

North Georgia News

75¢

3 Sections 28 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909

Wednesday, March 12, 2025

Panthers put up valiant championship effort

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Sports Editor

MACON – Union County's second-half rally came up short in the Boys Basketball program's first State Championship game appearance in 54 years.

The No. 6 Panthers erased an early 12-point deficit but eventually dropped a 57-49 contest to No. 4 Butler on Thursday, March 6, at the Macon Coliseum.

Union trailed 22-12 after one quarter and dug itself into a 12-point hole on multiple occasions during the second but managed to weather the storm and went into halftime down 33-24.

Butler extended its lead to 44-33 in the third, but the Panthers wouldn't go away, climbing within 45-38 after

three. Union County opened the fourth with consecutive 3-pointers, cutting the gap to 45-44, but were unable to tie or take the lead down the stretch.

Still down 49-47, a momentum-shifting sequence occurred near the 2-minute mark when Butler knocked down a clutch 3-pointer, growing the Bulldogs' advantage to 52-47.

On the other end, Union County was hit with a traveling violation, taking 2 points off the board and allowing Butler to put the game away at the free throw line over the final minute.

The big match-up was televised live statewide by Georgia Public Broadcasting.

For more coverage of the 2025 Georgia High School Association Class AA Boys Basketball Championship, turn to this week's Sports Section.



The Panthers gave it their all in the GHSA title game last week, making their hometown proud.

Photo by Todd Forrest

Local man perishes in early morning house fire



Approximately 75% of this Becky Road home was fully engulfed in flames when Union County Fire arrived on the scene March 4. Tragically, the resident of the home died.

Photo/Facebook

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

A Union County man tragically lost his life in a pre-dawn house fire on Tuesday, March 4. Russell Willis of Becky Road was 73.

The State Medical Examiner's Office is working on an official identification due to the extent of the fire, though authorities said last week there was no reason to believe the deceased individual was anyone other than Willis, the lone occupant of the home.

A neighbor dog awoke its owners barking around 4:45 a.m. that Tuesday, alerting them to the blaze and prompting a call to Union County E-911.

The Union County Fire See *Fatal House Fire*, Page 2A

Irate resident leads chase from Sheriff's Office

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Trouble arrived at the doorstep of the Union County Sheriff's Office Friday afternoon when a man in a black Toyota truck parked outside the Beasley Street headquarters and began "acting crazy," Sheriff Shawn Dyer said.

Deputies noticed the man right away; he was hard to miss, irately shouting what sounded like nonsense, and they approached him on foot to see what was going on.

At their approach, the man jumped into his truck to drive away, striking and causing minor injuries to two

of the deputies who had walked over to speak with him.

As he exited the parking lot, he also collided with two vehicles: a patrol car with a deputy inside and an unoccupied car of an employee with the Georgia Department of Community Supervision, according to the Sheriff's Office.

As reported in another recent chase article, law enforcement uses many factors to assess whether to begin a pursuit or terminate a chase in progress, such as time of day, level of traffic on roadways and severity of violation.

In this case, the man had proven himself a danger to the public in committing



Bryce Nicholas Burgett aggravated assault against three deputies, said Sheriff Shawn Dyer, so there was no question – he had to be stopped.

See *Burgett Chase*, Page 5A

World War II vet Gerrard happy to receive visitors



Veteran Flo Gerrard, seated in the back, enjoyed her recent visit from members of the American Legion Post 121 and Auxiliary.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Local legend and World War II veteran Florence "Flo" Gerrard will be turning 100 on June 24, and she received a special visit by American Legion Ira Weaver Post 121 and other veteran advocates at her apartment at Stonehenge Senior Living on Feb. 18.

"We visit every month," said Post 121 Senior Vice Cmdr. Kathy Merritt, elaborating that the outings are meant to

celebrate veteran birthdays and give them some company. Usually, they include small gifts like balloons and sweets; indeed, Gerrard received cupcakes when her retinue stopped by her room, and two balloon bouquets were pinned to her walker in short time.

