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Historic Haunts

Cemeteries cast spell over visitors to Prince William Forest Park

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Mist clings to the morning air along a slight ridge blanketed with yellow, red and greenish leaves, forming transparent apparitions which skulk behind trees and watch as you inspect their nearby cemetery.

Perhaps one of the spectres is Dr. Alexander Muschett carrying his beloved 10-month-old son, still haunting the Prince William Forest Park ridge where he was buried 171 years ago.

"Sacred to the memory of Doctor Alexander M. Muschett who died Feb. 1823, aged 30 years and 29 days," reads a nearby grave stone, standing firm and upright in the morning cold.

The passage continues cryptically: "All who knew him loved him and concurred in the opinion that not only his family and friends had just come to mourn his premature death but that society also would deplore his loss."

Beside Muschett's grave lies the broken remains of his son's gravestone, which lies on its back among brown oak leaves. Muschett's son died a year or two ahead of him in 1822.

Prince William Forest Park holds many more undiscovered cemeteries, similar to the Muschett site, in its dense Piedmont forest. Park ranger Michael Shaver has been piecing together the history of some of these grave sites for the last four years.

Shaver believes the Muschetts

most likely died in a flu epidemic which may have savagely struck the forest settlement less than two centuries ago. Perhaps Dr. Muschett was attending to a sick patient when he caught the flu and died a "premature" death.

On closer inspection of the surrounding area, several more shallow furrows with smallish, gray headstones and footstones with no markings lie adjacent to the Muschetts' graves in the same east-west direction. The parallel furrows hold pools of water full of fallen beech, gum and poplar leaves, twigs, and random acorns splitting with growth.

Shaver explained that in the Christian tradition, graves were dug to lie east and west so that the dead, when finally freed from their earthen graves by God, would emerge with the rising sun. Furthermore, the dead are buried on a hill, such as the Muschetts' ridge, so they may be closer to God, said Shaver.

The 17,000-acre Prince William Forest Park was used by Indians for hunting grounds, and in the early 18th century, Scottish merchants began sailing up Quantico Creek, building trading posts and warehouses to ship tobacco grown on the highlands above the Potomac River. During World War II the park became a top secret military installation. Finally, in 1940, the area was placed in the national park system.

Less than a mile away from the Muschett grave site, in a small clearing enclosed by a thick growth of trees, sits a small gravestone mark-



Jeremy Redmon/Journal

Prince William Forest Park Ranger Michael Shaver shows off one of the historic gravesites in the park, centers of attention for history buffs and poltergeist chasers alike.

ing the burial site of M. Cannon, who died on April 21, 1875 at the age of 77.

About 100 yards from Cannon's grave stands another headstone, marking the burial site of Euriel Reed, who worked in the nearby Cannon Branch Pyrite mines where he died of asphyxiation on December 26, 1918 at the age of 34.

In 1889, the Cabin Branch Mining Company opened the Cabin Branch Pyrite mine on the north branch of Quantico Creek. Pyrite, known as "fools gold" due to its nugget-like appearance, was valued for its sulfur, which was used to make gunpowder. In World War I, gunpowder

was in great demand, of course, so the 200- to 300-man mine crew was exempted from active duty.

Shaver believes that Euriel probably grew sleepy while working one day and decided to take a nap in the mine. While Euriel was sleeping, methane gas, produced from the decomposition of the surrounding elements, crept down into the mine and fatally filled his lungs.

Several more grave sites can be found in the forest including the Florence and Tolson family cemeteries, the tombstone of Confederate Maj. Henry Carter, and the site where five Union soldiers, possibly from the battle of Fredericksburg, are buried.

Park rangers say they know of no

ghost stories associated with the cemeteries, but tell of strange occurrences in the park's visitor center, which was built in 1948.

Park Ranger Ann Sartori explained that after she had gone down into the center's basement and turned the light off one night, the light was back on when she returned moments later.

The rangers tell of similar stories about file cabinets opening by themselves and stairs creaking at night. And the center's main tenant, an eastern king snake, keeps unexplainably getting out of its cage to slither around the building.

Perhaps it is the ghost of Euriel Reed emerging from his deathly mine each night to haunt the center,

or maybe it is M. Cannon who is freeing the snake for some unknown vengeance.

On Saturday between 6 p.m. and 8 p.m., the park will hold its "Ghosts in the Park Hike." The hike will be led by a forest ranger who will tell ghost stories, explain local history, and lead the tour through one of the park's cemeteries. The tour meets at the Pine Grove Pavillion in the park.

And on Sunday between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m., a park ranger will lead a tour of some of the old burial mounds, explaining why they are there. The tour meets in parking lot D.

Both tours are free aside from the park's \$4 entry fee. For more information, call 221-7181.