



JUNE 30, 2010 WCRNEWS

## Riverton Dam claims 9-year-old boy's life



*Rescue workers work to recover the body of 9 year-old Ryan Warner of Bunker Hill, WV who died at Riverton Dam, near Front Royal, VA June 29. Photo courtesy of Stephens City Fire and Rescue. Click image for more photos.*

### ***West Virginia youth was visiting relatives, playing on dam***

By Roger Bianchini  
Warren County Report

The soon to be demolished Riverton Dam claimed its second victim in less than three months on June 29th.

On June 30th Warren County Fire & Rescue Chief Richard Mabie confirmed that the body of 9-year-old Ryan Warner of Bunker Hill, West Virginia, had been recovered at 12:59 p.m. that afternoon. The boy had been playing on or around the Riverton Dam the previous afternoon in the company of two cousins aged 10 and 11, when he slipped off rocks on the upstream side of the dam. Also present with the boys at the time of the accident was a man identified as Warner's grandfather. Mabie believed Warner's relatives at the scene were from the Woodstock area though other sources had cited Winchester as their home.

No charges will be brought as a result of the drowning following a Warren County Sheriff's Office investigation. While the town has "No Trespassing" signs for the dam itself they do not appear to prohibit going into the river around the dam.

According to a July 1st WCSO press release, following interviews with family members and other witnesses, “the three boys were playing on the upriver side of the dam when the nine-year-old boy slipped on rocks in the water and was swept into a large hole on the north end of the dam by the swift water current. Two of the eye witnesses said the boy was very quickly pulled under the water after he fell. The 10-year-old family member borrowed a cell phone from another person near the dam and called 911.”

Mabie said Warren County Emergency Services received the initial alarm call at 4:16 p.m. on Tuesday, June 29. Initial responders included Front Royal Company One and its Swiftwater Rescue Team and North Warren Company 10. Also called and responding to the scene were Frederick County Company 11 with its water rescue team and the Frederick County Sheriff’s Office Dive Team.

Mabie said with water levels down on the Shenandoah River there was no water running over the top of the dam the day of the drowning. Mabie said that when Warner slipped into the water he fell into a whirlpool created by a submerged crack at the dam’s base and was immediately pulled down and pinned by the force of the water created by the damaged footing at the base of the dam. It appeared to rescuers that the hole at the dam’s base was the only point at which water was running through the dam. Mabie cited a flow rate of 160 cubic feet per second at the point where the boy became trapped. With no evidence the boy had been washed through the hole downriver, a plumber’s underwater camera was utilized to confirm that Warner’s body was trapped at a location near where he fell into the river.

“After multiple attempts over the next hour to afford a rescue in this area, it was determined that the water pressure was too great,” Mabie said in a press release released late in the day of the recovery. “A plan was put into place to divert the river flow from this area so rescuers could enter the area of the dam that had been undermined. With the assistance of a private contractor, Donald Poe Construction and the use of multiple tons of rock and gravel from Essroc Corporation, working through the night, a temporary diversion dam was erected. This temporary dam diverted the river flow to the south side of the dam, allowing rescuers to safely enter the area where the boy fell in. Within an hour of this operation, the body was located in this area under the dam and removed from the water at 12:59 p.m. today (June 30).”

Mabie also told us some water flow was diverted through an old, long unused opening related to the dam’s last use some 70 years ago as an electrical generating plant. Crews were able to lower a ladder into the slowed water flow and recover Warner’s body from the Shenandoah River. Mabie said the recovery was made virtually at the spot the boy fell in some 20 hours earlier.

## **April death**

On April 7th the dam claimed the life of a 51-year-old Linden man kayaking near the dam with his fiancé. Mark D. Grand had survived four tours of duty in the Iraq War before losing his life to the swirling waters around the Riverton Dam. At the time of that fatal accident the river's levels were up and flowing hard across the dam. Grand and girlfriend Julie Granger were kayaking separately on the downstream side when Grand and his kayak were sucked into the churning water around the dam.

After backtracking for over a month after a year of discussion of utilizing federal and state Fish and Wildlife Service grant money totaling \$123,000 to demolish the dam, the Front Royal Town Council finally voted to accept those funds at its March 22nd meeting (see related story). That vote came after the town received estimates of \$500,000 to a million dollars to repair the dam, which would have been done totally at town expense had the Wildlife grants been rejected. The demolition, which will not use explosives, is expected this fall.

That schedule was too late for yet another victim of a dam described by county emergency service's Officer Raymond Cross as "a drowning machine." Prior to this year's two fatalities, the last fatality at the Riverton Dam was in 2002 when Thomas Walker died while fishing with his two sons, 17 and 9, near the dam. If Grand was a hero for his service to his country, Walker died a hero credited for saving his sons' lives by getting them out of the boat and away from the deadly whirlpool before being swamped himself.

Unfortunately the most recent victim, 9-year-old Ryan Warner, will never have the opportunity to find his life's direction and the heroism that might have lived within his own heart.

## **Timeline**

Many agencies worked extremely hard through the night to help bring this incident to an end including;

Time of Dispatch: 4:16 PM Stations 10 and 1, WC Special Operations Team, Advanced Life Support

Arrived on Scene: 4:22 PM

Special Call: 4:28 PM Boat 2

Special Call: 4:54 PM Game and Inland Fisheries

Special Call: 5:08 PM Frederick Co. Boat 11

Special Call: 5:42 PM Frederick Co. Sheriff Office Dive Team

Recovery Made: 12:59 PM (Wednesday)

In Service: 1:40 PM

Other assisting:

- Town of Front Royal- Department of Environmental Services, Police Department
- Warren County Sheriff's Office
- Poe Construction
- ESSROC Corp.
- HN Funkhauser
- McDonalds- South Street
- Papa Johns

The investigation was headed by the Warren County Sheriff's Office.

[Update: [Sheriff calls death accidental, tragic](#)]



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