

**AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE PARK
ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS
AND PRESERVATION STRATEGY**

by

Francine W. Bromberg
and Steven J. Shephard



**Alexandria Archaeology Publications
Number 39**

Alexandria Archaeology
Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia
Copyright 1992

ALEXANDRIA CITY COUNCIL

Patricia S. Ticer, Mayor

William C. Cleveland, Vice Mayor

Kerry J. Donley

T. Michael Jackson

Redella S. Pepper

Lonnie C. Rich

David G. Speck

CITY MANAGER

Vola Lawson

SUMMARY

Alexandria Archaeology conducted an investigation of a one-acre parcel of land situated on the east side of Holland Lane. Purchased by the Baptist Cemetery Association in 1885, this land lies within the property slated for development into the African American Heritage Park. An important interpretive aspect of the park revolves around the late nineteenth century black cemetery. Until the recent archaeological work, however, the actual occurrence of burials and the presence of any graves on the property remained conjectural.

City archaeologists set out to address these questions by excavating selected parts of the site. The archaeological investigation resulted in the recovery of coffin parts, a burial vest and nine grave markers on the property. City employees removed all the gravestones, with the exception of a massive brick base, to the Payne Street Storage Facility.

In addition, Alexandria Archaeology uncovered definitive evidence of burials. The outlines of one coffin and the edge of another were discovered approximately four feet below the current ground surface. These discoveries confirm the highly significant nature of the site as one of Alexandria's earliest African American cemeteries. Indeed, the park may contain the oldest surviving evidence of any black cemetery in the City. From documentary accounts, we know that two earlier nineteenth century African American cemeteries were established within Alexandria, near the corner of S. Washington and Church Streets, and near the Lee Center. Today, however, neither cemetery is marked with gravestones. Burials may not survive at either location.

The archaeological work consisted of the excavation of eight trenches in three of the four environments of the cemetery: the bluff top, the slope and the low terrace. No investigations were conducted in the wetland area. The work established that intact burials and other cemetery features remain in the terrace section of the site. The slope and wetland areas have the potential to yield additional cemetery features. On the bluff top, scattered materials from the cemetery may survive near the bottom of eight to ten feet of fill.

Alexandria Archaeology did not conduct any excavations outside of the cemetery portion of the park. However, the area north of the cemetery may also have archaeological resources, and others may be present in the south and east sections of the park. An 1877 Hopkins map depicts several structures in the northern area, which was later used by the railroad. Foundations of these buildings and other archaeological resources associated with their use may still exist within the park. In addition, the oldest surviving railroad bridge in Alexandria stands at the northeast corner of the park. This structure serves as a reminder of the significance of the railroad to black labor history, as well as to the economic, transportation and military history of the City and the state. These additional resources are an inte-

gral part of the park. Viewed in conjunction with the cemetery, they help us to achieve a more complete understanding of the history of the park and the nature of the "West End" village during the late nineteenth century.

Recommendations: All work in the park should be compatible with the historic character of the Hooff's Run Stone Railroad Bridge. The structure is protected by a listing on the City Register of 100 Year Old Buildings Located Outside the Historic District. The Bridge has also been determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Stabilization and modification of the bridge shall be conducted in accordance with its historic character, and conform to the standards of the Secretary of the Interior and the City of Alexandria.

Archaeological investigation should occur prior to all development which could disturb or destroy the burials and other historical resources within the African American Heritage Park. Destructive actions include any ground-disturbing activities, such as grading, planting, tree stump removal, placement of utilities, and digging foundation trenches or post holes for the construction of a boardwalk, platform, building or shelter.

Park: Research into the historical uses of the property should precede archaeological investigation in the park areas outside of the cemetery. If significant resources are found, appropriate preservation actions are necessary. All significant historical resources, such as buildings, foundations, or artifacts, should be preserved either in place, or through proper recording and removal by archaeologists.

Cemetery: Within the cemetery, archaeological actions must be taken to insure that development activities do not disturb burials or destroy other cemetery features, such as grave markers. On the terrace and slope, archaeologists must excavate all areas of disturbance prior to development. In the wetlands, additional archaeological work will be necessary prior to development to determine the presence or absence of burials; if burials are found, all wetland areas of disturbance will also need excavation before development. On the bluff top, where evidence of disturbed portions of the cemetery may occur under the fill, an archaeologist should monitor any ground disturbing activities exceeding six feet in depth.

