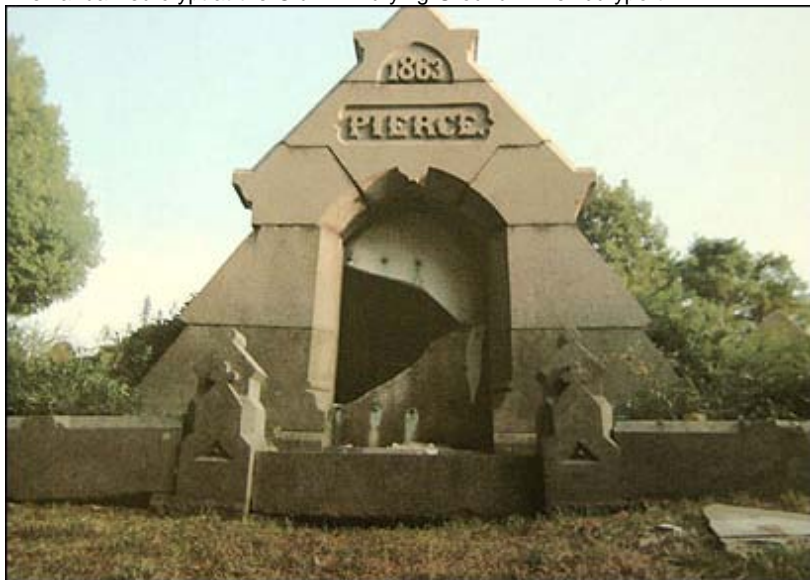


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The vandalized crypt at the Old Hill Burying Ground in Newburyport.



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Man, 19, accused of desecrating Civil War corpse

The Boston Globe

By Cristina Silva, Globe Correspondent | August 25, 2005

NEWBURYPORT -- A 19-year-old man from Salisbury was supposed to be

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cleaning up a cemetery last week as part of court-ordered community work after he broke into an apartment building last fall.

Instead, officials said, Neil J. Goodwin Jr. invaded the tomb of a Civil War veteran, pulled apart the 142-year-old skeleton, and then played with the bones, balancing the skull on his shoulder and posing for pictures.

"It's bizarre, absolutely bizarre," said Lieutenant Richard Siemasko of the Newburyport police. "I can't even imagine what was in his head. This is just a whole new level of weird for me."

Goodwin pleaded not guilty yesterday in Newburyport District Court to a charge of desecrating a corpse and breaking into a tomb, both felonies. Prosecutors said he was doing community service in the Old Hill Burying Ground on Aug. 17 when he kicked in the thin marble entrance to a tomb marked "1863 Pierce" and twisted off the spine, collarbone, and skull.

"Every time you think you have seen it all, something like this happens," Siemasko said. "We just can't understand why anyone would do this."

Goodwin was held on \$10,000 bail for breaking the terms of his probation by being arrested, said John T. Dawley, the first assistant Essex district attorney.

The Pierce tomb sits on a hill near Greenleaf Street in the cemetery, which was established in 1729. Many of the tombstones in the cemetery are so old that inscriptions are no longer legible.

Officials have not yet identified the Civil War veteran, Siemasko said, but according to court documents those interred in the crypt had died of tuberculosis, which is why they were placed in the tomb. Town officials could not say how many bodies were buried inside.

The city plans to hire a funeral home to piece the skeleton back together, so it can be replaced in its casket, Siemasko said.

Police said they were told about the incident in an anonymous phone call on Saturday. Someone later sent police three pictures of Goodwin and the bones, including one in which he is holding up the skull, according to court documents. Officials would not say who took the pictures or identified Goodwin, and police do not expect any more arrests.

Goodwin was taken in for questioning yesterday, as he waited for his probation officer for an unrelated meeting, the court documents show. He told police the tomb was open when he entered it and that he saw the skull hanging out of a casket, a police report stated. Goodwin said he showed the skull to a group of other community service workers, several of whom ran away upon seeing the skull. Goodwin went back to work, leaving the skull on the ground, when a supervisor returned to the area, the police report said.

When police went to the cemetery Sunday, officers found the skull in a hole about 15 yards from the entrance to the crypt. The upper part of the skeleton looked as if it had been twisted away from the lower half, police said.

Goodwin's recent problems with the law began in September 2004, when he was charged with breaking into and entering an ice cream shop in Salisbury. That October, he was arrested on charges of breaking into and entering an apartment building in Newburyport with the intent to steal. Goodwin was placed on probation after both arrests. He broke the terms of his probation earlier this year by neglecting to appear for a court date. He then tested positive for marijuana on a drug test a few months later, again breaking his probation, court records said.

A man who answered the door at Goodwin's house in Salisbury refused to

talk with a reporter. Phone calls placed to the Goodwin household were not returned. His lawyer also refused to comment on the case.

Many in the community were outraged by the crypt desecration. "It is a beautiful cemetery," said Fred Siegal, who lives across the street from the cemetery. "I'm sorry it happened."

Jennifer Williams, 16, said it was the talk of the city. "Everyone has been talking about it," she said. "It's so gross. Why would you want to play with old bones?"

David L. Smith, president of the Civil War Round Table of Greater Boston, said crypt vandalism is becoming more common. The historical society is lobbying the state to strengthen laws involving vandalism of gravesites.

"It's a terrible thing, whether it is a Civil War soldier or not," Smith said. "In effect, what this is hurting someone who is already dead. . . . And if it is a soldier, then this shows a tremendous amount of disrespect for the people who have gone off to war and died for this country."■

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