Gerrard, a known fan of the Atlanta Braves, also received a John Smoltz bobblehead. "How cute is that?" she was heard to utter, admiring the little figure with a grin as she bonded over some

pictures of the team hanging up in her living space.

Merritt added that Gerrard often receives a visit regardless of her birthday; she's well-known among the Legion and its friends and is in fact the reason for many veteran programs in Union County. To remember those days, however, is to know her as Flo Ford.

The year was 1970. Frank and Flo Ford moved to Union County from Jupiter, Florida. The pair purchased 71 See *Visiting Veterans*, Page 2A



The chase involving Burgett ended with GSP successfully executing a PIT maneuver to halt the fleeing man's black Toyota Tacoma on Georgia 515 Friday.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Historical Society hosts American chestnut discussion

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

As recently as the 1940s, American chestnut trees covered Appalachia – some tall enough that their photographs confused inexperienced onlookers into mistaking them for redwoods.

But the devastating blight that arrived at the turn of the last century decimated their numbers, leading scientists to look for ways to preserve the species.

Enter Scott Merkle of the University of Georgia Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources, who has worked with chestnuts since 1989.

At the invitation of See *American Chestnut*, Page 3A



This month, the Union County Historical Society hosted UGA Professor Dr. Scott Merkle for a talk on "The Restoration of the American Chestnut Tree."

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



Vol. 116 No. 12

Arrests - 9A Legals - 10B
Church - 2B Obits - 4B
Classifieds - 10B Sports - 8A
Opinion - 6A

See Panther Basketball Special Section Inside

Enotah CASA to Host Open Houses March 18

See Page 4A

FTC Warns Against "Unpaid Toll" Scams

See Page 6B



You work hard for your money. Shouldn't it be working hard for you?

BLAIR BURCH | LPL FINANCIAL ADVISOR

BLAIRSVILLE | 177 Highway 515 East | 706-745-0435



Securities and advisory services offered through LPL Financial, a registered investment advisor and broker-dealer (member FINRA/SIPC). Investment and insurance products are not FDIC insured, are not bank guaranteed, and may lose value.

Fatal House Fire...from Page 1A

Department responded to Becky Road, which is about 10 miles west of Blairsville city limits, off Georgia 325, with career and volunteer firefighters as well as apparatus from Stations 1, 2, 3, 4 and 13, according to Fire Chief David Dyer.

“Upon arrival of the first units, they found a small residential structure with approximately 75% involvement in heavy fire, with fire through the roof,” said Dyer, who believes the home was burning for a while before the call went out. “An aggressive defensive attack was made, and the fire was controlled.”

“Information gathered from bystanders and neighbors indicated that the owner/occupant, an elderly gentleman, could possibly still be inside the structure. After a short time, firefighters did discover a body inside the structure, suspected to be the owner/occupant.”

“Union County Fire Department fire investigators, in cooperation with Union County Sheriff’s Office and Georgia State Fire Marshals Office, began an investigation. Union County Coroner was

also involved.

“The fire was completely extinguished by firefighters on the scene. The residence sustained major damage. There were no injuries and no other fatalities. The cause has not been determined and is under investigation.”

The Fire Department calls in the State Fire Marshals Office to investigate all fires that result in death, Dyer said.

“We always bump (fatal fires) up to them,” Chief Dyer said. “They’ve got more resources if there’s any kind of foul play going on and have more experience in this, so we like to cover all of our bases when we have a fatality.”

Importantly, Dyer said he did not have any knowledge that foul play was involved and deferred to the state investigation.

“We’ve had some pretty significant calls in the last couple of weeks – I hope it’s not a pattern,” Dyer said. “We’ve had several structure fires, brush fires, pretty significant medical calls and accidents.”

“We don’t want fatal fires. We always work hard, train hard and do all that we can

to prevent such things. That’s why our efforts involve not only our training, our abilities and our response, but also prevention with smoke alarms and escape plans.

