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Man appeals trooper assault conviction

Ryley Ober
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – A Swannanoa man is appealing a jury’s verdict after he was convicted of assaulting law enforcement officers during then-presidential candidate Donald Trump’s October 2024 visit to the unincorporated community in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Helene, records show.

Leif Brynolf Johnson, 55, of Swannanoa, filed a notice of appeal Oct. 15 through his then-public defender, Michael Casterline. Meanwhile, his probationary sentence will be on pause until the appeal is resolved, according to state law.

During a four-day trial, a Buncombe County Superior Court jury reviewed police body camera footage, dash camera footage and bystander video, according to an exhibit log obtained by the

Citizen Times.

When Trump visited Swannanoa on Oct. 21, 2024, several law enforcement agencies coordinated security for his motorcade and visit. Less than a month after Helene devastated the region, some Mississippi Highway Patrol Troopers were still in town and helped with security.

Around 12:05 p.m., two troopers saw Johnson yelling and confronting people at the Stop N Go gas station, where

Trump supporters were standing on the side of the road, according to Johnson’s arrest warrant. The warrant describes him approaching people’s faces, yelling profanities and confronting Trump supporters.

Bystanders, including a 12-year-old child, intervened when Johnson approached an elderly veteran in a wheelchair, according to a previous news

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WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Two perspectives converge while on Mount Le Conte

Anne Bridges
Special to the Asheville Citizen Times

In late fall of 1925, Paul Adams was astonished to see a visitor walk into his camp on Mount Le Conte. Adams, a young man of 25, had been hired by the Knoxville-based Great Smoky Mountains Conservation Association to oversee visitor facilities on this most iconic of Smoky peaks.

At this time, the mountain was owned by Champion Paper Company but was increasingly of interest to hikers, hunters, botanists, birders, and others attracted by the possible formation of the national park. Adams was to make guests comfortable, or as comfortable as he could, in the rudimentary structures he was able to build as part of his camp.

It was not unusual for Adams to have guests, since accommodating visitors and protecting the mountain from fire and other damage was his job. But this particular guest was not like other people who had made the climb from Gatlinburg up Rainbow Falls Trail. Adams described the visitor as wearing “a light grey suit, low-cut shoes, spats, white shirt, bow tie, and a derby hat”—not the usual hiking attire of the time. He was carrying two cameras but no pack or extra supplies.

The visitor was Frank Bohn, columnist for *The New York Times*. He asked Adams for directions to the hotel on the mountain summit, and Adams responded that he had arrived. Bohn reached into his pocket and pulled out a letter from Colonel David Chapman requesting that Adams assist Bohn in gathering information and taking photographs of Smoky Mountain flora and fauna.

Colonel Chapman was vice-chair of the Conservation Association, whose members were heavily involved in promoting a national park in the Smokies. It was Chapman who hired Adams as custodian of Mount Le Conte. Of course, Adams took any direction from Chapman seriously.

He found more appropriate clothing for Bohn and proceeded to prepare lunch for his guest. After lunch, the two men, accompanied by Adams’ German shepherd, Smoky Jack, hiked to Myrtle Point so Bohn could take photographs and see the view, which, according to Adams, Bohn declared to be “the most



Pictured in the winter of 1925, Paul Adams had a special relationship with his dog Cumberland Jack II, also known as Smoky Jack.

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Sacred grounds speak of life, death

Neglected cemeteries face uncertain future

Jack Randall
Treasure Coast Newspapers
USA TODAY NETWORK

The cemetery, the liminal space between life and death, evokes both reverence and fear.

The fear of death – and the uncertainty of what comes after – makes many wary of cemeteries. It’s why they are often emblematic of Halloween and why faux gravestones are part of decorated front yards this time of year.

But more unsettling than a yard decoration or stumbling upon a lone gravestone in the woods at night is the possibility of dozens – or hundreds – of unmarked graves underfoot nearby.

Florida has thousands of abandoned and neglected cemeteries, according to state estimates.

There are dozens of gravestones interspersed throughout Gomez Pioneer Cemetery in Hobe Sound, far fewer than the approximately 600 graves originally dug there, according to ground-penetrating radar technology.