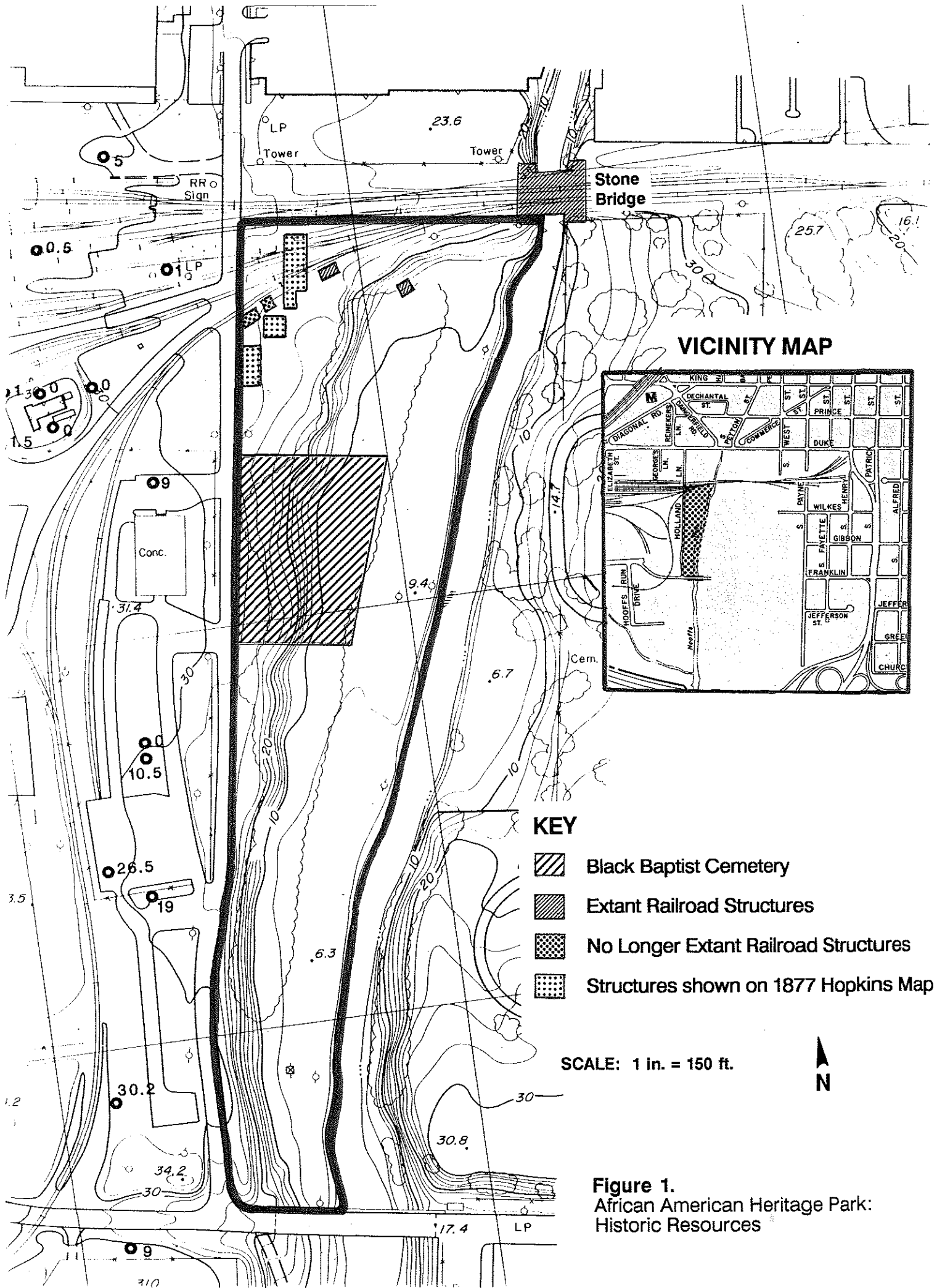
INTRODUCTION

Recent work by Alexandria Archaeology has shed light on some intriguing questions related to a one-acre parcel of land on the east side of Holland Lane. Purchased by the Baptist Cemetery Association in 1885, this property is registered as an archaeological site with the state (44AX136). The land lies within the property slated for development into the African American Heritage Park (Figure 1). It consists of a bluff top parallel to the street with a steep, artificially created slope abruptly leveling off at the terrace and floodplain areas of Hooff's Run.

An important interpretive aspect of the park revolves around the late nineteenth century black cemetery. Until the recent archaeological work, however, the actual occurrence of burials and the presence of any graves on the property remained conjectural. An important interpretive aspect of the park revolves around the late nineteenth century black cemetery. Until the recent archaeological work, however, the actual occurrence of burials on the property and the presence of intact graves remained conjectural. Planners needed this information to avoid disturbance of burials during development and to aid in the interpretation of the park.

City archaeologists set out to address these questions by excavating selective parts of the site. The archaeological investigation resulted in the recovery of coffin parts, a burial vest and nine grave markers. In addition, Alexandria Archaeology uncovered definitive evidence of burials. The outlines of one coffin and the edge of another were discovered approximately four feet below the current ground surface. These discoveries confirm the highly significant nature of the site as one of Alexandria's earliest African American cemeteries.