“So, we’re always trying to prevent these things with education, training, preparing and mitigating all that we can. A building can be replaced, but a life can’t.”

It is too early to say what caused the March 4 deadly fire – and what, if anything, could have prevented Willis’ death – but Dyer said home escape plans and smoke alarms improve people’s likelihood of survival in the event of a fire.

“One of our main goals is to make sure that information is given to everybody, and that they’re aware and practice it,” Dyer said.

Union County Fire has a free Smoke Alarm Program in which firefighters respond to homes, test smoke alarms and install new or replacement alarms in the appropriate locations. For more information, visit <https://www.unioncountygavirginia.gov/fire-department/programs-services/>.

Visiting Veterans...from Page 1A

acres and called the picturesque property “Ford Mountain.” It’s still held within the family where it stands near Richard Russell Road.

With the couple both being veterans, they were heavily involved in the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars and Disabled American Veterans. Gerrard specifically joined the Women’s Army Corps when she was just 18 years old, shortly after her marriage in 1944.

While her husband was deployed to Europe, Gerrard tended to amputees back home in the United States. Following three months of training, she was sent to McCloskey General Hospital in Waco, Texas. World War II provided a never-ending supply of horrors, and Gerrard admits there were many days where she fought – and sometimes failed to hide – tears.

Understandably, there are stories from that time in her life that stick with her. There was Capt. Black, who lost both hands to an explosion; Gerrard used a pencil tied to his wrist to restore his ability to turn pages while reading.

Then, there was a young man who needed Gerrard’s

invaluable Type A blood for an immediate transfusion. His words as they watched her blood flow into his arm remain with her all these years later.

“He said, ‘Thank you for your blood,’” Gerrard recalled. “Not thank you for your service, but thank you for your blood.”

After Mr. Ford came home, he didn’t talk much about the war, Gerrard said. Still, they understood the sacrifices their fellows had made and wanted to help. The Union County of 1970 was very different than that of today, and Gerrard remembers how appalled her husband was at the conditions some local veterans lived in.

They brought attention to the region on a state level with trips to Atlanta’s Veterans Affairs Office and were an integral part of establishing the Blairsville VA Clinic. In 1981, Gerrard and her husband launched the North Georgia Honor Guard, ensuring the fallen received proper military honors at their funerals.

From the start, finding enough money to purchase matching uniforms was an issue, but the group was able to fundraise \$3,000; it covered the total for each member and

even a few spares.

But a problem arose – almost all of them needed altering. Luckily, Gerrard was a talented seamstress, and with hours of time and boundless determination, she made sure the budding Honor Guard had fitting uniforms.

In one more show of love and solidarity for their fellow veterans, the Fords used the extra space on their land to start up the Holly Hill Cemetery. With 300 plots, burial is free of charge to members of the United States Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force and Coast Guard.

Gerrard independently published “All-American Woman: Flo’s Life Story,” which is now undergoing its third edition and can be purchased at the Historic Union County Courthouse courtesy of the Union County Historical Society.

Family and friends from all over the country plan to gather this summer for a dual reunion and celebration in honor of Gerrard’s 100th birthday at Brasstown Valley Resort. In the meantime, Gerrard values her visits from her friends at the American Legion; the feeling is entirely mutual.

Friends of Union County Library to award \$500 Scholarship to senior

We are excited to announce that the Friends of Union County Library (FOUCL) is offering a one-time, non-renewable \$500 scholarship to a Union County High School senior who has been accepted to an accredited school of higher education. The FOUCL Scholarship will be based on a written essay about how books impacted the student’s life.

All requirements to apply for this scholarship can be found in this article and on our website (foucl.org). The information sheet required for each submittal is also available on our website.

