

Fort Ward Historical Park Archaeology
Summary of Stage 1 and 2A Findings & Stage 2B Survey Strategy
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City of Alexandria, Virginia
Office of Historic Alexandria/Alexandria Archaeology

The City of Alexandria contracted with The Ottery Group to conduct Stage 1 Archaeological investigation at Fort Ward Park to identify unmarked graves and cultural resources, as well as to test effectiveness of various methods. Stage 1 focused on four areas with the highest possibility of containing: 1) unmarked graves based upon ground penetrating radar data, headstone locations, oral history and documentary sources; and 2) cultural resources associated with two significant structures—the Shorts House Lot (possibly the oldest African American home) and the School/Chapel/Residence-- and other locations in the “maintenance yard” (historically on Shorts/Adams/Clark/Casey/Belk land). Ottery completed this work in early 2011, and subsequently finished a Stage 2A investigation in mid-2011 to identify and protect graves and cultural resources within proposed drainage corridors. The findings are summarized below and yielded directions for preservation treatments and the Stage 2B Survey Strategy to assess the remainder of the park for purposes of planning resource protection and interpretation.

Graves

Findings

- A total of 23 graves were identified—2 of which had headstones (Virginia Fitzhugh and W.E. Javins); 1 grave to the north of Clara Adams’ marked grave is reported by Adrienne Washington to be Robert Adams; 19 graves are unmarked. One of the unmarked graves had been desecrated, and only half of the coffin bottom survived. One buried dog or pig was also discovered. [Further identification is needed to make a final identification.]
- The first stages of work have not identified boundaries of either the Jackson Family Cemetery or The Old Grave Yard. More graves may be present. There are no graves west of the ones identified in the Old Grave Yard, so one boundary appears to be known. A post hole provides some evidence that a fence may have existed on a western edge. The Adams Family Cemetery has two graves, and no other information has been received that more people were buried here; additional excavation did not occur beyond the two graves of Robert and Clara Adams.
- None of the GPR locations or excavated trenches in the maintenance yard, other than the Adams’ signatures, identified any graves as reported from oral history to the north and south of the Young House (School/Chapel).
- Subsurface field investigation is the only way to confirm the presence or absence of a grave.
- New oral history information and documents pointed to additional areas to investigate for graves.

Stage 2 Strategy

- Use hand, and where possible machine, to identify more graves and boundaries of the Jackson Family Cemetery and the Old Grave Yard. Tree roots and historic fabric of Fort Ward prevent full-scale excavation, but attempts should be made to identify as many graves as possible.
- Complete investigation of 2 GPR signatures which could not be examined earlier and re-examine possible location of Amanda Clark grave.

- Investigate a portion of the Robert McKnight Lot for graves based upon documentary information. Be aware of the potential for graves in the Craven Lot for graves while conducting survey with shovel test holes and units/trenches. Examine land to the west of the Oakland Baptist Cemetery, originally part of the cemetery, for graves, and north based upon oral information of descendants.

Cultural Resources

Findings

- Shorts House Lot: Foundations of the house and artifacts identified the core of the lot. Little was found on the eastern portion of the lot.
- School/Chapel/Residence: Extensive excavation uncovered a northern addition of the residence ca. 1940s. No evidence remained of the southern and eastern foundations.
- Shorts/Adams/Clark/Casey/Belk Lots/Maintenance Yard: Excavation yielded few artifacts indicating that the top soil does not have archaeological value. However, the subsurface had not been altered so that resources such as graves, foundations, trash pits and privies can still be preserved. Only one such resource, a wood-lined pit/privy was identified that was on the Casey/Belk land.

Stage 2 Strategy

See treatment Recommendations below.

Effectiveness of Investigative Methods

Findings

- GPR has utility primarily to limit field investigation to specific places when identifying graves. This saves time and funding, but does not provide sufficient information that all graves have been discovered, since there are a high percentage of false positives and many graves can be missed.
- Shovel Test Holes are useful for covering a wide area with minimum intrusion to the landscape and little time. At short intervals (25-30 feet), they can provide artifact and soil data to establish potential resource areas identified by age, activity and density and produce sensitivity maps for planning.
- Metal detection does have use. Given the long-term use of the park, however, many targets may be more contemporary items rather than historic artifacts.
- Trenching by hand or mechanical means gives the best view of the subsoil in order to identify graves, foundations, trash pits, post holes of fences and structures, and other such features.

Stage 2B Strategy

Use all four means as appropriate for predicted resource and soil conditions. See below for treatments

Treatment Recommendations by Area and Stage 2B Survey Strategy

- Jackson Family Cemetery: Identify additional graves and boundaries. Protect and designate Sacred Area. Plan interpretive and protection methods. Strategy includes studying relationship of the one northern grave to the others, which are inside the mapped cemetery boundaries, and determination of whether another burial cluster is present.

- Old Graveyard: Identify additional graves and boundaries. Investigate GPR signature under road not examined in Stage 1. Protect and designate Sacred Area. Plan interpretive and protection methods. Special attention should be given to understanding the outlying location of the desecrated grave and coffin identified in Stage 2A in relation to the Old Graveyard. Study relationship between the graves in this burial ground and those in Oakland Baptist Cemetery, since the rows do not appear continuous or on the same alignment. Explore the connections of Cornelia Spence and Virginia Fitzhugh to the Seminary and Episcopal High School to understand why they were buried here.
- Adams Family Cemetery: Protect and Designate Sacred Area. Plan interpretive and protection measures.
- Designate as Sacred Area the land identified by the Young family north and south of their home as having graves/headstones. A park plan could identify additional excavation as a priority to identify graves and/or the area can be retained as sacred without finding grave locations. However, if any project is proposed, archaeological excavation is needed to certify the absence of graves or resources. Protect. Plan interpretation and protection methods.
- Designate as Sacred Area the land identified by descendants in 2011 as having many graves north of the Oakland Baptist Cemetery, including on either side of the ravine. Additional interviews can provide more specific information. Conduct sensitive testing in portions of this area to identify some graves. A park plan can state whether additional excavation is wanted to identify more graves and/or whether the area can be designated sacred with Stage 2B information. Protect. Plan interpretation and protection methods.
- Dog/pig burial on the Clark/Smith/Collins Lot: Protect. Complete identification. Plan interpretation and protection methods.
- School/Chapel/Residence: Test to identify western wall (outside maintenance yard). Protect. Plan interpretive and protection methods.
- Remainder of maintenance yard: Field check 1 GPR signature not fully investigated at Stage 1. Examine possible Amanda Clark grave area more. Protect identified Belk Privy; Plan interpretation and protection methods. Preserve untested parts of this area which all have potential of graves or other subsurface resources such as foundations, trash pits, and privies. If any work is contemplated (drainage, interpretation), strip top soil to check for graves and resources, and if present, refocus project to another place without resources.
- Shorts House Lot: Protect. Consider additional investigation for research purposes. Plan interpretation and protection methods.
- Remainder of Park
- Assessment of resources spatially: Shovel Test Holes across park at 30 foot intervals to develop map of resource density, type, age, sensitivity.
- Assessment of known structures from maps/photos: Test Units across predicted structural foundations for approximately 23 structures.
- Metal detection in selected areas for Civil War resources and sites.
- Possible grave locations based upon documentary information: Sensitive testing across the Craven Lot, portion of Robert McKnight Lot and western portion of the original Oakland Baptist Cemetery Lot, aided by additional oral history.