The sections of the park outside of the cemetery may also contain historical resources. Viewed in conjunction with the cemetery, these resources help us to achieve a more complete understanding of the history of the park. This paper provides an overview of the current status of our knowledge on the history and archaeology of the park and cemetery. Based on this information, the paper concludes with recommendations for further work to insure preservation of burials, cemetery features, and other historical resources within the park.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Through a review of historical documents, an overview of the late nineteenth century history of the African American Park has begun to emerge. Figure 1 indicates the locations of the documented historical features.

In 1856, the Orange and Alexandria Railroad completed construction of a stone bridge to carry a single track across Hooff's Run. The railroad ran along the northern boundary of the park property. By 1871, a new track serving the Baltimore & Potomac Railroad necessitated an addition to the bridge. This bridge, the oldest surviving in Alexandria, stands at the northeast corner of the park.

In 1877 William J. Holland owned a large tract just south of the railroad property. The 1877 G.M. Hopkins map depicts Hooff's Run bisecting Holland's land; the western section is included within the park's boundaries. Three buildings stood on Holland's land near the northwest corner of the park. The use of the buildings is not presently known; however, the large one was constructed of stone or brick while the two smaller structures served as frame stables or sheds. Holland later conveyed the land to George Keys. Eventually Norfolk and Southern utilized the entire area as part of their railroad operations. Two railroad structures (a small concrete building and a loading platform) stand on the property today, while several other structures were present until recently.

In 1885 Keyes conveyed a one-acre parcel of his property to **Thomas Mann**, who served as General Superintendent of the Baptist Cemetery Association. On November 13, 1885, this association filed papers of incorporation in Fairfax County, stating "That the object of said cemetery is to furnish a place for the interment of the dead of all persons who shall purchase lots...." In addition to Mann, several others, identified as representatives "of the Silver leaf (Colored) Society of Alexandria, Virginia," signed the document: **Henry L. Webb, Charles H. Lee, ----- R. Tayer and Allan Robinson**. Chataigne's Alexandria Directory of 1888-89 records Webb as a black laborer living at 216 N. Henry Street and Lee as a black laborer living at 1401 King Street. Robinson, Tayer and Mann are not listed, although many other Robinsons are in the directory.

To date, researchers have not succeeded in locating additional documentation relating to the cemetery association and its founders, nor have historical records of burials surfaced. Thus, legal documents establish ownership of the property by the Baptist Cemetery Association in the late nineteenth century but do not provide evidence that interments actually occurred there. In 1976, Walter Sanford observed three gravestones on the property. As noted by Mr. Sanford, the stones record the deaths of **Abraham Hunter** on October 22, 1891, at the age of 37; **Sarah Hunter** on December 24, 1896, at the age of 82; and **Julia Ann Washington** on February 21, 1890, at age 52. Information about one of these

individuals again comes from Chataigne's Directory of 1888-89, which lists Abraham Hunter as a black laborer residing at 228 N. Payne Street.

The recorded presence of these gravestones certainly suggested that interments had occurred on the land purchased by the cemetery association. However, knowledge of more recent activities on the property challenged this certainty, for the area east of Holland Lane was the site of extensive landfilling and grading during the mid-twentieth century. Given the landscape changes known to have occurred on the property, the stones could have been moved considerable distances from their original locations or could even have represented random inclusions in the soil used in landfilling activities. The haphazard orientation of the stones and their locations on low lying land near Hooff's Run tended to support the latter alternatives.

By 1985, only Abraham Hunter's gravestone remained evident on the site. The stones memorializing Sarah Hunter and Julia Washington were no longer visible, and it was thought that they had been removed or vandalized. The orientation of the single headstone did not conform to what would have been expected for a typical burial. Graves are traditionally aligned on an east/west axis with the headstone placed at the western end so that the deceased "faces" east toward the rising sun. Lying flat on the ground at the base of a steep bluff, Abraham Hunter's headstone was clearly not in its original position.

Current plans call for development of the cemetery as part of the African American Heritage Park. The City's future role as manager of the park has prompted Alexandria Archaeology's interest in understanding the history of the property and in preserving the area's heritage.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDINGS

Archaeological investigation of the site began in the fall of 1990 when Tellus Consultants, Inc., surveyed the area as part of the Carlyle Project. The Tellus archaeologists again recorded Abraham Hunter's headstone and also noted the presence of four other grave markers: two headstone bases; a footstone with the initials A.H., presumably for Abraham Hunter; and a dressed stone fragment with a mason's mark. Tellus mentioned a possibility that the footstone could have been located in its original position.

However, the surface survey could not adequately address the important questions relating to the presence of burials on the property. To deal with this issue, Alexandria Archaeology returned to the site in the spring and fall of 1991. As shown on Figure 2, City archaeologists directed the excavation of eight trenches on the bluff top, slopes and lower terrace elevations of the cemetery; we did not conduct investigations in the wetlands. Because this work focused on questions relating to the presence of the burials, we did not dig any areas of the park outside of the cemetery.

