NEWSPAPER ARTICLE ABOUT BOULDEN BLVD (GARBLED WITH INFO ABOUT MOORE’S LANE) POTTER’S FIELD, with explanatory notes by Kathy Dettwyler

Thursday, March 5th, 1981

*The Morning News*, Wilmington, Del. [forerunner of *The News Journal*]

B1, continued on B4

**Headline: “Old Potter’s Field provokes concern for indigent dead”**

*“Yet ev’n these bones from insult to protect*

*Some frail memorial still erected nigh*

*With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,*

*Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.*

*Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid*

*Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire*

*Hands, that the rod of empire might have swayed,*

*Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.”*

From Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.”

By William P. Frank

Staff writer

At least 3,000 unidentified bodies are buried in a neglected, weed-choked, debris-covered, seven-acre tract near the intersection of the DuPont Highway and Boulden Boulevard, south of Wilmington. And few of them have a “frail memorial” or even “a shapeless sculpture.”

No one knows who was buried there or when they were buried.1

For 44 years, from 1934 through 1978, the bodies of indigent men, women, and children were carelessly dumped in shallow graves and forgotten. The graves were shallow, just deep enough to cover the crude caskets with earth.

Some of the graves, not many, have small markers with numbers, but no records are available to give clues as to what the numbers mean.

A number of the graves are open to the elements. Most of the markers have been stolen. Once in a while, skeletons are uncovered by vandals and children playing in the area.

The entire area is now covered with scrub trees, wild grass and brambles that are not sharp enough to discourage ghouls.

Since there is no fence around the tract, the site is open to dirt bikers and trail blazers who drive their vehicles over and through the field.

Since the bodies were buried there, in many cases less than three feet in the ground, the graves have been known to surface after heavy rains. This is New Castle County’s old Potter’s Field, an ancient name that denotes the place where strangers, murderers and derelicts were buried in olden times.

Patricia C. Schramm, secretary of the Department of Health and Social Services, is concerned about the condition of this Potter’s Field. So are Dr. Ali Z. Hameli, the state’s medical examiner, and State Sen. Robert T. Connor, R-Penn Acres.

Mrs. Schramm has written Attorney General Richard T. Gebelein, “It seems to me this situation should be corrected by some one, once and for all.”

“But first,” Mrs. Schramm added to the attorney general, “we need to know who is responsible for this area. Is the state or New Castle County responsible for maintaining the land?”

Hameli, who has made a study of the Potter’s Field history says, “This Potter’s Field is an example of how the indigent dead had once been handled, with less dignity than accorded dead dogs.”

Hameli has several suggestions on what to do with the Boulden Boulevard tract that he will make public after the attorney general determines who is responsible for it.

Connor wrote to Mrs. Schramm after she had asked the attorney general for an opinion.

“We have a severe problem here which can only become worse. A decision is needed on Potter’s Field. The nearby local residents are naturally concerned about their children and about the health problems that may occur some day. Many are concerned, from a moral and ethical point of view, about the county and/or the state’s commitment,” he said.

Praising Mrs. Schramm for what she has done about the problem so far, Connor added,

“I am frustrated and flabbergasted at the lack of genuine concern by the state for our indigent deceased.”

With the opening of Boulden Boulevard in 1977, the old Potters Field is now more . . . than ever accessible to intruders. Also, the surrounding territory is being developed as an industrial park with piles of piping all around on the edge of the Potters Field. Connor has informed Mrs. Schramm that he will, if necessary, persuade the nearby civic association to petition the Superior Court to prevent new construction on the Potters Field.

The civic associations of nearby Castle Hill and Jefferson Farms have been cooperating with in (sic) Connor’s efforts to have the tract cleaned up and further vandalism stopped, the senator said.

In contrast to the conditions at the Boulden Boulevard burial ground, the present-day one-acre Potters Field is in a corner of the nearby Delaware State Hospital area, well-maintained behind a high fence with a locked main entrance.

This area, under the eye of security guards, has been used for the indigent dead of the state since March 1979, with 26 bodies already buried there, the latest on Jan 13.

Under present procedure, each grave is at least six feet deep, with a concrete vault in each grave. Each body is now placed in a heavy cardboard burial case or a wooden casket.

Each grave now has a marker, deeply imbedded in the ground, that can’t be pulled out by vandals even if they do get into the field. Robert C. Feeney, superintendent of the state hospital, has a record of each burial, the name of the dead person if available, and the name of the undertaker who handled the burial.

Feeney also has a chart of the field, indicating exactly where each body has been buried.

“So in the event of a disaster of any kind,” Feeney explains, “we can determine who is buried where, by measurements.”

In contrast to the days when the Potters Field was under the haphazard jurisdiction of the old New Castle Levy Court and the county coroners, the burials of the indigent dead in the new field are cleared through the Division of Social Services of the Department of Health and Social Services.

