

Treasure hunt from 1982 might lead to St. Petersburg

An old book has fairy tale paintings and cryptic verses that double as clues leading to a gem.



A view of the Crescent Lake water tower overlooking the Huggins-Stengel Baseball Field in St. Petersburg. Nearly 40 years ago, eccentric New York author Byron Priess published "The Secret," a book of fairy tale-like cryptic paintings and correlating verses that double as clues in a treasure hunt he created for 12 jewels. So far, only three have been unearthed and the author died without providing more clues. But a Nashville father and daughter believe clues point to one being buried near Crescent Lake Park's Huggins-Stengel Field. [DIRK SHADD | Times]
By

- [Paul Guzzo](#) Times staff

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ST. PETERSBURG — Nearly 40 years ago, New York author Byron Preiss published *The Secret*, a book with paintings like fairy tales and cryptic verses that double as clues in a treasure hunt he created for 12 keys to be turned in for gems.

Only three have been found and the author died without providing more clues, but treasure hunters and puzzle solvers have not given up.

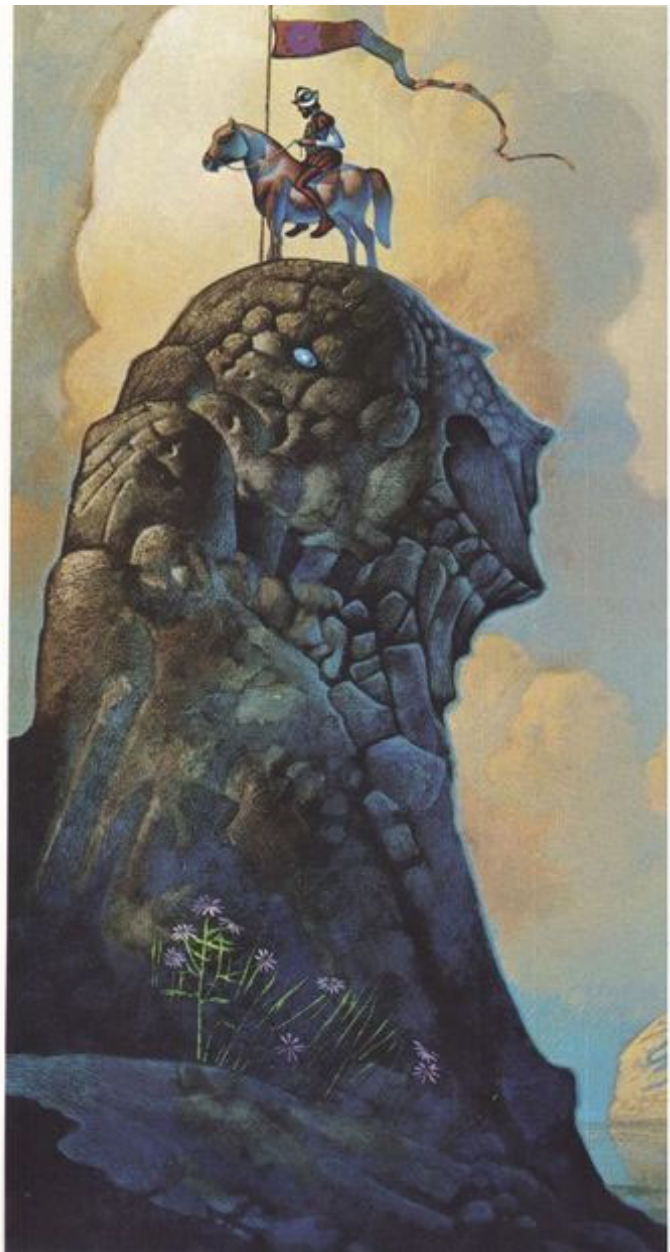
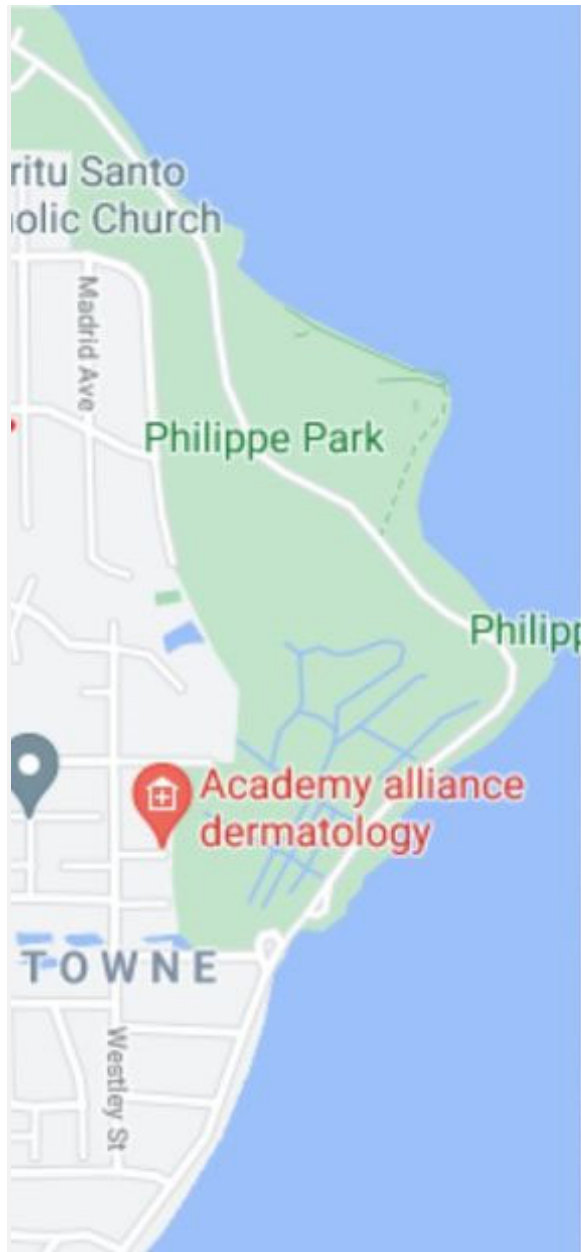
The decades-long search has inspired documentaries, books, podcasts and online devotees.