The first six trenches were excavated in May with the help of a backhoe and operator provided by the developers, the Oliver Carr Company, in partnership with the Norfolk Southern Corporation. These trenches were placed on the top and slopes of the bluff to determine the depth of the fill soil, to search for intact soil levels beneath the fill, and to look for evidence of burials. In November, a seventh trench was hand-excavated in the low terrace area of the site with the help of volunteer Skip Sigman. We placed this excavation unit to cross just west of the location of Alexander Hunter's footstone, to investigate the possibility that burials remained at the lower elevations of the site. In December, we expanded this trench in both length and depth with the help of a backhoe and crew provided by the City's Department of Transportation and Environmental Services. Under the direction of the archaeologists, the City crew also used a small bulldozer to scrape away the fill and overburden in the low terrace areas of the site in an attempt to uncover additional gravestones and grave shafts.

The excavations on the bluff top (Trenches 1, 2 and 5) revealed from eight to ten feet of rubble and fill overlying naturally deposited clay. The topsoil and upper soil levels in this area had apparently been graded and removed; the extensive landfill activities subsequently created the existing topography on the site. Artifacts included in the fill, such as bottles, tires and rusted metal, date to the first half of the twentieth century and, as expected, suggest that the filling occurred in the mid-1950s or early 1960s. Only Trench 2 in this area yielded evidence of burial activities. At a depth of about ten feet below the surface, near the top of the naturally deposited clay, we discovered pieces of wood planking, part of a man's vest (Figure 3), and a wood and metal coffin handle (Figure 4).

Figure 2.
Black Baptist Cemetery:
Locations of Archaeological Trenches
and Cemetery Features