Archaeologist Kate Higgins has been involved since 2017 in the community effort to restore the graveyard and rediscover the unmarked graves at risk of being forgotten.

“It’s very somber,” Higgins said, reflecting on the feeling of uncovering a human burial. “It makes you almost feel good inside, though, because it’s like you found them. And they can finally get their rest.”

The cemetery once rested beside the Allen Temple African Methodist Episcopal church. Arson burned the historic Black church to the ground in 1992, Higgins said, and the graveyard grew neglected and overgrown.

“I found a child’s grave one time,” Higgins remembered. “That one kind of hit hard, because it’s a child. It’s always hard when you find a child’s grave.”

She sat down in the grass beside the grave.

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Appeal

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release from the Buncombe County District Attorney’s Office. When the child asked him to stop yelling, he yelled and spit on the child, the release said.

Casterline said that the child punched Johnson in the face, breaking his glasses.

Troopers intervened and while they were escorting Johnson, he pulled a 4-inch stainless steel kitchen knife from his waistband as troopers held his other arm, according to his warrant and the DA’s Office’s release. Johnson was wrestled to the ground, and the Mississippi troopers “ried” the knife from his hand, the release said.

The assistant district attorney who handled the case, Kyle Sherard, said in the release that Johnson’s actions endangered a child, threatened people and led to a dangerous confrontation with troopers.

“I think a different jury might have seen it differently,” Casterline said.

There were some rulings during the trial that went against the defense, and an appellate lawyer would look at all those decisions, Casterline said.

While the prosecution argued the troopers were

assaulted because Johnson reached for his knife, Casterline said the knife was never brandished nor did it touch the troopers, neither of whom were injured. The knife was found in the bushes where Johnson was taken to the ground, according to his arrest warrant.

The jury found Johnson guilty on Oct. 2 of two counts of felony assault with a deadly weapon on a law enforcement officer, one count disorderly conduct and one count of simple assault, the Citizen Times previously reported.

Johnson was sentenced to 36 months of probation and to complete a 15-day jail term at the discretion of his probation officer. Should Johnson violate his probation terms, he was ordered to serve two sentences of 30 to 48 months in prison. He must also complete an anger management course and cannot contact any of the victims.

His probationary sentence is now on pause pending the appellate case. The Citizen Times reached out to Johnson but did not receive a response before press time.

Ryley Ober is the Public Safety Reporter for Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA Today Network. Email her at rober@gannett.com and follow her on Twitter @ryleyober

Perspectives

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beautiful he had seen in Eastern North America.”

By evening, the wind had started to pick up, but, despite the fierce gusts, Adams had to make fire patrol. Bohn accompanied him. First, they went to Myrtle Point where the wind was so strong it pushed Adams and the reporter into the myrtle and rhododendron, causing them to lose footing a time or two. Adams was used to this rough weather, but Bohn was not.

As they followed the trail around the edge of Cliff Top, Adams shouted to Bohn that if he started to fall, to grab something to his right. Once Bohn had fallen a few times, he started crawling on his hands and knees along the trail. After Adams climbed the fire tower and made his observations, Bohn asked if there wasn’t another way back to camp. Adams observed that Bohn was clearly frightened. They took an older trail back to camp with the wind still roaring and the echoing sounds of trees snapping. The next morning, Adams made a quick breakfast and accompanied Bohn back down the mountain to avoid the rain he knew was coming.

Back in New York, Bohn wrote an article about his trip to the Smokies, which appeared in *The New York Times* on January 25, 1926, with the title “A New National Park.” Like many pieces written about the Smokies during this period, much of the article was a glowing review of the mountains, calling them “one of the half dozen most remarkable natural scenes in our country.” Unfortunately, none of the photographs that Bohn took on Le Conte accompany the article. But, in light of Adams’ account, it is his description of his trip to Mount Le Conte that is most interesting.

He calls his hike up Le Conte “a rough climb” and calls for a “fine automobile road” along the summit. Then, he describes Adams: “At the very top of Le Conte there is a boy living alone in a cabin made of

slabs. The writer saw in the cabin a single volume, namely Thoreau’s *Walden*. It had been read and re-read and marked over and over again.” Bohn’s romantic view of Adams, who was hardly a boy at 25, omits all the terror of windy Myrtle Point and the fire patrol trip. Instead, it casts Adams—not as a practical and capable guide—but as an idealistic Thoreau of the South for urban readers eager to indulge in the possibilities hidden within the mysterious and remote mountains.

