

ARCHEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

AT

THE POOR FARM CEMETERY

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND

SUMMER, 1987

by

Diane Lee Rhodes

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
DENVER SERVICE CENTER  
APPLIED ARCHEOLOGY CENTER  
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

AUGUST, 1987

The following report was written to fulfill NPS obligations under Amendment 1 to Cooperative Agreement CA1200-5-0004 between Montgomery County, Maryland, and the National Park Service, August, 1987.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We owe a great debt of gratitude to the more than 50 volunteers who participated in the project; it could not have been done without them. Some of the volunteers, from various chapters of the Maryland Archeological Society, came long distances to contribute their talents, their expertise and a great deal of hard work. Some of the volunteers were from local service clubs. Many of the volunteers were inexperienced in archeological excavation, but because of their desire to learn, their dedication, and their sincere interest they contributed greatly to the project. Several Maryland archeologists also contributed their time, skills, and energy to the project. Their help was invaluable.

A number of Montgomery County officials were also instrumental in bringing the project to fruition. A few of those involved include Joanne Robertson of the District Attorney's office, Robert McGarry, head of the Transportation Division, and E. James Sayer, Gloria Kratz, and Jim Boston of the Department of Facilities and Services. Employees of the City of Rockville also provided a great deal of assistance with background data, and with the permitting process.

Maryland State Archeologist Tyler Bastian and Maryland State Administrator of Archeology Richard Hughes, active participants throughout the project, provided us with continual support and encouragement. Richard Hughes made important contacts with regional archeological personnel and groups, handled announcement of the project, and coordinated responses from volunteers. Tyler Bastian and his associate Dennis Curry graciously provided equipment, personnel, and excellent advice. We are indeed fortunate to have been able to draw upon the talents of these concerned and committed individuals.

The author would also like to extend a personal thank you to Douglas Comer and the staff of the Applied Archeology Center for their continued support and encouragement throughout the project.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND:

Removal of the historic Montgomery County Poor Farm Cemetery was necessitated by the proposed construction of an extension to Ritchie Parkway, and by the proposed development of land adjacent to Monroe Street and I-270. Since the Almshouse and Poor Farm had been in continuous operation since the late 1700's, archeological excavation of this pauper's cemetery offered a marvelous opportunity to study a poorly documented segment of population through time. Early in 1986, a research design (Vrabel 1986) was drawn up, and plans were made for a formal, full-scale excavation of this historically significant site.

Over the next year or so, discussions among archeologists from the State of Maryland, various Montgomery County officials and National Park Service staff generated major changes in project scope, responsibilities, and time frame. Eventually, personnel commitments and funding restraints necessitated a smaller scale operation than originally planned. In the spring of 1986, a five acre area immediately adjacent to the Monroe Street extension along I-270, thought to encompass the historic cemetery, was cleared of vegetation. A ground-penetrating radar (GPR) survey was conducted by Bruce Bevan of Geosight, Pitman, New Jersey (Bevan 1986). Bevan's survey located nine different areas containing subsurface anomalies, all but two of which were thought to contain burials.

## PROJECT PLANNING, 1987:

During the first two weeks of July, the author did historic background research for the project. Research was conducted at the Maryland State Hall of Records, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, several Montgomery County repositories, the Montgomery County Historical Society, the Rockville Public Library, and American University. Invaluable assistance was provided by personnel at these facilities, and at Peerless Rockville, a local historic preservation group.

During this time, the necessary environmental permits were obtained, the amendment to the cooperative agreement negotiated and signed, and heavy excavating equipment procured. Other details such as repairs to sedimentation fences and a culvert on the access road, procurement of portable restroom facilities, and recruitment of volunteers were also resolved. Project activities were coordinated with personnel from the Maryland Historic Trust, Maryland Geological Survey/State Archeologist's Office, various Montgomery County offices, the City of Rockville, and the Denver Service Center Applied Archeology Center.

