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Humanitarian Exhumation at the Citadel's Johnson Hagood Stadium
By Jonathan M. Leader and Randy Burbage

Twenty-six Confederate sailors and marines, and the remains of a three-year-old child, were carefully recovered from under the floor of the Johnson Hagood Stadium last June and July of 1999. On November 12, 1999, they were reburied in the Soldier's Ground at Magnolia Cemetery, Charleston, South Carolina. How the people came to be buried under the floor of the stadium and how the Charleston community came together to rescue them is a tale of dedication, perseverance, and luck. It is also a story of community relationship and interdependency.

When South Carolina seceded from the Union, the Charleston Mariner's home donated their burial ground to the state for use as a military cemetery. It was used by the Confederacy until the capitulation of Charleston in 1865. The majority of...
the war dead in the area were sent to the larger cemeteries, such as Magnolia Cemetery Soldier’s Ground. But a significant number of Confederate and Union dead are still to be found in smaller, less centralized cemeteries scattered throughout the state. The Confederate Naval and Marine Cemetery was maintained by the ladies of Charleston. In 1922, the cemetery was spruced up by the addition of a fence made of white concrete pillars with black iron pipe rails and by the placement of an obelisk in the center of the grounds. The obelisk contained the names of the people who were known to be buried there. This information was derived by the ladies from the surviving headstones. This is an important point, as five separate acts of vandalism between 1865 and 1922 had destroyed a large number of the headstones. The ladies did the best they could with the information that they had. The obelisk also noted that there were “ten unknowns” and “four torpedo boatmen” from the H. L. Hunley also buried at the site.

The area around the naval cemetery was used as a fairground and livestock exhibit area for many years starting in the 1900s. Given its long use, it is unsurprising that the city would consider the fairgrounds as being a good area to locate a public stadium. The military cemetery was still clearly marked in the 1940s, when the decision was finally made to build the stadium. The city entered into negotiation with a developer, and an agreement was reached to have the cemetery moved to the west and the stadium built on the cemetery and adjoining grounds. It is at this point that the history becomes murky. It would appear that the developer may have been told that they could start the process by the city and “move the stones.” At any rate, the stones were moved to an unknown place or places, and the obelisk was relocated to Magnolia Cemetery Soldier’s Ground as agreed. Unbeknownst to the city, the graves were left behind.

The Hagood Stadium was completed in 1947.
The majority of work on the stadium was done by hand, very little in the way of heavy equipment was used. The girder supports were attached to floaters rather than pylons, which was a departure from normal engineering. The soft sands of Charleston are not stable and pylons sunk to great depths are usually used to provide support. The floaters were for the most part 5 feet x 6 or 7 ft. concrete pads roughly 28 inches deep. While clearly a design flaw in terms of safety in an earthquake prone location, the use of floaters proved to be a boon to the archaeology. There were no pylons extending through the burials. On the other hand, on at least four separate occasions it became clear that the workmen had unearthed the dead while preparing the in-ground molds for the floaters and poured the concrete directly on top of the skeletons.

The stadium was given as a gift to the Citadel, South Carolina’s Military University, in 1967. The Citadel staff had no idea that the stadium was on a cemetery or that any cemeteries had ever been in the area. In the early 1990s a group of local historians, re-enactors, civic organizations, and genealogical groups banded together as the Confederate Heritage Trust (CHT). The CHT, a non-political, non-profit organization, has as its mission the preservation of historic battlegrounds, camps, graves, and history of the Civil War. As part of its mission, it engaged in the registration and cleaning of sites in the Charleston area. There are repeated references to the Confederate Naval and Marine Cemetery in the news articles and histories of the time. The CHT, under the leadership of Randy Burbage, made it a point to look for the graves at the Magnolia Cemetery located 14 graves and recovered 13 bodies. The failure of the developer to move the bodies was no longer a supposition, it was now a fact.

Negotiations with the Citadel for the recovery of the remaining bodies took several years. The reasons for this were quite ordinary and understandable. The projected cost of the recovery from under the stadium was quite high. None of the groups, including the Citadel, had the cash in hand. The danger to the structure and the people doing the recovery was also high. Undermining an antique stadium with known structural defects is not the type of project one does without due consideration, study, and care. Last and certainly not least was the scheduling of the project. The Citadel is a military academy and university of high repute and community interaction. Many organizations, schools, and groups rely on the Citadel for facilities support. The stadium is in constant use.

An opportunity occurred in 1999 when the Citadel closed the stadium to accomplish much needed repairs. The SCIAA performed Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) tests of the stadium’s interior to show that there were burials still in place under the structure. The GPR results were positive. Coordinating with the Citadel, the SCIAA and the CHT,

See EXHUMATION, Page 6
The Governor’s School for Science and Mathematics students, Rachel Kopany and Elizabeth Lambert, volunteer on the project. (SCIAA photo by Jonathan Leader)

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the public and “dead” gates, also
were located early in the project. A
significant scattering of large broken
marble chips found under the 28
inches of fill dirt, which itself was
brought to the site from an unknown
location, suggests that the grave
markers were simply rent from the
earth and piled up in pieces by the
workmen. It seems very unlikely
that any have survived intact.

The first burial
was encountered the
first day. The sandy
soils of the site made
the identification of
gate shafts remark­
ably easy. A non­
denomina tional
service was held the
next day at the site
for the dead, and
then exhumation
commenced. It
rapidly became
apparent that the
burials were laid out
in an east-west
orientation and that
they were in ordered
rows. A number of
the burials went
under the walls and
floaters of the
stadium. In consul­
tation with building
experts and with the
permission of
General Grinalds,
President of the
Citadel, these
individuals were recovered. There
can be no doubt that additional
burials are still under the support
structure of the stadium in areas too
dangerous at present to work. The
stadium is scheduled for demolition
and rebuilding in the next several
years. SCIAA and the CHT are
scheduled to return at that time.

Four of the sailors were found as
pairs in single burials. The state of
the bodies and the historic documents
available made it possible to identify
these individuals as likely members
of the first crew of the H. L. Hunley.
The Hunley was the first submarine to
sink an enemy vessel in time of war.
Five of the first crew perished when
the vessel sank at its moorings at Fort
Johnson. Considered to be a secret
buried at Magnolia Cemetery in a
donated plot.

Reburial of 23 sailors, marines,
and a child took place on November
12, 1999 at the Soldier’s Ground at
Magnolia Cemetery. Fifteen horse­
drawn caisson with burial platforms
were used to transport the deceased
to the cemetery. The funeral march
started at the Charleston Battery and
was lead and escorted by Civil War
re-enactors in full
period uniform.
Many of the re-
enactors worked as
volunteers on the
project. In addition,
quite a few of the re-
enactors had assisted
as an honor guard
for the reburial of the
55th Massachusetts
soldiers recovered in
1989, during an
earlier SCIAA project
at Folly Beach, South
Carolina.

The reburial of
the sailors and
marines from the
stadium was well
attended. Several
thousand people
lined the four-and­
half-mile parade
route to the cem­
etery. At the
cemetery, over 2,500
people were in
attendance for the
burial service. It
was
a positive and moving experience,
showing what can be accomplished
when the public and the professional
community come together for the
common good.

The first Hunley crew was
reburied in a separate ceremony on
March 25, 2000. An article in the next
Legacy will provide photographs.