Adams, for his part, recorded the episode more plainly in his personal diary, a meticulous ledger of events and observations that he began as a teenager and maintained for the rest of his life.

The differences between these accounts from two very different men, each with his own area of expertise and motivations, make for an amusing anecdote. But it’s also an anecdote that hints at a dynamic that was quite common at the time as newcomers explored the Smokies and, in the process, applied their own assumptions, interests, and agendas on the land and the locals they found there.

While the Smokies have certainly changed since these two crossed paths atop Mount Le Conte nearly a hundred years ago, it’s safe to say some things have not. There are always two sides to any story.

This piece was first published on July 2, 2022, in the Asheville Citizen-Times. For more on Paul Adams’ time atop Le Conte, read his 1966 autobiography Mount Le Conte, republished in 2016 by University of Tennessee Press, edited and introduced by Ken Wise and Anne Bridges.

Anne Bridges is the former co-director of the Great Smoky Mountains Regional Project at the University of Tennessee Libraries and project founder and bibliographer for the Great Smoky Mountains Regional Collection. The 29,000-member Smokies Life is a non-profit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org.

Cemeteries

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“I heard a man cough behind me and (smelled) a woman’s perfume waft in front of me,” she said. “And there was no one out there.”

Presumably, it was the parents, she said.

“It was almost as if I had found their child there,” she said. “They were able to be at rest now. I don’t know. It was beautiful.”

There are thousands of abandoned cemeteries across Florida, according to the Florida Division of Historical Resources, the state’s historic-preservation agency. Many go forgotten when old homesteads are subdivided and sold.

In response to complaints, the Legislature in 1998 created an abandoned-cemetery task force, which collected data on 3,580 cemeteries statewide. Up to half were abandoned or neglected, potentially an irreplaceable loss of historic or archaeological value, the task force found.

Cemeteries are under-recorded, and different state agencies have different estimates of how many exist.

For example, there are only 2,322 cemeteries listed in the Florida Master Site File, the Division of Historical Resources’ official inventory of cultural resources for the state. But there are up to 8,000 abandoned cemeteries throughout Florida, the Division of Funeral, Cemetery and Consumer Services has estimated.

“It’s a shifting number,” explained Sarah Miller, regional director of the Florida Public Archaeology Network. “It’s difficult to say.”

“Cemeteries are outdoor museums,” she said. “More important than that, they’re sacred sites. They’re places of remembrance. They do contain a lot of the community’s history, social values and genealogy information.”

Zora Neale Hurston’s grave arguably is the most well-known, formerly lost grave in Florida. The legend of its rediscovery is interwoven with folklore.

Hurston, the Harlem Renaissance novelist and folklorist who authored “Their Eyes Were Watching God,” died penniless in 1960 in Fort Pierce. She was buried in an unmarked grave in the segregated Garden of Heavenly Rest cemetery there.

Alice Walker, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of “The Color Purple,” set out to find Hurston’s grave. She wrote about her journey in Ms. magazine.

Walker, with a funeral home employee, walked

There are thousands of abandoned cemeteries across Florida, according to the Florida Division of Historical Resources, the state’s historic-preservation agency. Many go forgotten when old homesteads are subdivided and sold.

through the overgrown cemetery, she recounted.

“Zora!” Walker yelled. “Are you out there?”

“My foot sinks into a hole. I look down,” she wrote. “I am standing in a sunken rectangle that is about 6 feet long and about 3 or 4 feet wide.”

Walker purchased a headstone to commemorate Hurston’s life and literary achievements, with the epitaph: “A Genius of the South.”

It is an ongoing tradition to leave coins on her grave to ward off evil spirits. Coins still are found on that headstone bought for Hurston, who now is celebrated by literary scholars and, in a way, penniless no longer.

Eden Cemetery is the sole abandoned cemetery on the Treasure Coast, according to a University of Florida database.

The cemetery, a densely wooded and overgrown plot on Indian River Drive in St. Lucie County, is one of the last remnants of the historic Eden settlement. Dense foliage has covered the 1½ acres since the 1990s, according to Google Earth historical imagery.

