

Stones Of Evil

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Background: The October 1996 Scottish Rite Journal carried the article "Garden of Evil?" about several members of the Westwood Hill Baptist Church, Virginia Beach (Kempsville Borough), Virginia, who joined their pastor, the Reverend Jess Jackson, in destroying a memorial garden dedicated to Arthur Sedrick Ward, a Mason and former member of Corinthian Lodge No. 266, Norfolk, Virginia. Brother Ward died in 1979, and the garden, with its memorial plaque dedicated in loving memory to Ward, was a joint project of about 20 members of the church's Sunday School Class that Bro. Ward had taught for many years. Two of the members who worked on the garden were Masons.

In April 1996, 17 years after Bro. Ward's death, certain members of the Westwood Hill Baptist Church, reflecting a spiritual malaise in the congregation, came to believe an evil force lurked in the garden and was affecting the church. To them, the garden's cobblestone walk appeared to contain curious, possibly "occult," symbols; someone remembered that Ward was a Mason; others believed the garden's cross, entwined by a rose bush, was a Masonic symbol and evidence that Freemasonry was the malevolent force they were experiencing. Without consulting the church's general congregation, the Rev. Jess Jackson, two associate pastors of the church (the Reverend Allan Riley and the Reverend Randy Goode), and seven other church members destroyed the garden on April 23, 1996.

Statement of Mrs. Donna Ward-Meekins, Widow of Arthur S. Ward:

When I became aware that the garden to the memory of my late husband, Arthur, had been viciously and sadistically [destroyed], I was in a state of shocked disbelief. The pastor, Rev. Jess Jackson, would only answer my questions with, "It has been done away with."

When I pressed for information about what had become of the garden's benches, bricks, and cobblestones, I got the same answer, "They have been done away with." I asked specifically about the stone with the memorial message, "In Loving Memory of Our Teacher and Friend, ARTHUR S. WARD, 1979," you guessed it, I got the same answer, "They have been done away with."

I finally got the truth from my friends Betty and John who told me the following amazing story. Five members of the church supposedly had made a "prayer walk" of the church grounds and had seen a "vision of evil" in the garden. These people, along with the pastoral staff of the church, and two wives of the staff members, without knowledge of the church membership, entered the garden area on the afternoon of April 23, 1996, and began to dig up and destroy every shrub and tree in the garden and break up every piece of brick and concrete they could find. They removed a cross and burned it and removed every plaque with the name of Arthur Ward on it. They disposed of the plaques apparently in a truckload of brick and stones to the city garbage dump.

One week after the garden was destroyed, word reached Betty and John. They contacted the Rev. Jess Jackson and had a meeting with him on Wednesday May 1, 1996, after the Wednesday night prayer service. John asked the pastor for an explanation, and he was told the story about the five members having discovered "evil in the garden." Rev. Jess Jackson said the garden had been destroyed and that he was "comfortable" with that action.

Before the meeting with the pastor, Betty had observed two cobblestones in the garden area during a brief look at the former garden's site, and she asked the Rev. Jackson's permission to retrieve them. The pastor gave his permission, and the next morning John and Betty went to the former garden's site with digging tools and unearthed 12 cobblestones, placed them in the trunk of their car and took them home, placing them in their yard.

The following evening, May 1st, Betty and John's daughter returned home from five weeks in St. Louis. Early the next morning, she suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and was taken to the intensive care facility of a local hospital. On Sunday night, May 5th, Betty and John received a visit at the hospital from two ladies from the church who had participated in the garden's destruction.

After all other visitors had left, one of the women informed Betty and John that "We are here by divine appointment." She stated that John's and Betty's daughter's illness was "not physical but spiritual" and was the result of their possession of the stones. The women asked where the stones were and, after learning they were at John's and Betty's residence, asked if they could go and get them.

The same lady said the stones were "too dangerous to be picked up in one vehicle." Six vehicles would be necessary to pick up the stones, she said, because the evil forces in the stones would be increased if the stones were kept together. She said that John and Betty and their daughter

would be in great danger as long as they had possession of the stones. The two women did not receive their requested permission to remove the stones and left the hospital soon thereafter.

John immediately called Rev. Jess Jackson expecting to receive spiritual comfort, but got only scriptural references to read, references which appeared to justify the destruction of the garden. After about 45 minutes in prayer in the hospital chapel, John and Betty decided to call another pastor of their acquaintance.

This pastor came to the hospital in the middle of a very powerful and drenching thunderstorm. He heard their story in amazement and anguish since he was well acquainted with the Westwood Hill Church and its pastor. He gave them much encouragement and prayer support and assured them that he did not believe God worked in the manner in which the garden was destroyed and the way the two women visited the hospital.

He said in his opinion God worked through order and unity rather than through confusion and disorder. He agreed that this was a matter that should be brought before the congregation of the church. This pastor ministered lovingly to John and Betty for about three hours that night, ending at about 3:30 AM the following morning.

Happily, despite the fact that the stones were not surrendered to the women, Betty and John's daughter recovered fully. Later, the stones were brought to my son's home, and they are now in his garden. With grim humor, my son Gary said, "Look Mom, they don't even glow in the dark" My family and I continue to feel the pain and live under the shadow of this incident I grieve that my husband's memory has been tarnished. I was always proud of his Masonic affiliations, and when I remarried, I was happy that my second husband, now deceased, was a Mason who served as Master of his Lodge.

From my experience, Masons have been men of high caliber. Incidents such as this should never happen. The destruction of the garden was unconscionable. To assure this never happens again to the widow of any Mason, I have retained a lawyer and have filed suit against the people who took part in this terrible act.

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