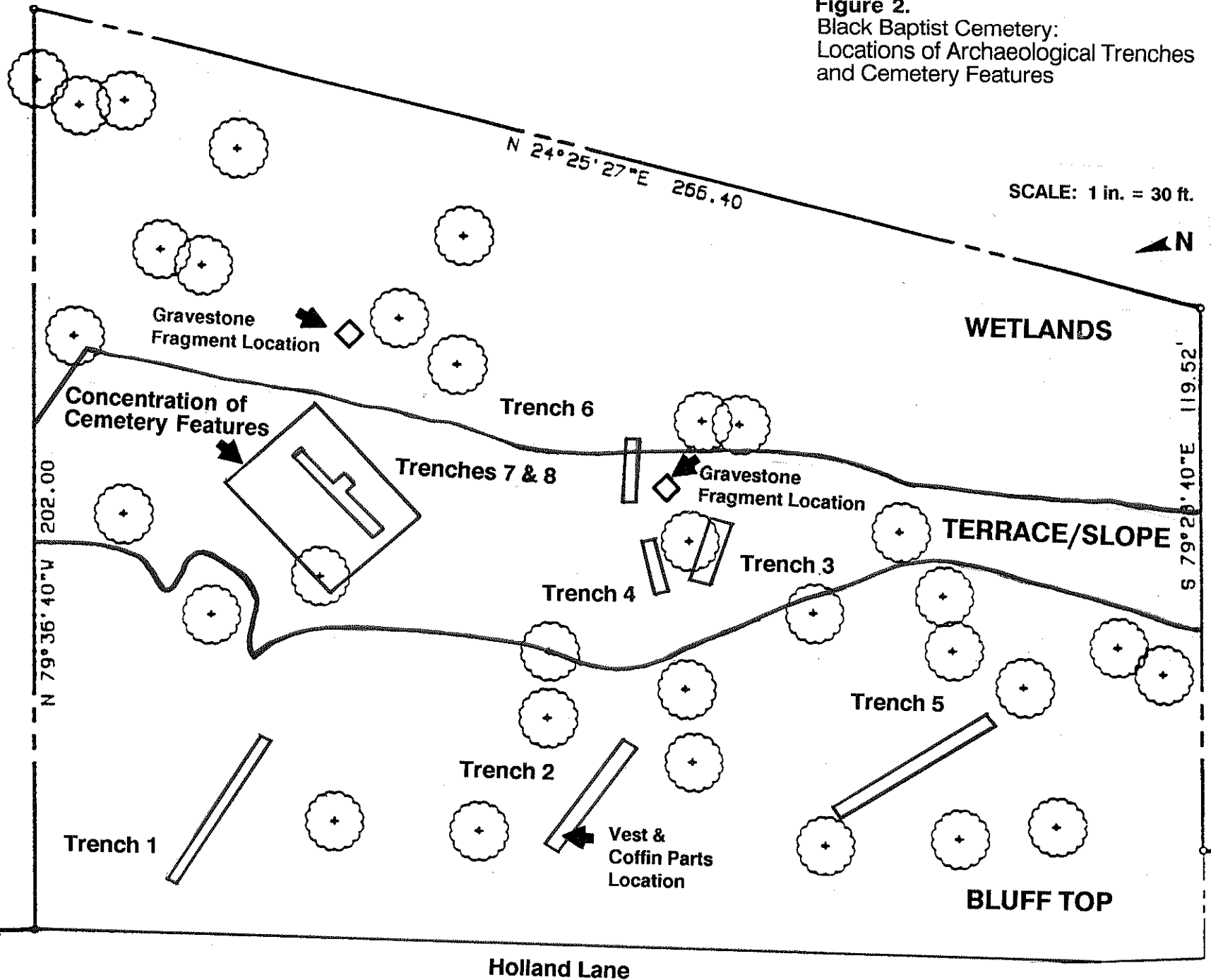




Figure 3.
Fragment of Vest - Found 10 Feet Below Ground Surface in Trench 2

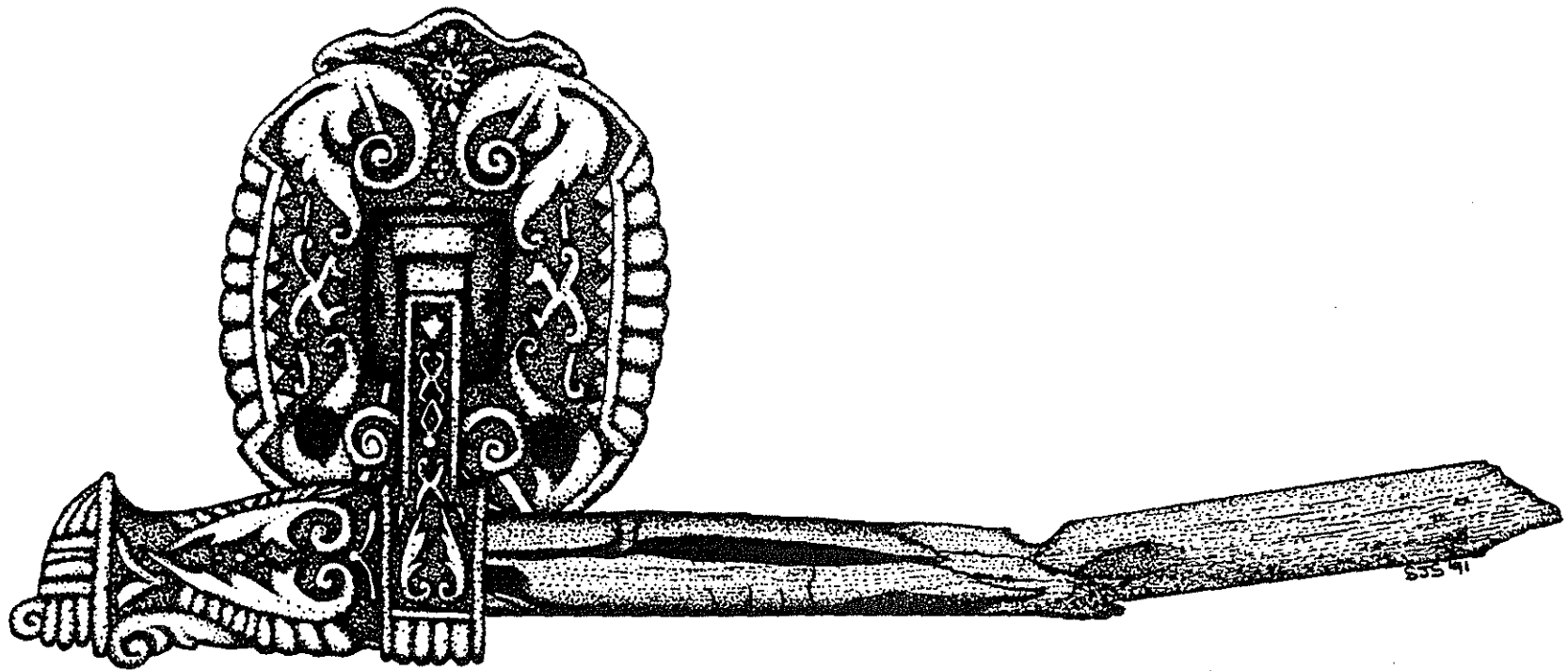


Figure 4.
Coffin Handle - Found 10 Feet Below Ground Surface in Trench 2

These items are probably the remains of a burial disturbed during the grading and landfilling activities. Thus, it is unlikely that any graves remain undisturbed on the current bluff top portion of the site because of the extensive grading. Nevertheless, evidence of burials (coffin parts, clothes, and perhaps even human remains) may be scattered within the fill, probably near the interface of the fill and underlying clay at depths of eight to ten feet below the ground surface.

On the slope, the excavations revealed one to six feet of fill which create a slope over the natural soil levels (Trenches 3, 4 and 5). The topsoil was still evident, signifying that grading had not occurred in this area. Human burials may therefore remain undisturbed in the natural soil deposits under the fill.