Eligibility Criteria: 1) Applicant must be a graduating senior from Union County High School, accepted to a college or university. No senior with a parent or grandparent on the judging committee will be eligible. Blind judging will ensure no personal information can identify the applicant. 2) There are no academic requirements such as grade point average or intended secondary concentration of study. The scholarship must be used for academic expenses. 3) The written essay must follow the guidelines stated below and be received through our email address (foucl.blairsville@gmail.com) or at our post office box by March 28, 2025. The address to mail the essay and student information sheet is: FOUCL; Attn: Scholarship Committee; PO Box 1546; Blairsville, GA 30514.

Essay Guidelines: 1) Write an essay about how books have impacted your life. Include how books have shaped your personal development, inspired your educational journey, or career choice. It could be any transformative experiences or moments of inspiration that stemmed from books, or the role books have played in overcoming challenges, understanding others, or developing life skills. 2) Word Count: Between 750 and 1,000 words. 3) Formatting: Typed and double-spaced, using 12-point Times New Roman. 4) Include the student information sheet which can be

FOUCL \$500 SCHOLARSHIP

\$500 Scholarship
to be awarded to a Union County High School Senior for educational purposes at an accredited college or university

Deadline
March 28, 2025

For More Information:
foucl.blairsville@gmail.com
foucl.org

found on our website (foucl.org) or picked up from the bookcase outside the Friends Room at Union County Public Library. 5) Include citations if referencing specific books, authors, or studies.

Scholarship Award and Benefits: 1) Monetary: one-time, non-renewable \$500 check. 2) Public recognition at Awards Night, on FOUCL’s Facebook page, website,

newsletter, and/or a newspaper article.

Deadlines: 1) Essay must be received through our email address or at our post office box by midnight, March 28, 2025. Receipt will be acknowledged by email. 2) Recipient will be notified by April 7, 2025.

For more information, please contact FOUCL at foucl.blairsville@gmail.com.

“FREE PRESCHOOL”
Creating Masterpieces: One Child at a Time

REGISTRATION OPENS MARCH 1ST

HEAD START MUST BE 3YRS OR 4YRS BY SEPTEMBER 1ST

Family Support, Parenting Curriculum, Disability & Mental Health, Health & Development, Quality Learning, Nutritious Meals

REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION
PROOF OF AGE (BIRTH CERTIFICATE/BIRTH RECORD/PASSPORT)
PROOF OF INCOME OR PUBLIC ASSISTANCE DOCUMENTATION

CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE, FAMILIES RECEIVING PUBLIC ASSISTANCE (SNAP/FOOD STAMPS, SSI, TANF) OR EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS ARE AUTOMATICALLY ELIGIBLE

PRE-APPLY @ WWW.NDO.ORG OR SCAN

Union County Head Start
226 School St. Blairsville, GA 30512
706-745-4200

OUR PROGRAM DOES NOT DISCRIMINATE BASED ON RACE, GENDER, NATIONAL ORIGIN, SEX, CREED, RELIGION OR DISABILITY

American Chestnut...from Page 1A

the Union County Historical Society, Merkle presented at the Old Courthouse on March 1, educating the audience on the biology of the treasured chestnut, its significance to Appalachian history, its uses, its downfall and how people like him are attempting to combat its decline.

Chestnuts actually increased in density with the deforestation caused by European colonists who were looking to build a rush of new cabins in the wake of land lotteries; the species thrived in the aftermath due to cleared land leaving ample room for sunlight.

This, combined with their rapid growth rate, allowed the chestnut to flourish. Wildlife and humans alike took advantage of this time of plenty, with the nuts themselves sustaining animals and drawing people out in droves from urban and rural communities.

Roasted as-is or ground into flour, it's no secret that the American chestnut has been a favorite food for generations. Even today, it's regarded by some culinary experts as holding a sweeter flavor than other regional variations.

The wood, too, was highly valued. Chestnut wood is rot-resistant, making it invaluable for structures built against the ground or exposed to weather. This durability is due to a high tannin content, which also made chestnut a great asset to properly preserving leather back in the day.

