

## Friends of Oakdale Cemetery, Inc.

520 North 15th Street  
Wilmington, NC 28401

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# Inscriptions

VOLUME 18, NO. 2

FALL 2022

## *The topsy, turbulent and tragic life of Leon George*

*Written by Hunter Ingram*

In the early 1920s, the name Leon George was a mainstay in the Wilmington Morning Star. A detective with the city's police force, George was at the center of repeated news stories that, today, read as though they were ripped right out of Prohibition-era movies and novels. Bootleggers, rum runners, hooch makers – all make and model of Prohibition rebels ran up against the long arm of the law and Leon George's no-nonsense enforcement of it.

Hired to the force in 1898 just before the Wilmington Massacre. By the time Prohibition's libation limitations came to Wilmington, he was assigned to enforcing the ban on alcohol and quickly became known in the news as a "tiger hunter" for busting down illegal bars and the "official 'monkey rum' sleuth of the police department." When he patrolled the streets, it was a time when lawlessness ran rampant. Danger, stoked by desperation, lurked around every corner – and George would run afoul of it soon enough. But not before finding himself wrangling a different kind of outlaw.

This October marks the 100th anniversary of the



harrowing escape of Topsy the elephant, who had arrived by train in Wilmington with the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus for a whirlwind one-day appearance on October 9, 1922.

The circus was a source of entertainment like no other at this particular moment in history when radio and movies were just new enough that not everyone had access. When the circus quite literally rolled into town, people showed up in droves. As was evident that October when more than 11,000 people visited the fair set up at 13th and Ann streets despite a steady rain falling dawn till dusk.

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## BE a Friend of Oakdale Cemetery!

*Please mail your tax-deductible contribution to:*

**Friends of Oakdale Cemetery, Inc.**  
520 North Fifteenth Street ❖ Wilmington, NC 28401

**Questions? Call us at 910-762-5682**



*Please check one:*

- Founder**  **\$2,500 & up**  
**Benefactor**  **\$1,000-\$2,499**  
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**Patron**  **\$250-\$499**  
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Membership is for one year ❖ Many volunteer opportunities!

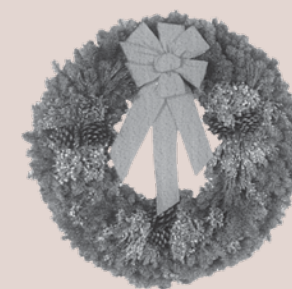
*Please contact me about volunteering!*

### A REMINDER

*To all the Friends of Oakdale, when receiving this periodic publication, this is not a reminder of your membership status. The Membership Committee sends out a specific letter. These letters are mailed to you annually when the time arrives according to the month you had renewed last or joined.*

### Calendar of Events

**Friends of Oakdale Cemetery Board Meetings**  
Board meetings will be held virtually. Time and date TBD.



**Christmas Wreath Sale**  
Deadline will be Monday, November 28, 2022 for ordering Christmas wreaths, which will be placed on the graves of loved ones during the second week of December. See back page for more details and ordering information.

**Flashlight Tour**  
**Saturday, September 17, 2022**

Historical walking tours of North Carolina's oldest rural cemetery will be given by local historians, Dr. Chris Fonvielle, Robin Triplett and

Hunter Ingram. Each of these historians will lead you through the cemetery and speak about the history of Oakdale, Civil War veterans, as well as fascinating tales of Oakdale's prominent citizens. Tour is from 6:30 pm till 8:30 pm. Cost is \$20.00 per person and you must supply your own flashlight.

#### **Pandemic Tour**

**Saturday, October 15, 2022, 10:00 a.m.**

Historical walking tours of North Carolina's oldest rural cemetery will be given by local historian, David Rice. Mr. Rice will be accompanied by the Superintendent Eric Kozen as they take you back to the time of the Yellow Fever Epidemic in 1862 and the Flu Epidemic of 1918. Tour is from 10:00 am to 12:00 noon. \$10.00 for non-members and FREE to members.

**ALL TOURS ARE CANCELED IN THE EVENT OF INCLEMENT WEATHER.**

A NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF OAKDALE CEMETERY, INC.  
520 NORTH 15TH STREET, WILMINGTON, NC 28401 ❖ 910-762-5682  
EMAIL: FRIENDS@OAKDALECEMETERY.ORG ❖ WWW.OAKDALECEMETERY.ORG

## The topsy, turbulent and tragic life of Leon George

*Continued from front page*

After the final spectator was ushered out of the big top that night, Topsy was reportedly being herded back into her train car when she was spooked by a dog and fled into the darkness. The search for her consumed the city, as reports came in from the residential sector of a monster trampling through vegetable gardens and tearing down fences.

The elephant became a sensation as her 18-hour walkabout stretched on. Venturing into downtown Wilmington, she ended up bursting through the door at Eureka Dye Works at Second and Dock streets (now the Topsy-themed Dram Yard + Gazebo Bar), spewing ink and nearly collapsing the back wall. The owners of the building went on to sue for \$5,000 in damages while simultaneously using the notoriety of the commotion to promote their Topsy-approved business in newspaper ads.

According to reports from the Morning Star, she managed to tangle herself in the reeds of Greenfield Lake, where she was freed with the help of trainers and a few local officers including none other than Leon George.