The investigations in the lower terrace areas of the site also revealed intact soil layers. This area yielded a concentration of cemetery features (Figure 5). The excavations resulted in the rediscovery of the gravestones of Julia Washington and Sarah Hunter. Thus, the stones had not been removed or vandalized but had been covered with three to six inches of soil which eroded from the nearby bluff. In addition, two other grave markers were recovered. A massive brick and mortar base (Figure 6), also buried by erosion of soil from the slope, was discovered about six and a half feet due west of the original location of Abraham Hunter's footstone, and a previously unreported gravestone fragment was found during a walkover of the floodplain area.

In addition, the investigation revealed the definite presence of burials on the property (Figure 7). Remains of one coffin and the edge of another were found buried about four feet below the current ground surface. The coffins are very decayed and collapsed. The alignment of Coffin No. 1 between the brick base and Abraham Hunter's footstone suggests that the three are related and that the coffin belongs to Abraham Hunter. The state of preservation of the human remains is not known, since a court order and state archaeological permit are required prior to exhumation.

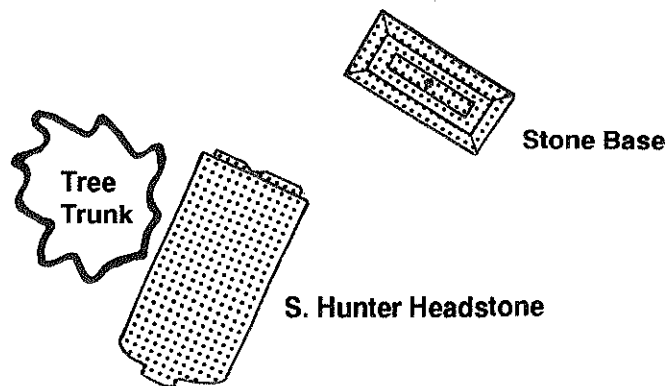
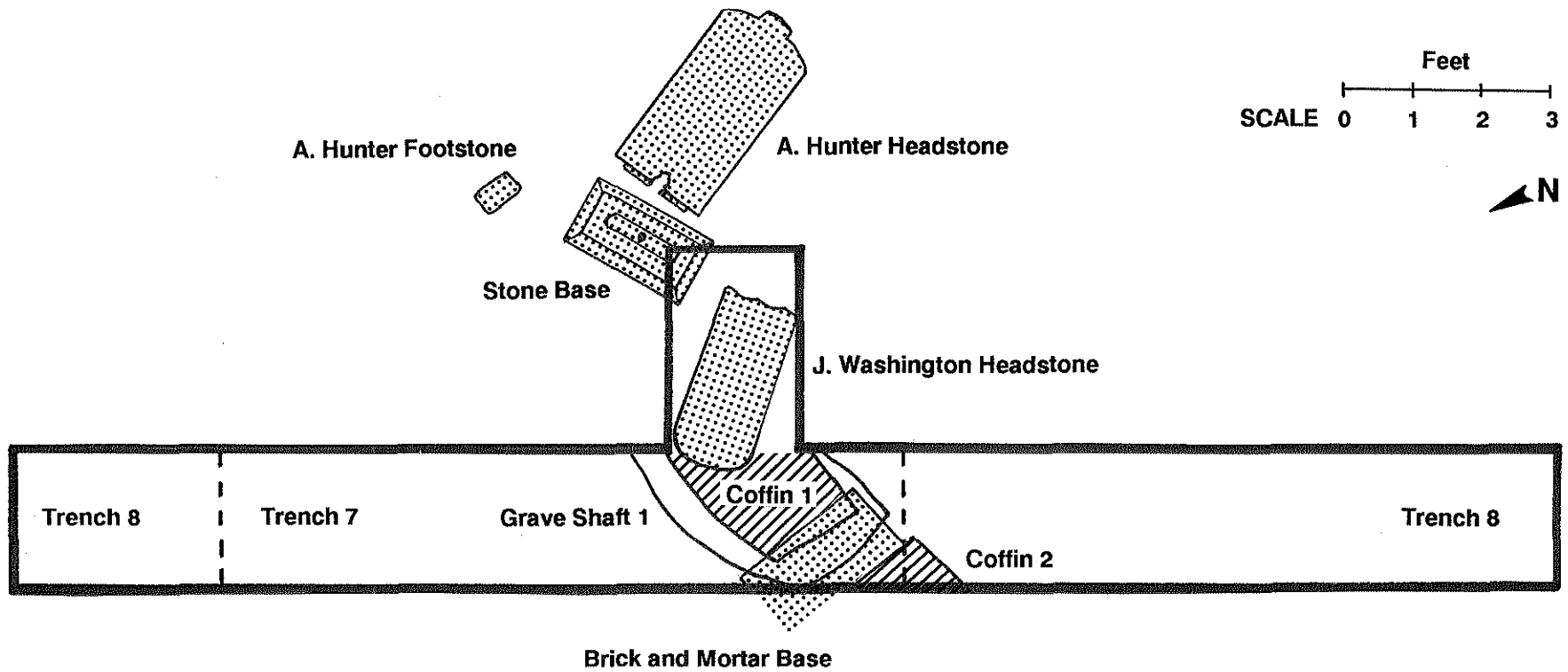