Finally, its straight grain meant that woodcutters could more easily make even slices along the planks for things like shingles, and its lack of smoke while burning made it a popular

choice among moonshiners hoping to hide their stills during operation.

So beloved was the chestnut that it was known as the "cradle to grave wood." In early 1900s Appalachia, it was very likely that many people were lulled to sleep as babies in chestnut cradles, and then, at the end of their lives, were lowered into the ground in chestnut coffins.

At the end of the 19th century, the fungus *Cryphonectria parasitica* hitched a ride from a shipment of Japanese chestnuts to the Bronx Zoo, then known as the New York Zoological Gardens.

Forester Herman Merkel first noticed a blight on American chestnuts growing on zoo grounds, and by 1905, mycologist William Murrill identified the fungus responsible.

Despite efforts to quarantine the disease and treat infected trees with fungicides, the chestnut blight spread south at a rate of about 20 miles per year. Tell-tale signs of the blight include sunken "cankers" in the bark, as fungal hyphae or mycelium – similar to roots – eat the tree from the inside out with oxalic acid.

The tree dies when the infection spreads around its width, girdling it and rendering it unable to pass water or sugar between the roots and boughs.

It's estimated that, across the country, about four million trees were killed with the blight's introduction, resulting in an abundance of a phenomenon known as ghost forests; because of the nature of how the blight killed the trees, they were left standing after their bark was stripped off.

It took the upright dead delayed time to fall, resulting in "clear day thunder" when one of the towering husks fell and sent an audible boom rippling through the forest. And so, the age-old question of whether trees make a sound when they fall in unattended woods was answered.

Make no mistake – the American chestnut is far from extinct. They still grow throughout their old range but

are nowhere near the majesty of their glory days; they're much shorter and yield smaller chestnut outputs. In fact, the vast majority are saplings, and there are approximately four to five million of them growing today.

Depending on location and other environmental factors, many populations undergo a vicious cycle. As the saplings grow, their bark cracks, leaving them susceptible to fungal infections. Inevitably, the young tree dies, and another sapling rises up to take its place for a few years.

Ecologists and scientists have done what they can to mitigate the arboreal apocalypse. In the 1960s, there was an attempt to irradiate chestnut seeds, hoping to stimulate the development of more hardy mutations, but "no one's really followed up on it."

Attempts to hybridize the American chestnut with the Chinese chestnut were another popular method. The American Chestnut Foundation spearheaded this movement in the hopes of creating a tree that had all the appearance and functionality of an American chestnut and the blight resistance of the Chinese variety.

Unfortunately, many of these hybrids did not possess the right genes and eventually succumbed to the fungus like their predecessors. This, along with technological advancements in genetic engineering, led to more hands-on measures.

Merkle himself has participated in the process, which can take more than 10 years to complete correctly. Using the genetic makeup of chestnuts from all across the original range, the embryos of tiny trees are grown in a lab, their DNA augmented in a multitude of ways to withstand the blight.

Some survive and some don't, but even if they did, there are lingering ethical questions and legal limitations in regards to their future.

For now, Merkle continues his research alongside those who want to see a return to the American chestnut's

heyday, with his presentation including a slide thanking his fellow scholars and scientists, as well as the undergraduates who work to achieve the same.

The Historical Society hosted a barbecue luncheon on the Old Courthouse Lawn before the presentation, showcasing its members' continued commitment to bringing the community together in education and preservation of local heritage.