In each medium, it's been agreed that one key is in St. Augustine.

Now a Nashville father and daughter have advice for those searching the oldest city in the U.S. for the buried treasure: To quote Indiana Jones, "They're digging in the wrong place."

"It's in the Tampa Bay area," said Joey Sweat, 51, who, along with his 21-year-old daughter, Savannah Sweat, has been working on the riddle for five months. "I don't have all the answers, but I have enough to say it is there."

His most compelling piece of evidence is the painting thought to be connected to St. Augustine. The outline of the painting's mountain matches the outline of [Philippe Park](#) when seen from above.



The outlines of Philippe Park when seen from above and that painting from the book "The Secret" might mean that there is treasure buried in the Tampa Bay area. [Courtesy of Google and Brick Tower Press]

Also in the painting is a conquistador on a horse. Under them is a gem in the mountain. Perhaps that is "X Marks the Spot" in the Safety Harbor park?

No, Sweat says.

"That image is there to bring you to the Tampa Bay area, but it's not in Philippe Park," he said. The key is "in Crescent Lake Park."

Sweat has narrowed his search to just outside the St. Petersburg park's Huggins-Stengel Field, but he won't dig.

"I'm not about to go to jail," he laughed.

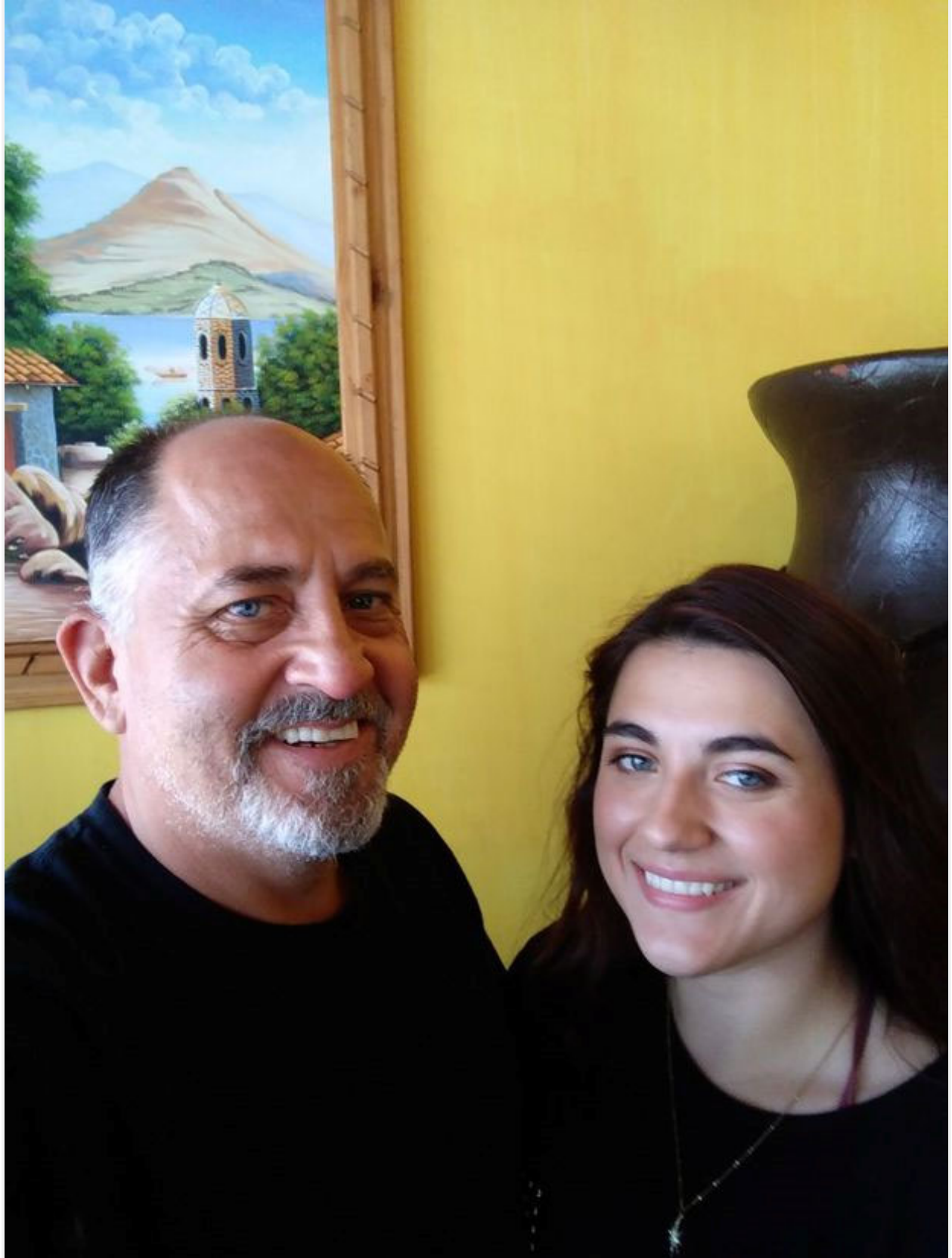
That's the right approach, Mike Jefferis, St. Petersburg's leisure services administrator, said via email. "City Ordinance Sec. 21-37 prohibits damaging city property and that includes digging in city parks."