Figure 5.
 Black Baptist Cemetery:
 Archaeological Trenches and Cemetery
 Features in Terrace Area



Figure 6.
West End of Trench 7
Showing Brick and Mortar Base (right) and Julia Washington's Headstone (left)



Figure 7.
Center of Trench 8 - Coffin Outline

CONCLUSIONS

These investigations have provided the City with valuable information to aid in the protection and interpretation of this historical site. The recent work has brought to nine the number of partial or whole grave markers recovered from the property. Included are the headstones of Abraham Hunter, Sarah Hunter and Julia Washington; two gravestone fragments, one with a mason's mark; a footstone bearing the initials, "A. H.," presumably referring to Abraham Hunter; two stone bases; and the recently discovered brick and mortar base. To prevent vandalism of the stones, City employees have removed all but one of these markers to the Payne Street Storage Facility; the brick base, too heavy to move, was left on the site. These artifacts are thus available to aid in the design and historic interpretation of the African American Heritage Park.

Most importantly, the investigations clearly demonstrate that human burials remain intact approximately four feet below the ground surface in the lower elevations of the cemetery. The known grave sites cluster under a group of trees which appear to offer an appropriate setting for a small interpretive area on the site. The investigation allows for the proper placement of Abraham Hunter's grave markers on the site. These discoveries confirm the highly significant nature of the site as one of Alexandria's earliest African American cemeteries. Indeed, the park may contain the oldest surviving evidence of any black cemetery in the City. From documentary accounts, we know that two earlier nineteenth century African American cemeteries were established within Alexandria near the corner of S. Washington and Church Streets and near the Lee Center. Today, however, neither cemetery is marked with gravestones. Burials may not survive at either location.

The area outside of the cemetery also contains historical resources. An integral part of the park, these resources help us to understand better the history of the park and the nature of the "West End" village during the late nineteenth century. The 1877 G.M. Hopkins map depicts several structures north of the cemetery. Later, the railroad built structures in this area. Foundations of these buildings and other archaeological remains associated with their use may still exist within the park. In addition, the oldest surviving railroad bridge in Alexandria stands at the northeast corner of the park. This structure serves as a reminder of the significance of the railroad to black labor history and to the economic, transportation and military history of the City and the state.

RECOMMENDATIONS

All work in the park should be compatible with the historic character of the Hooff's Run Stone Railroad Bridge. The structure is protected by listing on the City Register of 100 Year Old Buildings Located Outside the Historic District. The bridge has also been determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Stabilization and modification of the bridge shall be conducted in accordance with its historic character and conform to the standards of the Secretary of the Interior and the City of Alexandria.

Archaeological investigation should occur prior to all development which could disturb or destroy the burials and other historical resources within the African American Heritage Park. Destructive actions include any ground-disturbing activities, such as grading, planting, tree stump removal, placement of utilities, and digging foundation trenches or post holes for the construction of a boardwalk, platform, building or shelter.

Our current knowledge of the archaeology and history of the park allows us to distinguish five resource management areas, three in the cemetery and two in the remainder of the park (Figure 8):

Area A - Cemetery Terrace and Slope: Intact graves exist in one section of the terrace and could occur throughout the area, approximately four feet below the current ground surface. Because natural soil levels were encountered under one to six feet of fill, the slope area also has high potential to yield burials. Gravestones could be scattered in both of these areas, buried under the fill or under a few inches of erosional debris from the nearby bluff.

Recommendation: Within the cemetery, archaeological actions must be taken to insure that development activities do not disturb burials or destroy other cemetery features, such as gravestones. Therefore, prior to development of the park, Carlyle project archaeologists must excavate all terrace and slope areas where ground disturbance is to occur.

Area B - Cemetery Wetlands: Alexandria Archaeology did not conduct any investigations in the wetlands. While it is less likely that burials would have been placed in this area, it is nevertheless possible. Oral history accounts and a 1929 Alexandria Gazette article suggest the possibility that interments actually occurred in the floodplain and subsequently eroded out of the banks of the creek. The article reported the presence of human remains and coffins in Hooff's Run.

