

Virginia American Water 12-Inch Water Line, Phase I Archaeological Investigation and Archaeological Monitoring, St. Mary's Cemetery and Freedmen's Cemetery

Alexandria, Virginia

Public Summary

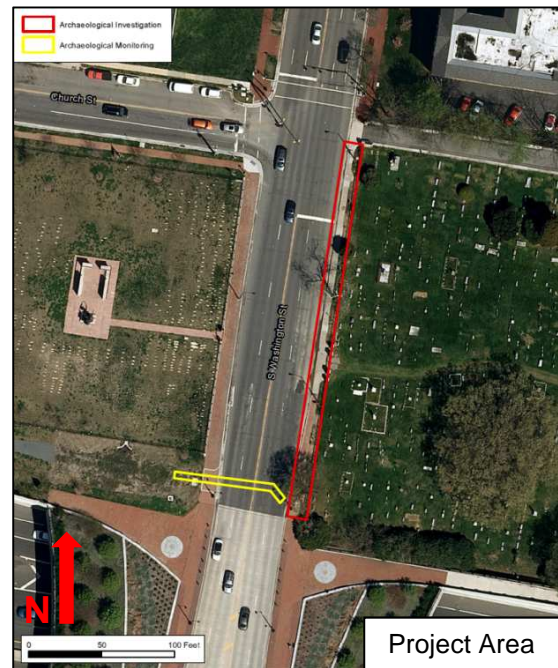
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Introduction

Virginia American Water (VAW) recently installed a 12-inch diameter water line from an existing capped water line underneath South Washington Street north of the bridge over I-495 to an existing water line underneath Church Street in Alexandria, Virginia. Given the location of this project, adjacent to Freedmen's Cemetery and St. Mary's Cemetery, archaeological survey and pre-construction trenching were conducted to ensure that the project did not impact any graves, marked or unmarked.

The original proposed route for the water line was underneath the eastern side of South Washington Street, just off of the curb. Given that previous archaeological investigations under the western sidewalk of South Washington Street exposed burials associated with Freedmen's Cemetery, the City of Alexandria was concerned that unmarked graves associated with St. Mary's Cemetery could extend underneath the sidewalk and possibly underneath South Washington Street itself.

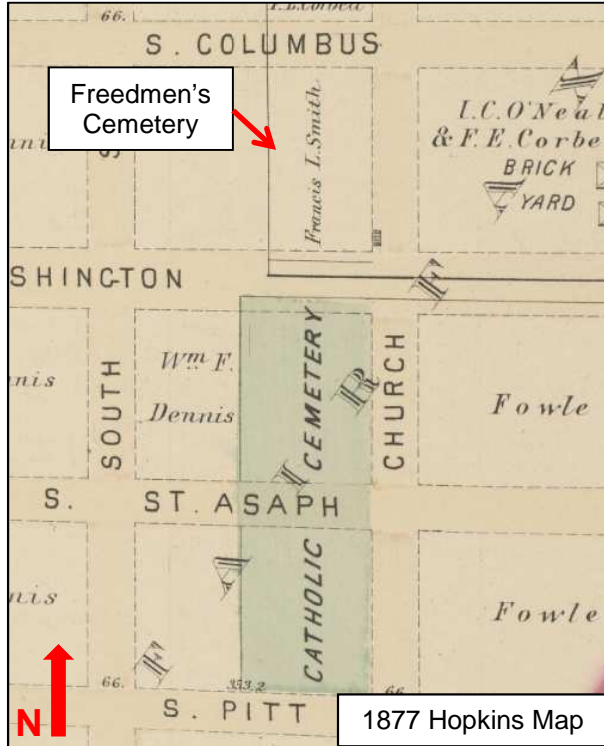
To support VAW, AECOM conducted an archaeological survey in October and November of 2014 between St. Mary's Cemetery's western fence and the eastern curb of South Washington Street to determine the potential for the proposed water line to impact unmarked graves. The survey documented two unmarked graves extending west of the fence, indicating a high potential for graves to exist within the route of the proposed water line, and the project was rerouted to the south and west of Freedmen's Cemetery. In 2017, AECOM conducted archaeological monitoring of a preconstruction trench across South Washington Street in the event that unmarked graves were encountered. The investigations were conducted in accordance with the *City of Alexandria Archaeology Standards*.



Background

Due to the influx of African-American refugees (referred to at the time as "contrabands") from the Confederacy into Alexandria during the Civil War, and high death rates among the new arrivals due to disease outbreaks, the Federal government set aside property at the corner of South Washington and Church streets specifically for use as an African-American burial ground currently known as Freedmen's Cemetery. The cemetery was quickly laid out and began to

receive burials as early as March 7, 1864. It featured a white fence, wooden shingle grave markers, and a caretaker's shed. During the period of federal management of the cemetery from its founding until 1869, the names of 1,711 individuals interred in the cemetery were recorded what is known as the *Book of Lists*.