The detective's role in Topsy's rescue varies depending on who tells the story. Some reports claim he was the one who bravely waded into the waters of Greenfield Lake to untangle the scared animal, creating an unspoken friendship between the two. "The police officer showed absolutely no fear in entreating with the beast that had created consternation in the hearts of many people," the Morning Star read. Others merely place him among those who helped walk her back to confinement by offering peanuts and apples as enticement.

Topsy didn't go easily though. After her first rescue, she reportedly fled once more and, according to some, took a dip in the Cape Fear River before being found. Having missed her ride to the circus' next stop by a few days at this point, she was eventually hoisted back into a cage and sent to South Carolina to catch up with her traveling owner. George playing a role, even a small one, in Topsy's story places him at the center of two local legends – each defined by the rebels in his path.

His name was so well known in the papers that it sent a shock-wave through the community when he was brutally murdered on July 29, 1924 by father-son bootleggers in Brunswick County. George, along with his beloved dog Baby, was serving a warrant with Deputy U.S. Marshal Samuel Lilly in the latter's Ford when they were ambushed with guns by C.W. and Elmer Stewart. The shooting, as recorded in an alarmingly detailed Morning Star account, left George, Lilly and Baby riddled with bullets on a desolate road described as one of the area's "most lonely spots imaginable." With the car in motion when the bullets began flying, George was unable to escape from behind the steering wheel. He was found with one arm draped across the back of the seat as if he had reached for Baby behind him.

George, just 52 years old, was widely mourned in town, striking a different refrain in the repeated news reports that bore his name in the days after. The Stewarts were tried and sentenced to death for the murders of George, Lilly and Baby. They were executed by electrocution in 1925 – the first pair to ever be executed together, according to some accounts. They are buried together in Wilmington's Bellevue Cemetery.

But Leon George's legacy is more than just the sum of his headlines. He was, in essence, an eternal mama's boy, having never married and lived with his mother until the day he died. Today, he is buried in Oakdale in the same plot and under the same stone as his mother, Rhoda Ann. Although her son's life was cut short, hers carried on for a few more years, passing away at the sturdy age of 101 in 1931.

At the time of his death, he was survived by his mother, brother and two sisters.

What had been a life lived in pursuit of justice came to an end in a violent hail of resistance to it. But on their shared gravestone, his unwavering dedication to the rule of law is still etched nearly a century later – "Nobly he fell while fighting for right." ❖

[www.oakdalecemetery.org](http://www.oakdalecemetery.org)

For those interested in Oakdale Cemetery, the website provides spectacular photography by Kenneth Newland. Featuring a fresh updated look and offers a more user friendly experience, improved navigation, and more interactive resources including maps, burial database, the ability to purchase items online, history, news, calendar of events, comprehensive cemetery information, newsletter archive and much more.



PLEASE FOLLOW US

## A Letter from the President of Friends of Oakdale Cemetery

Recently I went to Oakdale and decided to stop in to see my family at our plot. I realized that it needed a little bit of tender loving care and made a mental note. Two weeks later, I stopped in again only to discover that the plot looked beautiful! Eric and his crew were at it again, quietly making Oakdale one of the loveliest historic places around.

This year marks Eric's 20th anniversary working at Oakdale, and I am thankful to the hiring team. Eric is one of the founders of the Friends of Oakdale whose mission is to preserve and promote the historical character of the cemetery. He is involved in burials, plantings, fundraising, Eagle Scout projects and so much more. His favorite day of the year at Oakdale is Veterans Day when he works to flag the graves of Veterans. He was instrumental in the Capital Campaign, as well as in the restoration of the Meares fence which was originally constructed in 1857. Oakdale received recognition from the Historic Wilmington Foundation for this project. Most recently, two columbariums have been constructed and a scatter garden is in the works at Oakdale, thanks to Eric's many years of planning. The list of Eric's contributions to Oakdale goes on and on. His dedication is unrivaled. Eric likes to say, "I love my job." I'd like to publicly say thank you on behalf of those who enjoy Oakdale Cemetery and especially for those of us who have family buried here.

Cece Lippitt Snow, President, Friends of Oakdale Cemetery



If you would like to become more involved with the Friends of Oakdale Cemetery, Inc., we have lots of opportunities for you.

**910-762-5682**

## Twenty Years and Still Going

*Written by Catherine Solomon, Vice President of Oakdale Cemetery*

During the past 20 years, Oakdale Cemetery has flourished under the direction and devotion of our Superintendent Mr. Eric Kozen. In July of 2002, we were extremely fortunate to have had Eric walk thru our doors. He came to Oakdale after having worked at Arlington National Cemetery. Many changes and improvements have happened and many citizens have become involved with Oakdale in the last 20 years thanks to Eric. One of the first accomplishments Eric made was the installation of section signs. He has also worked with many Eagle Scout projects, Junior ROTC flag presentations, school tours and has even been involved with various local garden club projects. Eric also played a huge role in organizing the Friends Of Oakdale, which has done many projects to help in funding numerous improvements throughout our cemetery. His most lasting contribution has been the construction of the new columbariums and the scatter garden.

Thank you, Eric, for all you have done to make and keep Oakdale the historical and beautiful resting place that it is for the citizens of Wilmington. ❖