LOCAL BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

GA MOUNTAIN GRADING, LLC
 DRIVEWAYS, CULVERTS, STORM DRAINS & MORE
706-994-0543
 gamountaingrading@gmail.com

SHAWN'S HOME FURNISHINGS
 Mattresses, Porch Rockers & More!
 "From the Front Porch to the Back Door We've Got You Covered!"
 568 Blue Ridge St. • Blairsville, GA
706-835-1209
 Mon-Fri 9am-5pm • Sat 9am-4pm • Closed Sun

Southeast Geothermal & Spray Foam
706-745-8685
 1442 Blue Ridge Hwy.
 www.segeothermal.com
 www.sesprayfoam.com

Specializing In:
 Alignment • Computer Balancing
 Brakes • Auto Repair
 Industrial Foam Fill
 Oil Changes

Thomas Tire, Inc.
 Auto & Big Truck Service
 Oscar Thomas - Owner
 76 Shoe Factory Road
 Blairsville, Georgia 30512

Randolph Jones Grading
 Licensed Septic Tank Repair & Install, Driveway Scrape and Repair, Bobcat, Excavator.
 Lot Clearing and Basement, House Site, Haul Dirt or Gravel. Any & All Small Jobs Welcome!
706-897-4909

LICENSED INSURED
GIBSON LAND SERVICE
706-897-8564

TOTAL RECOVERY PAINT & BODY SHOP, INC.
706-745-9703
 ALL INSURANCE ACCEPTED

BIG FROG FORESTRY MULCHING
FORESTRY MULCHING
 Tyler Silverson
706-851-3524

BPM Group, LLC
 Invest. Build. Manage.
706-835-6295
 General Contracting
 Property Maintenance
 www.mybpmgroup.com

Wiley & Sons
 Licensed Grading Insured
 Lot Clearing, Gravel Driveways, House Sites, Long Arm Mowing, Retaining Walls, Underbrushing, Erosion Control, Water Management
706-897-4065

Let's Talk Trash
TONY'S GARBAGE
 706.897.6066
 Weekly Pickup
 tonysgarbage.com
 706-897-6066

WHITENERS ADVANCE CONSTRUCTION, LLC
 GRADING PROPERTY MAINTENANCE
 Lot Clearing Retaining Walls
 Basements Drainage
 Driveways STUMP GRINDING
 SEPTIC SYSTEMS LANDSCAPING
 CALL **706-400-2048**
 MATT Licensed & Insured

DUNCAN GRADING AND LANDSCAPING LLC
706-994-7200
 •Grading/Excavation •Drainage
 •Lot Clearing •Long Arm Mowing
 •Driveways •Stump Removal
 •Septic Installs/Repairs

Veterans Home Renovation Co.
 - Owned & Operated by a prior U.S. Army Engineer -
 ★ Quality Building & Finishing
 ★ Remodeling, Electrical & Plumbing
 ★ Expert Kitchen & Bath Remodeling
 ★ Deck Building & Repair - Paint/Sealing
 -Fast completion times, show-up daily and work the military way-
 Member Professional Remodeling Organization Since 2004 & Local Chamber
CALL: 706-400-0897
 FREE SITE VISIT & ESTIMATES Mon-Sat, 8 to 5pm.

HOME REPAIRS
 Room Remodels
 Interior, Exterior, Baths, Decks, Doors.
 Painting, Trim, Electric Water Heaters
 Floors & Installation
 Professional & Insured
706-970-7641

Aaron's Pressure Washing & Gutter Cleaning
 Professional Results Guaranteed
 Serving the Tri-County Area
 FREE Estimates • 706-897-1862

SOSEBEE LAWN CARE
 Quality service you can count on.
Mowing & Light Maintenance
 Gary Sosebee
 Owner/ Operator
706-781-7387
INSURED • FREE ESTIMATES

West Printing Company
706-745-6343
 Need Blueprints?
 Forms?.....YES
 Business Cards?.....YES
 Labels?.....YES
 Signs?.....YES
 Blueprints.....YES
 Name Badges.....YES
 Custom Note Cards.....YES
 Invitations.....YES
 Letterhead.....YES
 Envelopes.....YES
 And MORE!
 Your Hometown Printer since 1975
 See Allison or Kenneth
 Same building as the North Georgia News
 266 Cleveland St. • Blairsville

King Heating & Air
706-632-9276
 3 Generations Strong!!