The major remaining problem was location of the graves. Because this was a pauper's burial ground, only a few markers were ever placed there. Wooden markers, hand lettered by Poor Farm inmates, had disappeared. The area had long been used for local dumping. Previous attempts to clean up some of the garbage with heavy equipment had removed most of the metal markers once used to mark a few of the twentieth century graves. During the 1985 and 1986 planning sessions, a number of depressions were identified as probable grave sites. However, in order to run the radar

survey equipment over the uneven terrain, it was necessary to clear the area of brush, stumps, and small trees. The depressions were obliterated or covered over during this work. Untimely heavy rain made work more difficult for the heavy equipment. Disturbance and mixing of up to 18 inches of topsoil occurred in some areas. Garbage and organic materials from the surface were incorporated into the topsoil.

Because the exact locations of the burials were unknown, a testing program was designed wherein backhoe trenches would be run at a 45 degree angle off true north, at designated intervals, across the project area previously defined by the County and GPR surveyed in 1986. Traditionally, burials are oriented east/west and placed in north/south rows. The 45 degree angle was chosen to maximize our chances of encountering north/south rows. These trenches were also oriented to intersect the echo clusters identified by the 1986 radar survey. Since no tree removal was planned for this portion of the project, locations of the backhoe trenches had to be adjusted slightly in the field to avoid the numerous trees in this forested area.

#### HISTORIC BACKGROUND:

The Montgomery County, Maryland, Almshouse was built in 1789 to provide for the County's indigent. Management of the facility was vested in a corporation known as the Trustees of the Poor<sup>1</sup>. The Almshouse was built on about 200 acres of land originally part of the land patent known as "Resurvey on Part of Exchange and New Exchange." This acreage was located west of the city of Rockville on the Seven Falls Road. Monroe Street was later extended from Rockville to the Seven Falls Road, bisecting the Almshouse lands. The scanty historical documentation suggests that for at least part of the lifetime of the Poor Farm, the largest portion of the land was in cultivation. Between five and ten acres were reserved for the Almshouse and the nearby outbuildings. It appears that another five acres were occupied by the wooded, stony hill top where, traditionally, paupers were buried in unmarked graves (Rockville Sentinel 14 January 1910).

Over the 170 years of its existence, land was acquired and sold, but the basic operations of the Almshouse, later known as the County Home or the Poor Farm, changed remarkably little. The cleared lands were cultivated to supply food for the inmates and farm employees, to provide feed for livestock, and to produce surplus crops such as corn, wheat, and hay for sale. Supplementary funds for food, medical care, and clothing, as well as the overseer's salary, were provided by the County.

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<sup>1</sup> The Works Progress Administration Historical Records Survey (1939:220) gives the date as 1789; Cissel (1986:2) suggests that "a 'Alms House' was not built at an early date. . . and. . . According to Noma Thompson's book, p. 25, he could find no evidence of an institution previous to 1835".

In the mid-1800's, laws were passed providing for appointment of the Trustees of the Poor by the County Commissioners. In 1922, the County Commissioners assumed control of and responsibility for the Poor Farm, and the corporate entity known as the Trustees of the Poor was abolished.

The Almshouse never housed a large number of people. Over the years, the maximum number of residents appeared to range between 20 and 30. Occasionally, the Almshouse sheltered migrants, hitchhikers, or others in need of short-term temporary quarters. While the residents of the Poor Farm were indigents, they varied in age, sex, and race. Some were elderly, lacking either the family or the means to support themselves. Other were crippled or otherwise handicapped; and both mentally ill and mentally retarded were also placed at the home. Census records suggest that the population of the farm was composed of fairly equal numbers of black and white inhabitants.

In 1959, the Almshouse, no longer needed to provide for the County's poor, was torn down. Very few records remain to describe the operations of the Almshouse, the farm, or the cemetery. It is assumed that the cemetery was used for the burials of the indigent, both from the Almshouse and the surrounding county. We do know that, over the years, numerous burials were made somewhere on the property. The exact number is unknown. However, County Commissioners' records for the period from 1898 to 1920 document that the County was spending from \$200 to \$400 per year for "Pauper's Coffins". Amounts paid to individuals (mostly carpenters or employees of one of the funeral homes) ranged from \$3.00 to \$7.00. Using an average price of \$5.00, there may have been as many as 60 burials per year, or 1200 burials over this single 20-year period. It could be argued that some of the paupers were buried on private land or in established cemeteries, but this appears unlikely. Obviously, the burials were from various areas of the county as well as from the residents of the Almshouse. It was reported that paupers from other areas, especially from Washington, D.C., were also brought to this area for burial in the recent past. An unknown number of burials were removed and reburied elsewhere when the highway now known as Interstate I-270 was extended northwest/southeast through the property.

