

Stealing metal from cemeteries a national trend

Scrap dealers say doors stolen from Riverview cemetery last week most likely moved out of state



The News Journal/SUCHAT PEDERSON

A photo of the Todd mausoleum at Riverview Gardens cemetery is shown before its door was stolen last week. Three were stolen in Wilmington, but area scrap dealers said they were not disposed of locally.

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ONLINE EXTRA

View a photo gallery of the damage at delawareonline.com.

Across the country, scavengers looking for brass and other metal are looting cemeteries of everything from memorial vases to grave markers.

They've even taken metal surgical parts from bodies.

Because of the growing number of thefts, police nationally are scrambling to prevent the bandits from being able to sell their contraband.

Delaware officers already have been grappling with a rash of metal thefts, including copper from irrigation systems, copper downspouts, storm grates and wiring and plumbing from construction sites.

The trend of targeting cemeteries hit Wilmington last week

when thieves stole the brass doors - some weighing 1,000 pounds - off three mausoleums at Riverview Gardens cemetery at 33rd and Market streets.

Scrap dealers in Delaware said the stolen doors were not disposed of locally.

"We don't buy those," said Carmen Micucio Jr., who owns Newark Recycling. "We need a specific letter from the cemetery, because it throws up an automatic flag with someone's name on it."

Demand for recycled metals in the construction industries in China and India is fueling the

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Cemeteries: Across U.S., vases commonly stolen

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thefts, authorities said.

On Friday, copper was listed on the Comex division of the New York Mercantile Exchange at \$3.79 a pound. The metal reached a record high of \$4.26 a pound on May 5.

To discourage metal thefts, the state Legislature enacted regulations that went into effect June 1 requiring scrap dealers and pawnshops to hold incoming materials for 18 days, so stolen items can be better tracked.

They also have to keep a record of every transaction, including a copy of the seller's photo identification.

Police on Wednesday alerted Diamond State Recycling in Wilmington to be on the lookout for the stolen mausoleum doors after the theft was reported by the Rev. Tom Davis, owner of Riverview Gardens.

The company's president, Scott Sherr, said they were not accepted there.

"They definitely did not stay in the state," Sherr said. "There are some places out of state that are open hours they shouldn't be."

Local recyclers say metal scavengers are wise to Delaware's regulations and usually head out of town to sell stolen scrap in Chester or southwest Philadelphia, where there's no holding period and laws are lax.

Last summer, a cemetery in Pittsburgh experienced a theft similar to the one at Riverview Gardens.

Brass doors were taken from a mausoleum in St. Michael's Cemetery, leading police to believe they were scrapped.

Other cemeteries across the country have been reporting thefts of brass vases, grave markers, brass louvers from mausoleums, funeral urns and even titanium surgical replacement parts from bodies that were cremated.

In January, more than 2,000 pounds of metal surgical parts were stolen from below-ground vaults at a cemetery in St. Petersburg, Fla. The surgical parts - joint replacements removed from cremated bodies - were recovered in March. Two men were later arrested.

With the exception of Riverview, most cemeteries in

"We have gotten some calls from families wondering if we have any surveillance cameras. It raises the consciousness."

Tom Kane of Catholic Cemeteries, about calls to All Saints Cemetery after thefts at Riverview

Delaware have not been targeted by thieves.

Gracelawn Memorial Park, on Du Pont Highway near New Castle, has reported some thefts of brass vases. President Lee Hagenbach said the stolen vases have been replaced with ones made of zinc.

Paul White Jr., president of Silverbrook Cemetery at 3300 Lancaster Ave. in Wilmington, said they have not experienced any thefts, adding that maintenance employees have been on the lookout.

At All Saints Cemetery at 6601 Kirkwood Highway, Tom Kane said there have been no reported incidents.

"So far, we've been fortunate," said Kane, of Catholic Cemeteries. "We have gotten some calls from families wondering if we have any surveillance cameras. It raises the consciousness."

Katherine Twesten, at Lawn Croft Cemetery in Linwood, Pa., said the only thing that's been stolen recently were aluminum downspouts.

Micucio, of Newark Recycling, said the thieves are too smart to try and get rid of cemetery objects in the state where they're stolen.

"They are very identifiable and we have a holding period that makes it tougher for people to try to get away with it in Delaware," he said.

A couple of years ago, one man tried to sell a dozen brass markers from the Delaware Veterans Cemetery at the salvage yard, Micucio recalled.

"They were replacing the markers," he said. "I wouldn't take them without a letter from the cemetery. They were all legitimate."

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