John T. Colby of Brick Tower Press, which owns the rights to *The Secret*, said that respecting property is a rule of the game. "People need permission to dig."

Colby also warned, "I've found some of these folks are trying to send searchers in other directions."

But Sweat said he is driven by solving the riddle, not owning the treasure. He hopes someone with access to ground-penetrating radar will look in Crescent Lake Park. He does not expect payment if the gem is found.

"It's a beautiful mystery that he started," Sweat said of Preiss. "It needs to be solved."



Joey Sweat, 51, and his 21-year-old daughter, Savannah Sweat, both reside on Nashville.
[Courtesy of Joey Sweat]

According to *The Secret's* Amazon page, the 226-page book published in 1982 tells the story of “the Fair People — the goblins, fairies, dragons, and other fabled and fantastic creatures ... who fled the Old World for the New, seeking haven from the ways of man. With them came their precious jewels: diamonds, rubies, emeralds, pearls. But then the Fair People vanished, taking with them their twelve fabulous treasures ... The key to finding each can be found within the twelve full-color paintings and verses.”

In public places throughout the United States and Canada, Preiss buried casques containing keys to be exchanged for a gem valued around \$1,000.

The first key was found by two teenagers in 1983 in Chicago’s Grant Park. It took until 2004 for the second to be discovered in Cleveland’s Greek Cultural Garden.