After 1869, the cemetery fell into private hands and entered a prolonged period of neglect, culminating in the construction of a gas station on the cemetery grounds in 1956. Work associated with the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Improvement Project led to the purchase of the cemetery by the City of Alexandria in 2002, and the cemetery was eventually turned into the *Contrabands and Freedmen Cemetery Memorial*, with the formal dedication occurring in on September 6, 2014.

St. Mary's Cemetery is Alexandria's oldest active cemetery and the oldest Catholic cemetery in Virginia. It includes the original 1 acre of land donated by William Thornton Alexander in 1795 and saw its first burial in 1798. In 1810, the Catholic congregation purchased the Trinity Methodist meeting house and rectory on Chapel Alley, an action that likely saved the cemetery. At that time the

church was located within Alexandria's city limits, and the Common Council had ruled in 1804 that no new burial lots or cemeteries could be opened within the city limits. However, since the cemetery was located outside of the city limits, it continued to operate and grow. St. Mary's Cemetery continues to receive interments up to the present day, though the original grounds have been substantially enlarged since the 1790s. It doubled in size between 1855 and 1877 and expanded again in the early twentieth century.

At the time the Freedmen's and St. Mary's Catholic cemeteries were created, the south end of Washington Street consisted of an unimproved path terminating on a bluff above the Hunting Creek floodplain just south of the project area. Though streets and city blocks were plotted in this vicinity by the late eighteenth century, they remained largely undeveloped throughout the nineteenth century since this area occupied the sparsely inhabited southern outskirts of Alexandria. South Washington Street was widened and sidewalks, curbs, and gutters installed in the 1930s, an action which pushed back the boundaries of Freedmen's Cemetery and St. Mary's Cemetery and definitely resulted in burials from Freeman's Cemetery ending up underneath the street and western sidewalk. Additional improvements to South Washington Street were made during the construction of the current Woodrow Wilson Bridge over the Potomac River in the 2000s.

Archaeological Investigations

While no unmarked burials were encountered within the constructed route of the water line, the 2014 archaeological investigation for the original route did encounter two unmarked graves and the foundation of a cemetery monument associated with St. Mary's Cemetery. The rest of the features documented were more modern, generally consisting of iron fence post footers, utility trenches, or unknown twentieth century disturbances.

One of the graves, designated Feature 10, is located about 50 feet north of the bridge over I-495. The top of the grave shaft was revealed during the excavation of Test Unit 5 and found to extend underneath the cast iron fence that runs along the western edge of the cemetery. The grave shaft, which was not excavated, measures approximately 2 feet 5 inches wide and extends about 4 feet 9 inches west from the fence. While the top of the grave shaft had been cut by a utility line, it does not appear that the utility trench extended deep enough to have impacted any human remains.

The second grave, designated Feature 13, is located about 70 feet north of the bridge and was found in Test Unit 4. Only a very small sliver of the grave shaft, about 2 feet 6 inches long by 4 inches wide, was revealed in the test unit. Similar to the first grave, this grave has also been impacted by a later utility trench, but it was also impacted sometime in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century by the excavation of a trench or pit filled with coal and slag. Given the alignment of the shaft, the grave also appears to extend underneath the cemetery fence. As with Feature 10, Feature 13 was not excavated after it was identified.



The excavation of Test Unit 2, located about 90 feet north of the western entrance gate, encountered Feature 12, which consists of numerous pieces of broken concrete casement or foundation of a cemetery monument; perhaps an obelisk or large cross. The concrete was found within a trench also found in two other test units, which likely is the remains of an older drainage ditch. The broken concrete may have been put in the ditch when it was filled, possibly when South Washington Street was widened in the 1930s.

After approval of the rerouting of the waterline around the south and west of Freedmen's Cemetery, AECOM conducted archaeological monitoring in 2017 of excavation of a trench across South Washington Street to ensure that construction of the waterline would not impact any unmarked burials associated with either St. Mary's Cemetery or Freedmen's Cemetery. No unmarked graves or mortuary items were observed in the pre-construction trench. The trench only encountered abandoned utility lines and disturbance related to construction of South Washington Street. As such, AECOM recommended clearance for the installation of the water line.

Conclusions

The 2014 archaeological investigations found that unmarked graves associated with St. Mary's Cemetery extended underneath the fence and to the edge of the sidewalk along the east side of South Washington Street. It was determined that there is a high probability that additional unmarked graves associated with St. Mary's Cemetery can be found underneath the sidewalk and possibly underneath the street, such as previous investigations documented at Freedmen's Cemetery. As such, the project was rerouted around Freedmen's Cemetery. Since no features having the potential to represent unmarked graves and no mortuary items were observed in the pre-construction trench dug in the summer of 2017, the project was allowed to proceed. Construction of the waterline wrapped up in October 2017.