Recommendation: If plans call for ground disturbing activities in this area, additional archaeological work will be necessary prior to development to determine the

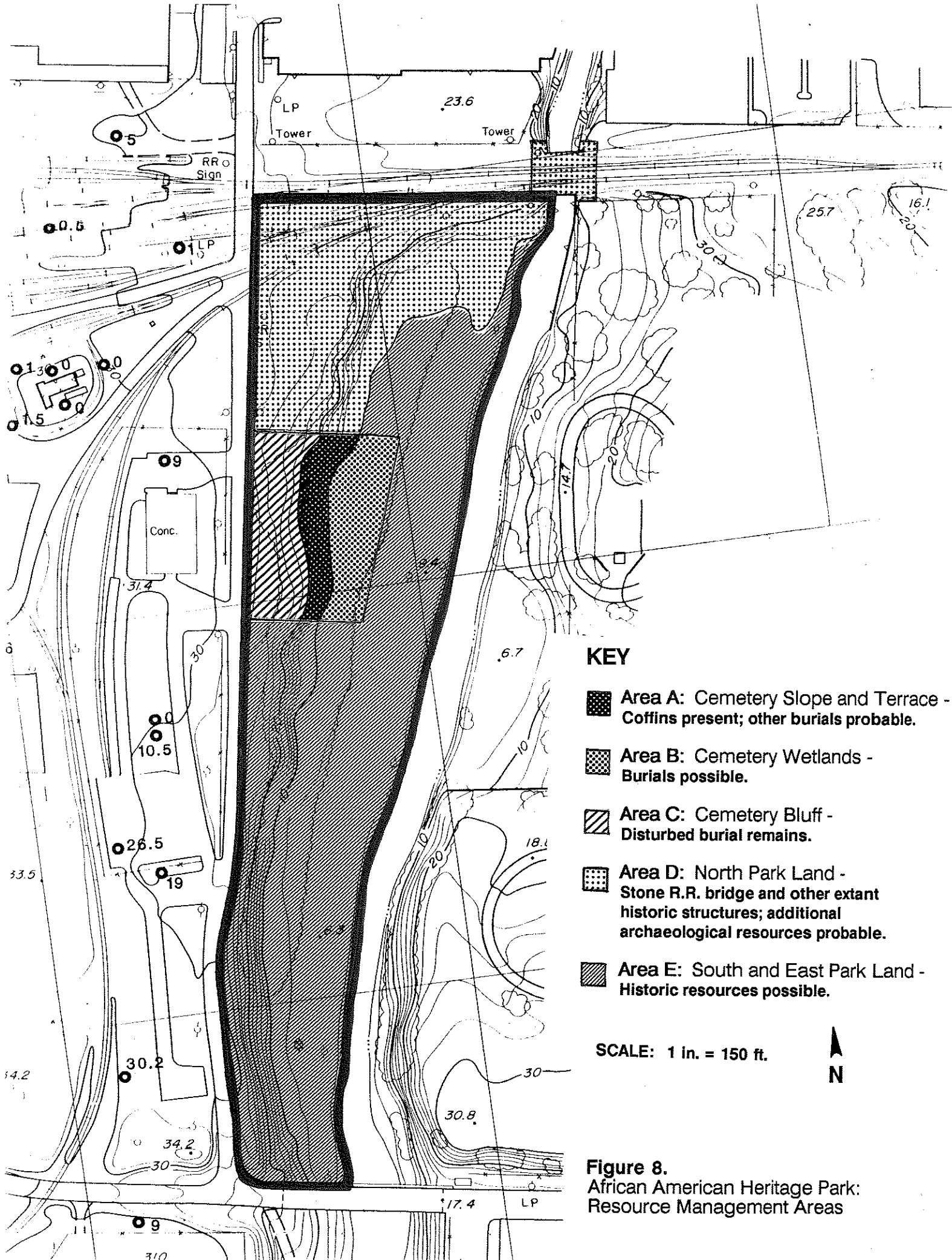


Figure 8.
African American Heritage Park:
Resource Management Areas

presence or absence of burials. If burials are found, all wetland areas where ground disturbance is to occur will also need excavation before development.

Area C - Cemetery Bluff: Given the extent of the grading and filling which occurred parallel to Holland Lane, intact graves probably do not remain on the bluff top. However, as indicated by the recovery of the random coffin parts and vest, evidence of the cemetery could be scattered throughout this area, probably near the bottom of eight to ten feet of fill.

Recommendation: If plans for development call for ground disturbing activities exceeding six feet in depth on the bluff top, an archaeologist should monitor the work to record the presence of any cemetery evidence and to recover any associated artifacts, such as coffin parts.

Areas D and E - North, South and East Park Land: Alexandria Archaeology did not conduct excavations in the park outside of the cemetery. However, extant railroad structures and the highly significant railroad bridge are present in the north park land. The 1877 Hopkins map suggests that other significant historical features, such as building foundations and artifacts, may remain buried in this northern area. No information is currently available relating to the possible presence of historical resources in the east and south park areas.

Recommendation: Research into the historical uses of the property should precede archaeological investigation of these areas. If significant resources are found, appropriate preservation actions are necessary. All significant historical resources, such as buildings, foundations, or artifacts, should be preserved either in place, or through proper recording and removal by archaeologists.