The undertakers who handle the burials are each paid $350 by the states, with $75 allocated to whoever digs the graves.

The records of the old potters fields have been lost or destroyed, according to Hameli. But within the memory of old times, the “original” Potters Field was located in 1881 near the site of the old county poor house, behind the present state hospital and continued in use until 1923.2

The 1 1/2 -acre field contained about 2,400 graves when its use was discontinued. This early Potters Field was later covered by a huge mound that I-95 now traverses near the state hospital.3

With the abolition of the Delaware’s county poor houses (sic) in the 1930’s, the responsibility for indigent burials was taken over by the now defunct State Welfare Commission and the state hospital was asked to provide space. The hospital then, as now, has its own field for burials of indigent patients.

In 1933, the late Dr. M.A. Tarumianz, superintendent of the state hospital, complained about the high cost of handling indigent burials.

So, in 1934, the state purchased for $2,300 a seven acre tract in the vicinity of today’s Boulden Boulevard, bounded on three sides by the farm of Frank Moore and by the old Delaware Railroad.

The state then turned the tract over to New Castle County as a Potters Field.

As the burials began to increase, efforts were made by various coroners to get a determination just who was responsible for the upkeep of the property.

During the early 1960s, when I-95 came under construction, the firm of C.J. Langendler and Sons began removing hundreds of acres of topsoil from the Moore farm as a fill for the new highway.

This left the Potters Field sitting much higher than the surrounding land. The New Castle County Levy Court then decided to skim off the top of Potters Field, making it possible for heavy rains to expose caskets and bodies.4

A six-foot chain link fence was erected around the graveyard in the 1960s, but no one in government seemed interested in preventing the spread of weeds and brush.

Since the tract was in a secluded area, vandals frequented the field, uprooting grave markers and probing around partially opened graves. In 1970, the office of the medical examiner was made responsible for indigent burials and eight years later, the responsibility for indigent burials was transferred to the Division of Social Services. It was then [1978] that the state hospital authorities agreed to allocate an area for a new Potters Field.

As far as can be learned, the last burial in the Boulden Boulevard tract took place **Sept. 13, 1978**.

Footnotes by Kathy Dettwyler, July 2016

1. In fact, the Certificates of Death (COD) available at “Delaware Death Records, 1855-1961,” through <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1520546?collectionNameFilter=true> ), while neither 100% complete nor 100% accurate, provide place of burial/internment information for the vast majority of people who died in Delaware during this time period. Based on year of death, signature of the undertaker, and the “Burial place” field, it is possible to identify almost everyone who was buried in each of the various Potter’s Fields that have been used in Delaware during this time period. For those buried between 1926 and 1933 in the Potter’s Field known as the “New Castle County Hospital/Almhouse Cemetery in the Woods at Farnhurst,” there is even a record of which grave marker number they are buried under. A project is underway to document who is buried in each of these fields, with the information to be posted to [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com).
2. The date of 1923 is incorrect. The Potter’s Field referenced here, the “New Castle County Hospital/Almhouse Cemetery in the Woods at Farnhurst” was used for deceased residents of the NCCH/Almshouse through its closing in 1933, and continued to be used for indigent burials until at least 6/9/1934. After that the new Potter’s Field on Moore’s Lane was opened.
3. The “New Castle County Hospital/Almhouse Cemetery in the Woods at Farnhurst” was mostly covered by the *I-295* embankment (leading to the Delaware Memorial Bridge) in the 1960s, but about 100 numbered grave markers remained uncovered, and are still visible in the woods on the grounds of the Herman Holloway campus of DHSS, if you know where to look. A project is underway to clear brush and clean up this cemetery and eventually provide some sort of fence and informational marker.
4. This part of the article is somewhat confused, as the writer apparently was not aware that there had been a Potter’s Field on top of the hill near Moore’s Lane from 1934 to 1962, before the bodies were supposedly moved by Doherty Bros. Funeral Home to the Boulden Blvd. site. It was the Moore’s Lane site that was up on top of a hill. After the bodies were moved to the Boulden Blvd. site, which is the one with the fence, the remainder of the hill was excavated for fill for I-95 and the area is now occupied by two giant industrial parks. Current personnel at Doherty Bros. claim to have no records or knowledge of the removal of the graves from the Moore’s Lane Potter’s Field to the Boulden Blvd. site in 1962.

Patricia C. Schramm, DHSS Secretary

Dr. Ali Z. Hameli, the state’s medical examiner

State Sen. Robert T. Connor, R-Penn Acres

Attorney General Richard T. Gebelein

Robert C. Feeney, superintendent of the state hospital

Dr. M.A. Tarumianz, former superintendent of the state hospital

C.J. Langendler and Sons, awarded contract to use hill for I-95 construction

Doherty Brothers, awarded contract to move 3,000 bodies to Boulden Blvd. site