#### DISCUSSION:

Because Bevan's radar survey provided the primary on the ground orientation for the 1987 testing program, and covered the area delineated by Montgomery County for archeological excavation, the first task was to locate the landmarks and datum markers used or placed by Bevan during the 1986 project (figure 1). Location of Bevan's markers, blue flagging on nails or pins in the ground, was extremely difficult. A dense cover of secondary growth consisting of poison ivy, green briar, raspberry bushes, Acacia, and other shrubs and trees now blanketed the area. Only a few of his original markers were found. Because the area was so heavily wooded, Bevan's references to specific trees (figure 1) had to be remeasured. That is, references to "2 trees" or "1 ft diameter trunk" could have referred to any number of trees in a given area.

Several days were spent cutting brush, and taping distances to re-establish markers so trenches could be run through the echo clusters defined by the earlier survey, and so features could be recorded relative to the earlier work. Several areas, including the echo clusters, were tested with a probe, and flagged for later investigation. Initial data suggested there were a number of burials in the areas defined by Bevan.

Backhoe trenching was begun July 29 in the center of the site, just south of the field road (figure 1). A lateral enlargement was made at the center of this trench (numbered 1S) to intersect Echo Cluster D. A second trench (2S) was run through Echo Cluster C, about 45 feet east of trench 1S. No burials were found in either trench. There were, however, disturbed soils and a rather distinctive odor in the Echo Cluster D segment of trench 1S. This disturbed area was later hand dug down to sterile soils, but no bone or other evidence of burials was found here.

Trench 2N was excavated next, just north and across the field road from trench 2S. While this area had not been identified by Bevan's survey as a potential burial(s), surface features and probe testing suggested their presence. Three of the four burials uncovered in trench 2N were excavated archeologically. Their removal was complicated by heavy tree roots and very compacted soils. The shallow burials, averaging about 2 1/2 feet below present ground surface, were oriented east/west, in a general north/south "row". Contrary to popular tradition, the heads were placed at east end of the grave, and the feet to the west. The fourth burial, situated at the northeast edge of the trench, was flagged for the undertaker to remove. This burial was bisected laterally; only fragments of wood and nails from the coffin were observed, and no bone or cloth was found. Because this burial was considerably deeper than the others (almost 5 feet below present ground surface), oriented more on a north/south axis, and appeared to involve considerably more ground disturbance, it is probably more recent than the adjacent burials in this trench.

Trench 3N was dug north of the field road just west of Trench 2N. Thirteen burials were uncovered in this trench. As predicted, the graves were oriented east/west, placed in north/south rows. In this area, however, the heads were to the west and the feet to the east. Average depth below present ground surface was less than 2.5 feet. Because the graves had not been dug into the red silty subsoils, none of the grave shafts showed a strong outline of differential, mixed soils before the collapsed coffins were encountered. The tan mottled soils in the grave shafts were somewhat less compacted than the surrounding matrix, but were not different in color or appearance.

Bevan's radar survey had identified two echo clusters in the central portion of the site, about forty feet west of trench 3N (figure 1). His data suggested that echo cluster A held the most potential for graves. Moreover, local informants suggested that most of the burials interred since the 1940's were in this section of the site. This information was

supported by the aerial photography, and by observations of the lush secondary growth suggestive of recently disturbed soils. We did not want to excavate these recent (as late as 1983) burials archeologically, nor did we want to disturb them with the backhoe, so the backhoe trenching was oriented to run along the very edge of echo cluster A and to intersect echo cluster B (trench 6N). At least 3, and possibly up to 5, burials were intersected by the backhoe in the central and northern portions of trench 6N. These burials were characterized by uncollapsed wood coffins, synthetic cloth, coffin hardware post-dating the 1940's, and "green" bone (recent, greasy-appearing bone). These burials were flagged for the undertaker, and the trenches backfilled. Another short trench (6A N) was placed to intersect Echo Cluster B. A second short trench (6B N) was run nearby when 6A disturbed a subsurface beehive in a large tree stump.

