegates. He held many offices in the state after the Revolutionary War.

Duvall served briefly in the U.S. Congress before being named judge of the Maryland Supreme Court. A longtime supporter of Thomas Jefferson, Duvall was named comptroller of the United States in 1802 by Jefferson. James Madison appointed him to the Supreme Court in 1812.

He resigned from the court in 1833. He spent the last decade of his life at Marietta, where he enjoyed thoroughbred horse racing and often rode the dozen miles to Washington on horseback. He died in 1844 at the age of 91.

Sassafras, cherry, walnut and locust trees surround the Duvall family cemetery, called The Wigwam. Through the years, farmers have plowed through parts of it to plant tobacco. Vines and shrubs obscure the few gravestones from the new boulevard that runs just a few feet away.

Richard Muzzrole, an archaeologist hired by the Duvall society, began mapping the graveyard more than two years ago. He has found evidence of at least 23 graves. He believes he has found Gabriel Duvall's grave near where a gate once stood by the graves of Duvall's mother-in-law and wife.

After careful excavation last week, Muzzrole allowed David Duvall to make the initial probe of the grave.

"I used a trowel to take off the final layers of earth," he said. "I thought I had discovered a piece of the casket but it was a shinbone."

When the wet clay was scraped away, the skull of a man was seen behind a cracked glass panel from the lid of the casket.

"When I first looked at the skull, I reacted with awe," Duvall said. "This is a relative of mine who talked to George Washington. He was friend of Jefferson who often visited at his home. They were his colleagues. It was an awesome experience to meet up with him."

Muzzrole said the dampness of the clay had accelerated the decay of both the man and the casket. In the graveyard, the archaeologist measured backwards from the shinbone, finding more bones. He later sifted the earth for bits of the body.

He spread the bones — pieces of arm, leg and spine — on a table in the office where Gabriel Duvall once worked as a lawyer. He cleans the bones and waits for them to dry.

"I am 99 percent sure this is Gabriel," Muzzrole said. "But leave open that little bit of doubt."

Duvall hopes an arm bone provides the best clue to the identity of the man exhumed from The Wigwam.

In 1824, Gabriel Duvall broke an arm in a carriage accident on Capitol Hill that was documented in newspapers of the day. The society hopes a forensic specialist can examine the arm bones for evidence of a break.

"Our only problem is that we only found the bones one arm," Duvall said.

If a positive identification is made, Gabriel Duvall will be buried at Marietta in a new graveyard. The society hopes to identify the remains of a few other family members in The Wigwam and move them to Marietta.

"Gabriel had a very sad private life," Duvall said.

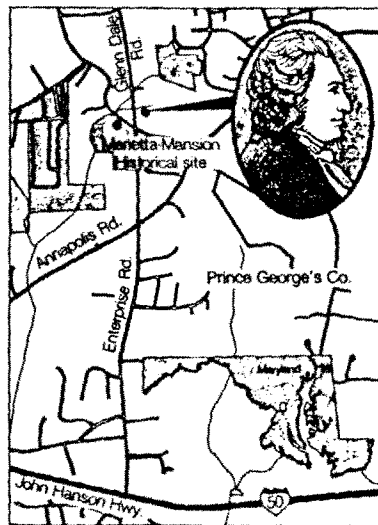
"Two brothers were killed in the Revolutionary War. His first wife died shortly after the birth of his only son. His son died almost 15 years before him. His second wife also died before him. He never had a proper gravestone probably because most of his immediate family died before him."

"We want to do what is proper. We want to give Gabriel a fitting reburial," he said.



By Walter McCardell — Evening Sun Staff

David Duvall, left, and Richard Muzzrole with items found during the search for Duvall's ancestor.



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