Brent's HANDYMAN SERVICES
 New Homes ★ Additions
 Garages ★ Decks
 Wood Finish & Repair
 Drywall Repair
 Acoustic Ceilings
 Flooring
CALL 706-400-0316

Burgett Chase...from Page 1A



Four patrol cars had to be towed after the chase through town March 7. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

“He was absolutely dangerous to the public – there’s no doubt in my mind,” Sheriff Dyer said. “If he was capable of coming up here and hitting three of our officers, there’s no telling what he could have done to the general public.”

Added Dyer, “We’re not going to put up with somebody trying to run over our deputies and get away with it.”

The man made his way down Beasley Street to the Glenn Gooch Bypass, turning right in the direction of Union County Schools.

Hearing the situation over the radio, the School System immediately initiated its safety plan protocols, putting the schools into “Soft Lockdown” as a precaution. It was about 2:50 p.m., and the system had already started loading students onto afternoon buses.

“We immediately sent out an ‘all-call’ notification to bus rider parents of the delay,” Director of Accountability and Compliance Dr. David Murphy said. “We held the buses to allow law enforcement to deal with the situation and clear some of the resulting traffic.”

Thankfully, the truck drove past the schools to Georgia 515. UCSO deputies caught up with the driver at the intersection, being quickly joined by a Georgia State Patrol

trooper who just happened to be at the traffic light as the truck turned west onto GA 515, toward town.

The pursuit never reached excessive speeds, but still, the man refused to pull over. This prompted the trooper, who had taken the lead in the chase, to perform a PIT maneuver near Earnest Street, a short distance from the traffic signal at Murphy Highway.

After successfully stopping the vehicle, causing it to rotate 180 degrees in the westbound lanes of 515, multiple patrol cars from the state, county and city agencies pinned it in to prevent the driver from taking off again.

As a deputy was attempting to exit his vehicle to assist in apprehending the suspect, the man suddenly drove forward, ramming the patrol car and causing the deputy to unintentionally discharge his drawn firearm.

Sheriff Dyer said the bullet exited the vehicle at an upward angle that was unlikely to present an immediate danger to the public. Indeed, no one was injured in the discharge, and no property damage was reported.

At first, the suspect refused to open his door or roll down his window, but law enforcement was able to get him out anyway and took him into custody.

He and several officers were transported to Union General Hospital for medical evaluation and treatment of minor injuries.

Nailing down his identity proved tricky initially, as the man gave different names to investigators and hospital workers, but the Sheriff’s Office eventually confirmed that the man was Bryce Nicholas Burgett of Autumn Lane in Blairsville.

Burgett, 29, has been charged with six felonies: four counts of aggravated assault; obstructing or hindering law enforcement officers; and fleeing or attempting to elude police officers.

He is also facing multiple misdemeanor charges: driving under the influence of alcohol, drugs or other intoxicating substances; aggressive driving; hit and run – failure to stop and render aid; and reckless driving.

The case remains under investigation, and additional charges could be forthcoming, according to the Sheriff’s Office.

A total of four patrol vehicles – two from UCSO and two from GSP – had to be towed in addition to Burgett’s truck in the aftermath of the chase. Two damaged patrol cars were driven from the scene on GA 515, one from UCSO and another from the Blairsville

Police Department.

Traffic in town was delayed for a couple of hours as deputies posted up at multiple intersections to re-direct motorists around the scene, enabling both an investigation and cleanup.

No weapons or drugs were found to be in Burgett’s possession at the time of his arrest, either on his person or in his truck, Sheriff Dyer said.

Investigators are still working to piece together why Burgett behaved in such an irrational manner.

“It’s under investigation at this time to see what triggered this event,” said Dyer, describing the situation as a first. “I’m really concerned that he would come to a place like this – it could have been anyplace, but thank goodness it was just this place – and act like this. It’s very disturbing.”

Burgett remains in custody at the Union County Jail without bond, which has been denied. He is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.