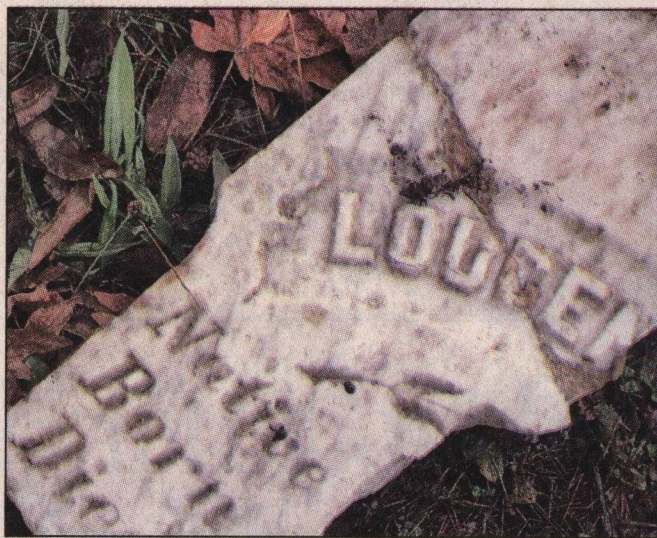# Pioneer's burial site vandalized

Louden Nelson's cemetery gravestone destroyed

By DAN WHITE
Cemeteries
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Louden Nelson was a former slave who left his estate to save a debt-ridden Santa Cruz school.

He was the city's first black resident, and a community center now bears his name.

So it's hard to imagine what vandals were thinking when they toppled and smashed Nelson's gravestone at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery late last week.

The attackers broke through thick marble and filed through a steel support bar. They also risked getting stung by hundreds of yellow jackets pouring from a hollow behind his grave, which overlooks Harvey West Park.

Charles Hilger, director of the Santa Cruz Muse-um of Art and History, said vandals trashed the grave so severely, he wonders if the wasps enraged them.

"They just beat the heck out of it," said Hilger, who was stung on the nose while checking out the damage on Monday.

A groundskeeper discovered the damage on Saturday.

"Everything was fine on Wednesday, so this must have happened Thursday or Friday," Hilger said.

The damage was not limited to Nelson's grave. The vandals also stole educational pioneer Mary Amney Case's memorial stone, which was donated to Evergreen last year.

Volunteers went back to the cemetery after the initial vandalism, and were startled to see someone had returned to Case's grave and done even more dam-

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TOP: Louden Nelson's damaged gravestone at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.
ABOVE: Charles Hilger, director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, struggles to right the vandalized gravestone Monday.

Shmuel Thaler/
Sentinel photos

Nelson

age, uprooting and stealing a pole supporting a sign providing information on Case's life. The vandals even clipped off the flowers near her grave, and filled in the post hole.

Cemetery docent Joan Nelson — no relation to Louden — said it was as if someone was trying to erase the Case site altogether.

She said she didn't understand the motivation.

"One person was black, the other a little old lady from Iowa," she said. "The only connection was education. They were singled out, but why pick those particular plots? I can't even put a spin on it. A typical vandal doesn't come back the next day, clip the flowers, then clean up the plot."

Nelson took the attack personally.

"First I cried, then I got incredibly angry," said Nelson, who dresses in Victorian garb to give historic cemetery tours.

Nelson's grave has never been left in peace for too long. His original wood headstone rotted away after his death in 1860. In the 1970s, someone smashed the 1920s-vintage marble replacement. Workers repaired the stone, but the 1989 quake cracked it again. The local Louden Nelson Center and the NAACP chipped in $2,000 to fix it.

The Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History owns the cemetery, and pays $600 a month for basic maintenance. Twelve volunteers help clean the quarter-mile-long site.

Founded in 1856, Evergreen is one of California's oldest public cemeteries. The pine and oak-shaded hill is the last resting place of Civil War veterans and pioneers who rolled wagons over icy mountain passes in the 1840s.

The graveyard is also a "party" spot for vagrants, who meet to drink alcohol and take drugs, and a sleeping spot for the homeless, who hide in its bushes and behind trees.

Nelson, however, said she doesn't think a homeless person is to blame. She said they tend to be quiet and try to avoid attention.

Nelson did not know if the broken Louden Nelson stone will be mounted flat in concrete or replaced entirely.

Attacking gravestones is nothing new; although "normally people regard burial grounds as sacrosanct," said historian Ross Eric Gibson.

Gibson is one of several local historians who say Nelson's first name is actually London, and that Louden is a mistake on his headstone, and on the sign at the Louden Nelson Center. According to one account, Nelson — who could not read or write — had someone sign his will by proxy. The signer's signature was in cursive, and generations of Santa Cruzans apparently misread the "n" as a "u" and the "o" as an "e."

Nelson was born into slavery in Carolina on May 5, 1800. He either bought or was granted his freedom and came to Santa Cruz by himself in the early 1850s.

He lived in a cabin near the current location of the Water Street bridge, repairing shoes and selling watermelons and onions. He was illiterate, but was sad to hear about the two-room Mission Hill School house shutting down because it went broke. When he died, he left his $372 estate to re-establish a school.

Mary Amney Case, who died in 1885, ran the first school in the city in a log cabin that also served as her home.

Gibson was disappointed to hear about the attack. But, on the plus side, "If we do a replica of the stone, this time we can put back London Nelson's original name."

Those who want more information on the cemetery, or to help with the repair effort, can call the Museum of Art and History at 429-1964, Ext. 10.

Contact Dan White at dwhite@santa-cruz.com.