

# Riverview fails to find remains of husband

## Widow has sought lost casket for two years

By **TERRI SANGINITI**  
Staff reporter

Jackie Allen had been prepared to bury her husband for a second time, until workers digging for his casket Thursday found another one instead.

An opening in an adjacent grave vault at Riverview Cemetery in Wilmington failed to reveal Melvin Allen's bronze-coated casket. But a silver-blue casket could be seen

where a rose-colored one should have been, said funeral director Robert Wright of House of Wright Mortuary.

Wright — along with more than a dozen others, including another funeral director, two attorneys, cemetery officials and investigators — spent five hours searching for Allen's remains. His casket has been lost for two years among 36,000 graves in the 128-year-old cemetery.

But they finished the day with more questions than answers. Jeffrey K. Martin, an attorney for the cemetery's owners, said he did not know what Riverview would do next

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The News Journal's **BRIAN BRANCH-PRICE**

**Robert Wright (left), Ann Meyers and Jackie Allen watch Paul Fisher unearth a grave in the search for Allen's husband.**

# Cemetery: 'Records are wrong'

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to find Allen's grave.

Allen and family members had gone to the cemetery in hopes of having a simple service should Melvin Allen's casket be found and moving it to a donated grave at another cemetery.

Riverview has been under state scrutiny following dozens of complaints in recent months about neglect of the graves and management problems.

The state Attorney General's Office on Jan. 31 charged cemetery owners with consumer fraud and asked a Chancery Court judge to place the cemetery in receivership.

Others in the funeral industry pushed for the renewed effort Thursday to find Allen's remains because of the ongoing problems at the cemetery.

Riverview failed to record Allen's lot and grave number when he was buried in November 1998. The mistake went undetected until Jackie Allen tried to have a headstone placed at her husband's grave several months after the burial.

The headstone since has remained propped against a tree at the cemetery entrance.

Martin said Riverview has tried repeatedly to find the casket of the 57-year-old former auto worker.

Martin represents the Odd Fellows Grand Lodge of Delaware, which oversees Odd Fellows Lodges No. 1 and No. 34, part owners of the 87-acre cemetery at 33rd and North Market streets.

In a Feb. 28 letter to Lois Dawson, Jackie Allen's attorney, Martin said the cemetery had confirmed the location of Allen's grave as plot G-75.

Arrangements were made to disinter Melvin Allen at 9:30 a.m. Thursday. The plans called for him to be reinterred at Sil-



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verbrook Cemetery at Lancaster Avenue and Du Pont Road, at a 1 p.m. graveside service.

Paul White Sr., Silverbrook's executive director, donated the new grave for Jackie Allen and her husband, along with the opening and closing fees.

Activist Grace Duffy, who sits on the cemetery task force formed by state Sen. Harris B. McDowell III, D-Wilmington North, contacted members of the funeral industry to help pay for finding Allen's remains.

Mealey Funeral Homes will pay for Allen's new burial vault, said Mealey funeral director Jim Keith, who was on hand to oversee Allen's disinterment.

Mark Christian, of Catholic Cemeteries will pay for the Tyson F. Sartin Inc. workers hired to dig for Allen's casket.

Arriving at the cemetery early

Thursday, Allen was optimistic that her long, emotional ordeal to find her husband would be over.

"Hopefully, this is the day," she told U.S. Sen. Joe Biden, D-Del., who stopped by to console her after visiting with the family of Damon J. Gist Jr., the 5-year-old slain in a Wilmington barbershop a week ago. Gist's family lives across the street from the cemetery.

"Having buried a wife and losing a daughter, I understand what you're going through," Biden told Allen.

In the search Thursday, workers found a white casket in a water-filled vault. Cemetery records do not indicate who was buried there.

At 2 p.m., Jackie Allen heaved a tearful sigh. "They can't find Melvin?" she asked.

Martin said he did not know what went wrong.

"We looked at our records that show G-75 was the correct location," Martin said afterward. "The records speak for themselves ... the records are wrong."

► Reach Terri Sanginiti at 324-2771 or [tsanginiti@delawareonline.com](mailto:tsanginiti@delawareonline.com).