Excavation of a short trench (11N) just west of an old road trace leading north from the field road was halted when recent burial(s) were uncovered. No indication of older graves was found in any of the trenches in this area.

Local undertakers suggested that the older burials may have been made in the area now obliterated by Interstate 270. George Snowden, Sr. of Snowden's Funeral Home in Rockville removed a number of burials from this vicinity during construction of the highway. Unfortunately, no records were found to substantiate the age of the burials, their location, or the precise number removed. An information request filed with the State Highway Department has not yet been filled. Trench 9N was excavated to test this portion of the site (figure 1). This trench was extended outside of Bevan's survey line, close to the Monroe Street diversion along I-270. It also intersected an old road trace. The trench was culturally sterile.

Trenches were run through all the echo clusters identified by Bevan in 1986. Burials were found only in trenches 2N, 3N, 6N and 11N. With the exception of echo clusters A and B in the central portion of the site where it is known that recent burials have been made, the majority of the burials were not picked up by the ground-penetrating radar (figure 1). There are several possible explanations for this. First, the soil profiles in the area, with their differing densities and composition, contain a number of features that might appear as anomalies. That is, upper levels of heavy, dense clay containing gravels overlaid gently undulating layers of silt and sands. Often a concentration of large rocks and gravels was found in the interface between these two strata. Echoes 2, E, F, and G were clearly stratigraphic in origin. Secondly, holes from downed trees, heavy concentrations of tree roots, and buried trash from clearing activities may have further confused the readings.

Because the backhoe was available to us only for a two week period, some hard choices had to be made in the field as to how much area was to be tested, and which areas were to be tested most extensively. The location and extent of the trenches were based on several factors. First, most of the site was heavily forested, and no tree removal was planned for this project. Second, topography was varied. Third, the trenches needed to

intersect the echo clusters. Because of these limitations, the backhoe trenches often deviated from a straight line at a 45 degree angle. The spacing, the orientation and the trench length and depth varied across the site (figure 1). It was assumed that burials would have been placed most often near roadways where access to burial sites was easy. Twentieth century photographs and tree size document that the area south of the field road was a cleared cultivated field until the last few years. Newspaper accounts and deed records suggest that throughout most of the period of the Poor Farm's existence, most of the area was cultivated farmland, with 5 or so acres reserved for the Almshouse and its outbuildings, and 5 acres in uncultivated woodland. It is unlikely that the burials would be placed in land reserved for cultivation. A 1910 newspaper article reported that "among the stumps in a corner of the woods, under unmarked mounds of yellow earth, sleep those who have died in the County Home" (Rockville Sentinel 14 July 1910). In addition, prior to initial clearing of the site, depressions thought to be graves were observed in the area where trenches 2N and 3N were run. Based on analysis of these factors, it was decided to concentrate the trenching north of the field road, with a few selected tests south of the road. Areas south of the field road where local informants remembered recent burials (less than 50 years old) were flagged for the undertaker, and were not trenched. Trenches were also oriented to intersect areas along two historic road traces entering the wooded portion of the site, one at the west end and the other in the center.

The excavated skeletal remains and all associated artifacts and samples were delivered to the Anthropology Department at George Mason University for future analysis prior to reinterment. Soil samples are currently undergoing analysis for soil pH; upon completion of the testing, these samples will also be sent to the University. This report will be expanded, at a future date, into a final report which will also include the analysis done by George Mason University. Sections in the expanded report will include background/history, field methods, discussion of findings, and conclusions. Field notes will be copied onto acid-free paper and forwarded both to the University and to the State of Maryland. Photographs will be labeled and, along with a photo log, sent to the University in support of the bone and artifact analysis.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS:

