

The Washington Post

Wanted Md. man turns up in Texas

By Jerry Markon
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Larry Deffenbaugh was convicted of bilking his cemetery customers out of more than \$1 million. The Calvert County man then took a fishing trip in the Chesapeake Bay and fell overboard.

Authorities suspected a scam. For one thing, Deffenbaugh was due in court on a probation violation that could have landed him in prison for 15 years. For another, he was a boat captain and an accomplished scuba diver.

"It was a little too convenient that the weekend before his hearing, he goes off the back of a boat," said Assistant Calvert County State's Attorney Kathryn Marsh.

On Tuesday, U.S. marshals found Deffenbaugh very much alive -- in Texas. The man who had pocketed money from 551 people for nonexistent coffins, headstones and grave markers had faked his death, authorities said, and was tracked down after a manhunt and a timely episode of the television show "America's Most Wanted."

Deffenbaugh, a charismatic preacher who led Bible study groups and formerly owned Southern Memorial Gardens in

Dunkirk, had been missing since May, when his brother told investigators he had fallen off a boat near Virginia Beach. His disappearance came two days before the court hearing on the probation violation and a year after his conviction for spending most of the money his cemetery customers gave him for "prepaid" burials on car payments, fishing equipment and dinners in Florida.

One of those customers, Deborah Chaney, shouted into the phone Thursday when told of Deffenbaugh's capture. "They found him? They found him? I'm so happy, I'm dancing," said Chaney, of Owings, adding that she gave Deffenbaugh about \$6,000 for her father's coffin and burial, and then had to pay it again after he took her money and sold the business.

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"Everyone knew he wasn't really dead," Chaney said. "It was all a big fake."

A lawyer could not be found for Deffenbaugh, 58, who is being held in the Harris County, Tex., jail pending extradition to Maryland. Authorities said he will be brought to court for the probation violation -- for failing to turn over a gun he owned -- and could face separate federal charges in Virginia for maritime violations stemming from his disappearance.

Deffenbaugh entered an Alford plea in the Maryland case, meaning he did not admit guilt but acknowledged that prosecutors had enough evidence to secure a conviction. His attorneys had said that the felony charge of running a theft scheme stemmed from a business dispute between Deffenbaugh and the cemetery's new owners.

In September 2008, a Calvert judge sentenced Deffenbaugh to five years of probation but suggested that any violation could yield a 15-year prison term.

Deffenbaugh's case had been on "America's Most Wanted" in November, but authorities persuaded the show's executives to run it again Saturday after initially tracking the man to Virginia Beach but then hitting a dead end.

Lt. Steven Jones of the Calvert sheriff's office was one of six officers at the show's studio in the District and took the call from a viewer who placed Deffenbaugh in Texas.

"He knew who Deffenbaugh's girlfriend was, the girlfriend's dog's name, his car tag number. It was all there," Jones said. "We got really lucky on this."

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