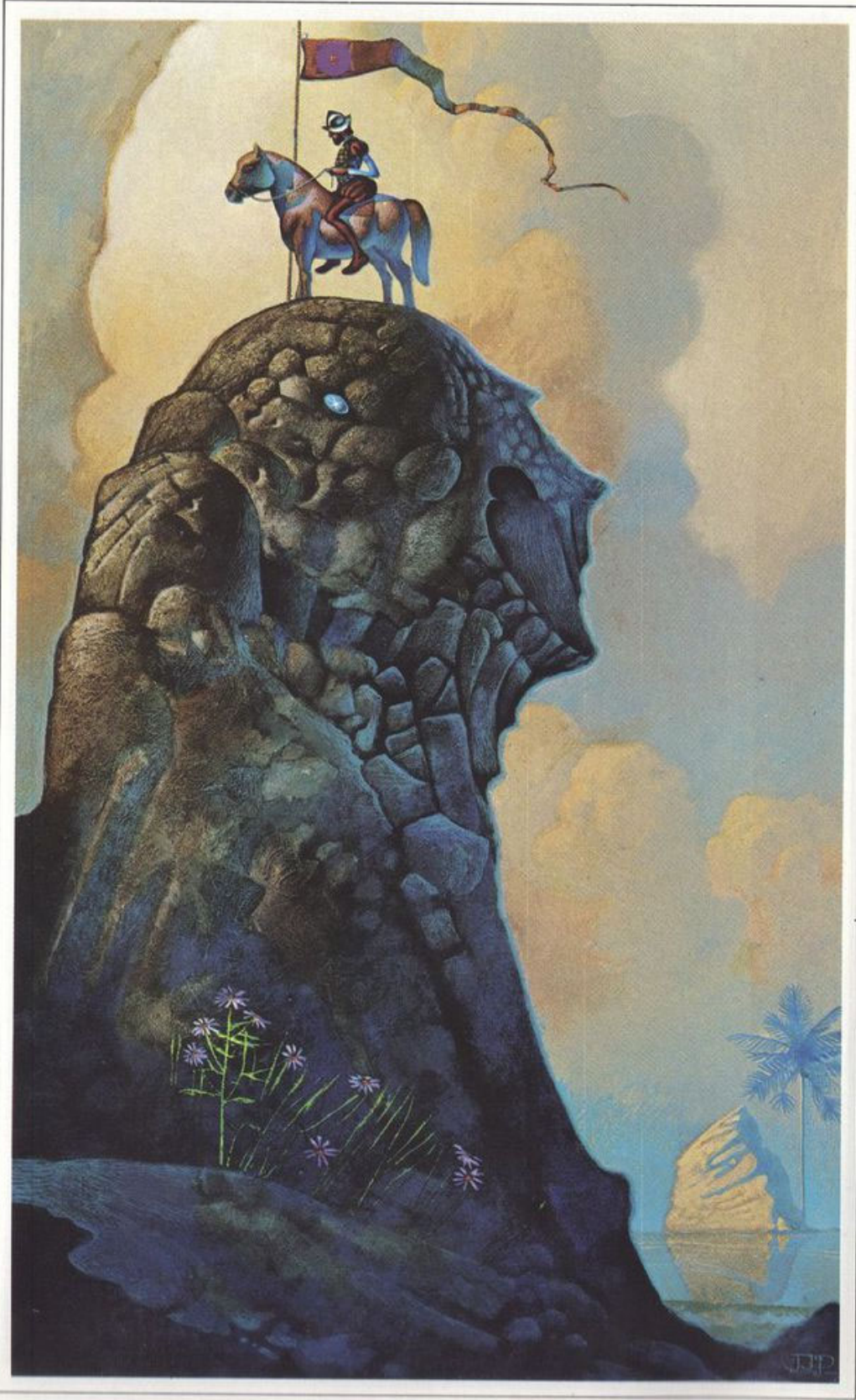
Preiss died in a car accident the following year, but the hunt was not called off.

“The estate will present a gem upon presentation of a casque/key,” Colby said. “Neither the estate nor I are certain of the exact locations.”

In 2019, the Discovery Channel’s *Expedition Unknown* docuseries produced an episode on *The Secret* and “members of the book’s cult following,” according to IMDB.com.

The show’s host, Josh Gates, worked with treasure hunters to find a third casque in Boston’s Langone Park under a baseball field’s home plate.

That episode inspired Sweat and his daughter to search for a casque, too.



A painting from Byron Preiss' book "The Secret" that leads readers on a treasure hunt for 12 gems. [Courtesy of Brick Tower Press]

St. Augustine is primarily believed to be a location because the conquistador painting's corresponding verse begins with "The first chapter written in water."

"The First Chapter" appears on a sign at Fountain of Youth Archaeological Park in St. Augustine.

That clue brought *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* to St. Augustine in 2020 and it is cited on numerous websites dedicated to the hunt.

But Sweat said that is "too obvious. Byron Preiss was a visionary and a very intelligent guy. He wasn't going to make it easy on people where they could just walk up to the Fountain of Youth and there's a sign."