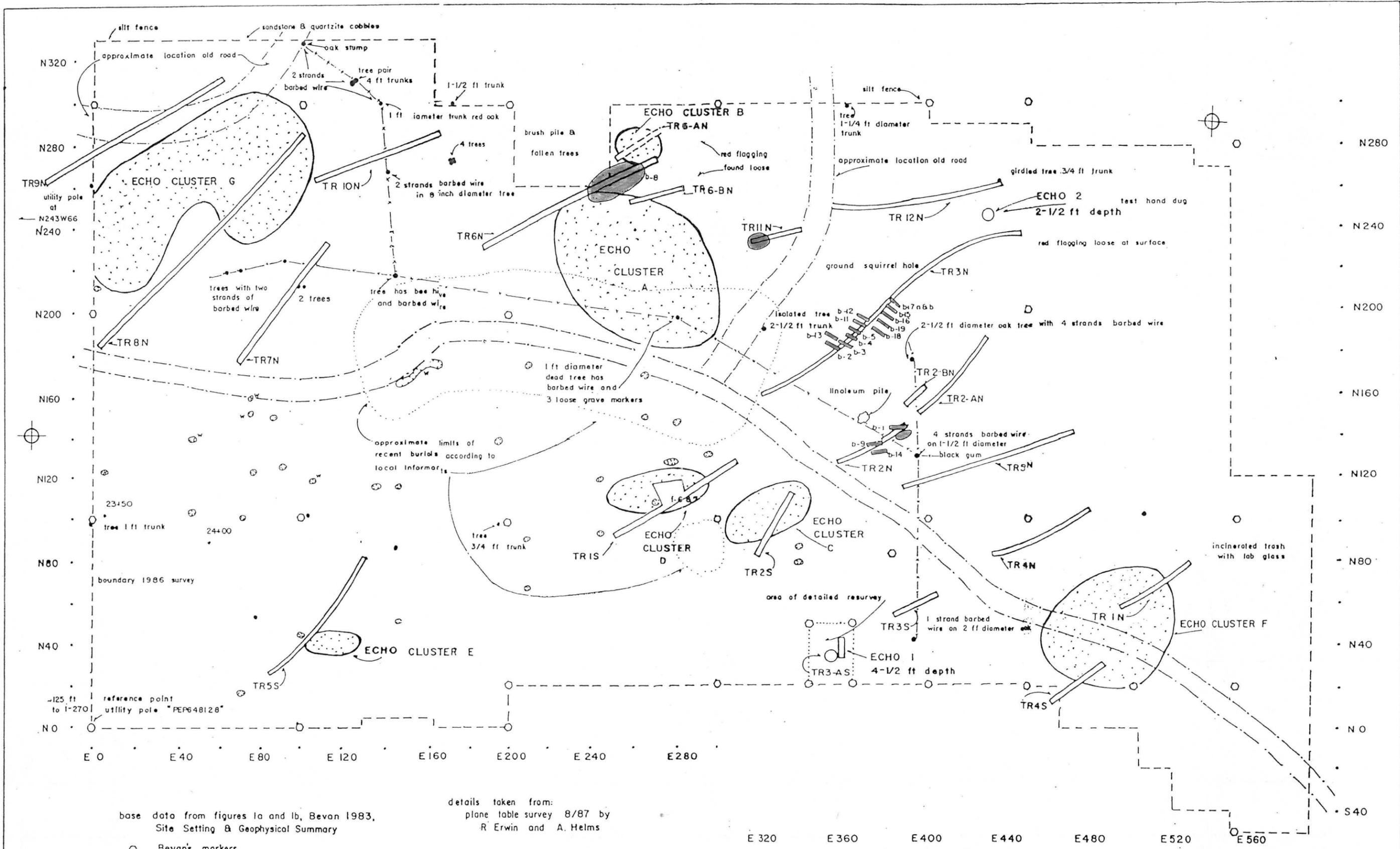
Twenty-one trenches, totalling approximately 1314 feet in length, and averaging 2 feet wide and from 4 to 6 feet deep, were excavated and backfilled during the two week period. Most of the fifteen burials excavated archeologically were intact, or nearly so. It appears that there were two distinct periods of burial represented by the findings; the burials in trench 2N appear to be slightly older, and in poorer condition than those in trench 3N. However, based upon tentative field identification of fragments of clothing, dental work, and nail and screw types, it is likely that both sets of excavated burials post-date 1890. Those skeletal materials that were reburied to await the undertaker probably post-date World War II. While we know eighteenth or nineteenth

century burials were found, far more grave goods and differential burial patterns were discovered than expected. Future analysis of these variations should provide us with a striking picture of the individuals interred in this pauper's cemetery.

