

## Sandhill Cemetery ravaged

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The stone spire that marked the grave of Margaret Bush, who died more than 136 years ago, lies on its side in the tall grass at Sandhill Cemetery.

A white arch etched with the words "mother" and "father" that belongs with the late-1800s burial sites of Bessiy and Samuel Gaddis has been pushed off its

base.

Across the old cemetery on 25th Street, dozens of other monuments have suffered a similar fate.

The widespread damage, valued in the thousands of dollars, was discovered Sunday morning after a motorist drove over remnants of the grave stones on 25th Street. Authorities are investigating the destruction as a severe act of vandalism — one that could lead to felony charges if the perpetrators are caught.

**Tips: Maj. Todd Noblitt, 379-1718, or the sheriff's anonymous tip line: 379-1712.**

"It's a shame that people don't have any respect for any property, let alone a graveyard like that," said John Bush, whose great-great-grandparents, the Burnetts, are buried at the cemetery.

Maj. Todd Noblitt, spokesman for the Bartholomew County Sheriff's Department, said 22 headstones placed from 1829 to 1912 have been damaged recently, about five of which were thrown into the street. A number of other headstones appeared to have been damaged previously.

More than one person must have been involved in the vandalism because of the size of the damaged monuments, said Mike Champlin, chairman of the Clay Township board. The township is responsible for maintaining the cemetery.

"The size of these things that are knocked over, it's pretty significant," Champlin said. "It's the physical size of these that's surprising, how big they are. There had to be adults doing this."

A towering piece of stone with a capital letter "B" emblazoned at its top was removed from its base at the grave of Della M. Burnett, who died in 1881. It pierced the ground like a heavy concrete spear.

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Sandhill Cemetery, just east of the McCullough's Run neighborhood, is one of the oldest burial grounds in Bartholomew County.

Grave sites are scattered across the green hill, which pops up out of the landscape of barren, brown cornfields and paved roadway. The fields surround three sides of the cemetery, and 25th Street runs along its north side.

Names of families buried in the cemetery include Blessing, Glick, Trotter and Davis.

The oldest grave belonged to William Hart — the son of Revolutionary War soldier Joseph Hart — who was buried there in 1826 after drowning in Clifty Creek as a child, said Cris West, a local cemetery historian. But the Hart family's graves were moved to Garland Brook Cemetery years ago.

"(Sandhill) is just part of Columbus now, but at that time it was far away from Columbus," West said. "They started dying when they moved in, so there's a lot of burials there."

The cemetery's most notable feature is a small decorative door in a retaining wall at street level that was installed when Indiana 46 was cut through the terrain in the 1930s. The door, which is covered with a green poster-board sign bearing the words "He has risen" in large, black letters, leads nowhere.

Not all the monuments were damaged. The largest marker, a 20-foot monolith belonging to William and Mary Western on the south side of the cemetery, was left untouched, possibly because it was too big to topple. Other, smaller stones also were untouched.

Colorful artificial flowers adorn a cluster of graves on the east side of the hill. Small American flags wave next to the markers for Thomas Foster, who died in the 1850s, and Thomas Hart, who lived from 1791 to 1865 and has a Navy insignia inscribed by his name.

West said a Presbyterian church and possibly a schoolhouse once sat on the hill as the cemetery grew. An old newspaper article indicates that soldiers trained at the site during the early part of the Civil War by jousting with corn stalks, she said.

An old chain-link fence wraps around the hill, and the entry gate is held closed with a blue elastic strap. At the top of the hill, in the middle of the cemetery, the limbs of a tall, decrepit pine tree stretch above two damaged grave stones enclosed in a rusty, wrought iron fence.

The markers belong to Margaret Bush, who died in November 1875 at the age of 25, and Bond and Jennett Burnett, who both died in the late 1800s.

"Shed not for me the bitter tear. Nor give the heart to vain regret. 'Tis but the casket that lies here. The gem that filled it sparkles yet," reads an inscription at the base of Bush's marker.

Helen Wildermuth, who operates Stonehugger Cemetery Restoration Inc. in Nashville, said she was hired by Clay Township to do some restoration work at Sandhill in late 2010 and early 2011. At the time, the stones needed repairs from minor damages, she said.

"Most of the stuff that was down before was just Mother Nature doing its thing and mower damage, things like that over the last couple of years," Wildermuth said.

When she learned of the vandalism on Monday, Wildermuth said she was "sick at heart" and planned to survey the destruction.

Champlin said many of the monuments likely could be returned to their places but that it would take a lot of work because of the amount of damage and the size of the pieces.

Noblitt hopes someone will contact authorities with information that could lead them to those responsible for the damage. Tips can be provided by calling Noblitt at 379-1718 or the sheriff's anonymous tip line at 379-1712.

"This isn't just some childhood prank. This is a crime," Noblitt said. "It's just despicable. It's disgraceful."

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