Two graves, spotted with lichen, are adorned with seashells.

One gravestone belongs to Thomas Richards, the pioneer who founded the Eden settlement in the 1870s and named it after the Biblical garden.

Richards is credited with starting the first pineapple plantation on the Florida mainland. Pineapple was the Treasure Coast’s first major industry.

The St. Lucie County Property Appraiser’s Office has no record of who owns the cemetery, spokesperson Kara Odom said. The cemetery – founded in 1887, historic survey records show – predates St. Lucie County itself, which split off from Brevard County in 1905.

The cemetery is at risk of desecration and private development, according to Florida Master Site File records.

“You have a high likelihood of unmarked graves,” Miller, of the Florida Public Archaeology Network, said, when asked about the Eden Cemetery. “It looks like there were 40 graves reported. And that approximately 12 remained at the time of the recording. But only six are now marked.”

NATION & WORLD BRIEFS

U.S. expands facial recognition at borders to track noncitizens

WASHINGTON – The United States will expand the use of facial recognition technology to track non-citizens entering and leaving the country in order to combat visa overstays and passport fraud, according to a government document published on Oct. 24.

A new regulation will allow U.S. border authorities to require noncitizens to be photographed at airports, seaports, land crossings and any other point of departure, expanding on an earlier pilot program.

Under the regulation, set to take effect on Dec. 26, U.S. authorities could require the submission of other biometrics, such as fingerprints or DNA, it said.

It also allows border authorities to use facial recognition for children younger than 14 and elderly people older than 79, groups that are currently exempted.

The tighter border rules reflect a broader effort by President Donald Trump to crack down on illegal immigration. While the Republican president has surged resources to secure the United States-Mexico border, he has also taken steps to reduce the number of people overstaying their visas.

UK pushes for more support to Kyiv as Zelenskyy goes to London

LONDON – The United Kingdom on Oct. 24 urged fellow allies of Ukraine to reach a deal to use frozen Russian assets to strengthen its hand for any future peace talks, as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy arrived in London for talks with those allies.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s office said he would also press the “Coalition of the Willing” countries to take Russian oil and gas off the global market and give Kyiv more long-range missiles.

European Union leaders agreed on Oct. 23 to meet Ukraine’s “pressing financial needs” for the next two years but stopped short of endorsing a plan to use frozen Russian assets to fund a giant loan to Kyiv over Belgian concerns.

Zelenskyy had asked the EU leaders in Brussels on Oct. 23 for long-range missiles and to use the frozen assets to provide it with more weapons.

He also welcomed President Donald Trump’s decision to impose sanctions on Russia’s two biggest oil companies, a dramatic U-turn after last week announcing plans for a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Second French museum robbed hours after Louvre

Hours after thieves took \$102 million in jewelry from the Louvre, another French museum was ransacked. Authorities say a group of robbers stole 2,000 historical silver and gold coins worth more than \$100,000 from the Maison des Lumières in Langres on the night of Oct. 19.

The theft was discovered when a security guard came upon the smashed display case the next morning.

The local prefecture said in a statement that the robbery was conducted with “great expertise and precision,” suggesting a targeted operation. No arrests have been made or suspects named. It’s unclear if the heist was related to the one at the Louvre.

Robbers have recently targeted cultural institutions in France. In August, six gold nuggets worth \$1.75 million were stolen from the Museum of Natural History in Paris. Prosecutors said they arrested a woman in Barcelona.

France’s Socialists threaten to oust government amid fraught budget talks

PARIS – France’s Socialists have threatened to topple the government by Oct. 27 if their budget conditions are not met, saying on Oct. 24 they would file a no-confidence bill in the coming days if billionaires are not forced to pay more in taxes.

“We have made an effort not to censure the prime minister, but so far we have not seen any sign of a willingness to compromise,” Socialist party leader Olivier Faure told BFM on Oct. 24. “If there is no change by Monday, it’s all over.”

Given the arithmetic of France’s starkly divided parliament, the Socialists have the power to topple Prime Minister Sebastian Lecornu’s weak minority government if they partner with the far left and the far right, which have said they want to oust him.

USA TODAY Network and Reuters

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