The moderately poor condition of the less than 100-year old wood coffin pieces and bone from trench 2N suggests that older burials may be in such poor condition that locating the burials would be very difficult and the deteriorated condition of associated remains such that their analytical value would be minimal. Tentative field analysis of the soil pH suggests a fairly acid soil which would contribute to deterioration of bone and other organic materials. However, there is such a wide range of variation in preservation influenced by such things as slope, soil pH, ground water, freezing and thawing, rodents, etc. that the presence of older burials in the area cannot be discounted. In the absence of a complete excavation of all of the area suspected to contain burials, a procedure much beyond the limitations imposed by the funding and time made available for fieldwork, we cannot state with certainty that absolutely no burials of more than 100 years of age are present in the project area.

There are several areas of the site where recent burials were noted or suspected. These areas have been marked on the enclosed map (figure 1). The areas were also flagged in the field, and discussed with the undertaker contracted by Montgomery County to remove the remaining bodies. It is clear that we were only able to sample a portion of the site, and that backhoe trenches run through part of the site at 40 to 60 foot intervals may have missed a large number of individual burials, particularly if they were not placed in some sort of systematic groupings. It may well be also that some of the older graves were removed by construction of the Interstate, or, that they lie in the echo A area, and have been disturbed by more recent burials. Doubtless numerous graves remain in the area. Based on the rather limited information from local informants and from historic records, it appears that a relatively large number of internments were made in the Poor Farm Cemetery over its almost two centuries of existence.

Burials were found in only two (A and B) of the nine echo clusters identified by the radar survey. This relatively poor percentage may be due to several factors. First, unlike small family burial grounds where radar has been very successful in identifying the graves, the Poor Farm Cemetery area has evidently undergone a great deal of ground disturbance over the years, including overlapping burials from different periods. Past ground clearing activities may have created pockets of compacted/filled soils. Secondly, the geology of this area has highly contrasting soil types. Heavy, compact clays and gravel lenses overlie looser banded silts and sands which appear in an undulating pattern anywhere from 2 to 6 feet below present ground surface. The undulating nature of these sand/silt strata may be reflected differentially by the radar survey. Third, because the area is heavily wooded, roots and rotted stumps mark breaks in the natural subsurface strata.



- base data from figures 1a and 1b, Bevan 1983,  
Site Setting & Geophysical Summary
- Bevan's markers
  - tree (only a few shown; width meas. at chest ht.)
  - ◊ depression; w\*contained water in 1986
  - ⊕ burials

details taken from:  
plane table survey 8/87 by  
R Erwin and A. Helms



DRAWN RHOODES TECH. REVIEW DATE 10/87	SUB SHEET NO.  FIGURE 1	TITLE OF SHEET ARCHEOLOGICAL BASE MAP MONTGOMERY COUNTY POOR FARM CEMETERY INVESTIGATIONS JULY-AUGUST 1987 ROCKVILLE MD.	DRAWING NO.  PKG. NO. 1 SHEET 1 OF 1
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Auth - FBI - [unclear] RBH

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MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST

OCT 21 1987



# United States Department of the Interior

## NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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IN REPLY REFER TO:

A26 (DSC-EAF)

To: Assistant Manager, DSC-TEA

Through: Chief, Applied Archeology Center, Eastern Team, Denver Service Center

From: Diane Lee Rhodes, Archeologist, Section B, Western Team, Denver Service Center

Reference: Archeological Investigations at the Montgomery County, Maryland, Poor Farm Cemetery, No Package Number, Cooperative Agreement Number CA1200-5-0004, Amendment 1

Subject: Trip Report, July 5, 1987 through August 16, 1987

MSY

### Purpose

I traveled to Rockville, Maryland, to conduct historic research on and archeological investigations at the Poor Farm Cemetery, Montgomery County, Maryland. This work was accomplished under a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and Montgomery County. During this time, I also met and coordinated project activities with personnel from the Maryland Historic Trust, Maryland Geological Survey (State Archeologist), various Montgomery County offices, the City of Rockville, and the Denver Service Center Applied Archeology Center.

