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Jonathan Leader

*University of South Carolina - Columbia*, [leaderj@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:leaderj@mailbox.sc.edu)

William Sattler

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# The Colored Asylum Cemetery: A Case Study in Urban Land Reuse and Historic Cemeteries

By Jonathan Leader and William Sattler

Readers of *Legacy* may think that the previously reported situation at the Johnson Hagood Stadium of the Citadel in Charleston, SC (*Legacy*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2000) was an uncommon occurrence. Unfortunately, it is not. The reuse of urban landscapes and the expansion of town centers to what had previously been hinterlands ensures that archaeological and historic sites will be encroached upon. A recent situation here in Columbia, clearly illuminates the situation.

The Colored Asylum cemetery was in use from the early 1800s through 1925. The individuals buried there died while in the care of the state. The cemetery was the final resting place for those who did not have family, had communicable diseases that forestalled their return to their loved ones, or who came from poverty and whose families could not afford to reclaim them for burial.

The original lay of the land included a slight rise and hill leading down into a large area of swamp. It was also a significant distance from



William Sattler in back of van with GPR antennae. (SCIAA photo by Jonathan Leader)

the center of Columbia, yet close to the original siting of the asylum. The distance and unsuitability of the land for other purposes and the proximity to the asylum made the location ideal to state officials.

Change is a fact of life. What was once unsuitable becomes not only suitable, but even desirable. Many African American and Native American cemeteries and burial grounds in the lowcountry and along the rivers of the up country have come under threat in recent times.

The modern advances in technology and disease control have turned what were once pestilential swamps into prime real estate. The pressure for reuse is compounded when the area becomes annexed to a growing metropolitan area.

A common problem in institutional settings is the shortness of corporate memories. While the Colored Asylum Cemetery was in use the individuals who were tasked with keeping track of it did so. There was an immediate need with immediate consequences. Once the cemetery was filled, this was no longer the case. It rapidly slid from the common view. It is a fact of life that institutions begrudge spending their scarce resources in areas that they perceive as having minimal returns. The cemetery did not object nor did the families or the public to its growing neglect. This would change.

The people interred at the cemetery were generally not memorialized beyond the placing of numbered stones. Two additional



Jonathan Leader, State Archaeologist, laying grid lines for GPS work at cemetery. (SCIAA photo courtesy of William Sattler)

monuments with names are to be found there, but they are not typical. The first is for a woman who is also listed as being buried in another cemetery near Elmwood. The second is for the reinterment of individuals moved to the property when their original cemetery was condemned for other purposes.

Over the years the state cemetery became covered with shrubs, trees, and trash. It gained an unsavory reputation as a place where illegal activities occurred. These activities endangered the people who lived in the community housing that adjoined the state owned property. The fact that it was a cemetery was known by some, but not by all. As an interesting aside, the local residents report the removal of some of the numbered markers by "brick thieves" and by a local resident who seems to have acquired a significant number in her apartment prior to her

death. Why she would wish to do this has never been determined. The whereabouts of these materials at this late date are unknown. It is possible that some numbered markers may remain buried in the cemetery area, although none were encountered during the field work.

The City of Columbia and the State Department of Mental Health discussed the property off and on for many years. Eventually, the City agreed to take the land, clean it up, and use it for recreational purposes. Plans were discussed and members of the community and developers approached. At about the same time a national grass roots movement within the mental health community to reclaim "lost" cemeteries took off. Local clients, officials, and others within mental health formed a state committee to trace the history of the state's asylum cemeteries.

In October of 2000, the Office of

the State Archaeologist was approached by members of the State Department of Mental Health to advise the group in their preservation efforts and to conduct ground penetrating radar (GPR) in the area of a proposed golf course. The GPR would be used in those instances where the cemetery boundaries might be indistinct. At the time, the scope of the cemeteries was not known.

Throughout this period, the City of Columbia was actively seeking advice from a variety of sources including the County Coroner's Office. The information that they received lead them to believe that they had the ability to develop the land without further work. This belief was bolstered by the City's decision to place a golf driving range on top of the site. They felt confident that this would be a non-invasive and acceptable use of the land with strong benefits to the immediate community. They discovered in very short order that nothing concerning burials is ever simple.

A storm of protest washed over the City Council once the land was cleared, seeded for grass, and the driving range "club house" went into construction early in 2001. Angry letters, news reports, and public meetings became a matter of course. The community polarized between those who opposed any use of the property at all, and those who wanted the driving range in some form to continue. While there was a great deal of sentiment and hyperbole from both sides, there was a dearth of facts.

The Office of the State Archaeologist moved at the request of the State Department of Mental Health and the City of Columbia to fill in the gaps. A close partnership was forged with James Watts, Richland County



The SCIAA mobile GPR unit at work. (Photo courtesy of Eric Campos, The State newspaper)



James Watts, Coroner, Vernon Kirkpatrick, Deputy Coroner, and William Sattler inspecting grave shaft outline. (SCIAA photo by Jonathan Leader)

Coroner, and his well trained staff who had also become involved due to the legal issues. The joint team decided that a two-pronged approach to the problem was best. The coroner's office tackled the fragmentary and incomplete documentation that had survived in the public record and the legal issues. The Office of the State Archaeologist determined the location, number, and placement of the burials within the impacted area.

Drawing on maps uncovered in the public record, the open area leading from a copse of trees at the hill summit down slope towards what had been the marsh was

gridded off for testing. The grid measured 330 feet by 204 feet. The lines were oriented north-south and spaced six feet apart and marked every three feet for their length. This ensured that any anomaly found could be precisely located on the ground. Each file produced by the equipment contained the permanent marks to ensure reacquisition.

The SIR System 2 GPR unit is equipped with 100 feet of armored cable. This was an insufficient length to do the lines as a single file. Although it is possible and common for multiple files to be produced and then be assembled into a single data set, it is also time consuming. Time

was one thing that could not be wasted. The decision was made to use the SCIAA van as a mobile platform for the GPR. William Sattler, an USC engineering student taking some time off from studies, volunteered to assist the project and became proficient in running the equipment. Each line was run from the back of the van moving at idling speed.

Once the lines were run the analysis phase began. GPR provides a study in contrasting densities. It is up to the operator to define the acquired anomalies. In areas that have been heavily disturbed it can be quite difficult to sort out the signatures. Fortunately, the Colored Asylum cemetery was quite ordered in its use. Putting aside those anomalies that were indistinct, a total of 1,985 anomalies, thought to be burials, were identified. But were they?

An anomaly is an anomaly. It only becomes a burial when you have sufficient distinguishing marks to identify it as such. Joined by Coroner Watts, Deputy Coroner Vernon Kirkpatrick and Mr. Sattler, the State Archaeologist picked a line and anomaly at random. Mr. Sattler volunteered to remove the top soil and to disclose what was hoped would be a grave shaft. It was. There was no longer any doubt. A meeting was held shortly thereafter with the Mayor's office to brief them on the findings of the joint Coroner and State Archaeologist team.

At the time of writing this article, the City has agreed to not build a driving range on the Colored Asylum cemetery. They have also agreed to maintain the cemetery to ensure that it will not devolve into the dangerous location that it had been. Plans are being made to build the driving range on adjacent land. We will continue to monitor the situation.