His daughter suggested the Tampa Bay area because St. Petersburg also has a Fountain of Youth, or at least what Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto believed was the mythical spring.

But, again, Sweat said, it seems too easy for the casque to be hidden in that downtown waterfront park.

"It's another clue pointing to the Tampa Bay area," he said.

They then noticed that the painting's mountain looks like Philippe Park from above.

"We meditated on Phillippe Park for quite some time," said Sweat, but they ruled against it as the spot because Preiss was clear that treasure hunters should not disturb a cemetery.

Colby confirmed that cemeteries and dangerous areas like train tracks or highways are out of bounds.

Odet Phillipe, for whom the park is named, [is supposedly buried somewhere on the property](#). And, while a Tocobaga tribe's burial mound there was excavated in the 1920s, there is no assurance that Native American remains were not buried elsewhere.

"I don't think Byron Preiss would want us desecrating that sacred land," Sweat said.

The painting has other clues, Sweat said.

Moon daisies are at the bottom of the mountain. "Moon is crescent," Sweat said. "Crescent Lake Park."

A purple circle on the conquistador's flag resembles what the Huggins-Stengel Field water tank looks like from above.

“Notice a trend?” Sweat said.



A Nashville father and daughter believe the top of the water tank at Crescent Lake Park's Huggins-Stengel Field is depicted in a painting that doubles as a treasure map. [DIRK SHADD | Times]

The conquistador's pants in the hip area look like a baseball glove, he said. Huggins-Stengel Field is famously known as the former home of New York Yankees spring training, and later the New York Giants, New York Mets and Baltimore Orioles.

"So now you have to look at the verse," Sweat said. "Every line in the verse just indicates that beautiful, landlocked moon-shaped body of water."

Here is the verse: "The first chapter written in water near men with wind rose behind bending branches and a green picket fence at the base of a tall tree. You can still hear the honking. Shell, limestone, silver salt. Stars move by day. Sails pass by night, even in darkness, like moonlight in teardrops over the tall grass. Years pass. Rain falls."

Sweat believes that the "first chapter written in water" refers to the discovery of a canoe in Crescent Lake in 1924. The canoe belonged to Spain's Pedro Menéndez de Avilés' expedition to the area in the 1600s.

There is a rock formation in the lower right-hand corner of the painting. Turn it sideways, Sweat said, and it looks like a canoe.

"The first chapter of the area's history was in the water," he said.



A Nashville father and daughter believe Huggins-Stengel Field' old baseball clubhouse and the flag are clues in a treasure hunt. [DIRK SHADD | Times]

“Near men with wind rose,” Sweat said, refers to the baseball field’s clubhouse and neighboring flagpole.

“The clubhouse was used by men,” he said. “And wind rose is a device used to test wind direction.”

The clubhouse is now used as office space for the city’s recreation department.

The honking, Sweat said, refers to the birds. Shells, he added, were used by Native Americans for a variety of tools, baseball baselines are made of ground limestone, and silver salt — also known as silver halides — is a chemical compound that “helps power halogen, as in halogen lights at a baseball field.”

“Literal light bulbs went off,” Savannah Sweat said with a laugh.

Lights for night games have been removed since Preiss would have visited the area.

The stars “moving by day” are the major leaguers who once played there and the celebrities like Marilyn Monroe who attended, Sweat said.

“Sails pass by night, even in darkness, like moonlight in teardrops over the tall grass,” he said, correlates to the teardrop-shaped blimps he has seen in old area photos, sailing over the ballfield in the evenings.

“Years Pass. Rain Falls” also relates to blimps, he said. “Goodyear blimps passed by” and, to rise, used ballasts to drop water. “They made it rain.”

Sweat said they also considered Al Lang Field, which is walking distance from the Fountain of Youth and has old postcard photos of blimps flying over baseball games, but the painting’s moon daisies and other clues were “too much to ignore. It’s Crescent Lake.”

As for the specific location of the casque, he points to “bending branches and a green picket fence at the base of a tall tree.”

The center field batter’s eye screen resembles a green picket fence, but that was not there when Preiss would have visited. Sweat says there used to be a line of trees surrounding the outfield that resembled a picket fence.

Those were removed in 1992, according to news archives.

Sweat thinks the casque was buried beyond that line of trees, likely at the base of a palm tree because that is what appears in the lower right-hand corner of the painting.

“There’s probably 200 trees out there,” Sweat said. “It’s tough to know which one. But it’s not supposed to be easy. That’s why only three have been found in 40 years.”