### Discussion

During the first two weeks of this trip, I did historic background research on the Poor Farm. Research was conducted at the Maryland State Hall of Records, National Archives, the Library of Congress, several Montgomery County repositories, the Montgomery County Historical Society, the Rockville Public Library, and American University. Invaluable assistance was provided by the staff of these facilities, and by Peerless Rockville, a local historic preservation group. Since the exact location of the burials was unknown, and apparently undocumented, particular attention was paid to historic photographs and maps which might aid in their location. Historic aerial photographs were available for the area; various views dating from the 1930's and later were compared to assess changes in topography and land use. Maps showing proposed site development were procured from state, city, and county offices.

During this time, I also spent a great deal of time working to resolve a number of administrative and logistical problems presented by the project. By the last week in July, the necessary environmental permits were obtained, the amendment to the cooperative agreement negotiated and signed, and heavy excavating equipment procured. Other details such as organization of volunteers, acquisition of portable restroom facilities, repair/replacement of sedimentation fences, and repairs to a culvert on the access road were also accomplished.

A testing program was designed for the area to maximize the chances of encountering burials. Under this plan, backhoe trenches were run at a 45 degree angle off magnetic north at intervals across the site. They were also oriented so as to intersect the anomalies (echo clusters) identified in ground penetrating radar surveys conducted in 1986. These echo clusters and several areas suspected to have burials were probe tested and flagged. Areas known or strongly suspected to contain recent burials were avoided. Shovel tests were done in two areas.

Backhoe trenching was begun July 29 in the center of the site, just south of a small field road. When trenching of the echo clusters failed to produce any indication of burials, trenching activities were moved to a different spot where depressed areas suggestive of graves had been observed in the past. Seventeen burials were uncovered in two trenches just north of the field road, towards the center of the site. These burials were oriented east/west, in north/south rows. These burials were excavated archeologically.

Five additional burials were uncovered in two trenches adjacent to Echo Cluster A, west of the earlier excavations. Judging from coffin hardware, uncollapsed coffins, synthetic fabric, and the newness of the bone, these graves were much more recent. They were flagged and the trenches backfilled to await excavation by the contractor hired by the county to reinter the burials.

Twenty-one trenches measuring about 2 feet wide and between 4 and 6 feet deep, totalling approximately 1,314 feet in length, were excavated and backfilled during the two week period. The trench walls were scraped, and the profiles were closely scrutinized for evidence of past ground disturbance or burials. Soil samples were taken from the trenches, strata depths and composition were recorded, and a complete set of site/feature photographs were made. More than 50 volunteers participated in the project overall.

Most of the fifteen burials excavated archeologically were intact, or nearly so. The excavated skeletal remains and all associated artifacts and samples were packaged and delivered to the Anthropology Department at George Mason University for future analysis prior to reinternment. Soil samples are currently undergoing analysis for soil pH; upon completion of the testing, these samples will also be sent to the University. A short summary of the site findings and conclusions is in process, and will be forwarded to Montgomery County upon completion. A report covering the background and history, description of the environment, field methodology, and findings will be forwarded to the University for use in later

reporting. Field notes will also be forwarded to George Mason University; all data will also be made available to the office of the State Archeologist.

### Summary and Conclusions

It appears that there may have been two different time periods represented by the excavated burials; the burials in trench 2N appear to be slightly older, and in poorer condition than those in trench 3N. However, based upon tentative field identification of fragments of clothing, dental work, and nail screw types, it is likely that both sets of excavated burials post-date 1890. Those skeletal materials that were reburied to await the undertaker most likely post-date the beginning of World War II. While we did not find skeletal materials from the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, far more grave goods and differential burial patterns were found than expected. The individual variations among the excavated burials provides us with a fascinating glimpse into burial practices, health and nutrition, etc. of this select group. Future analysis should produce a striking picture of those individuals interred in this pauper's cemetery.

Diane Lee Rhodes

Approved for Distribution

(SGD) Benjamin H. Biderman

Chief, Branch of Falls Church, DSC-EAF

OCT 21 1987

(Date)

cc:

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George Mason University-A. Palkovitz  
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