

Burial Ground for Negroes, Richmond, Virginia: Validation and Assessment

Research Summary

DHR has gathered and assessed pertinent evidence on the location and probable condition of the former Richmond free black and slave burial ground known as the *Burial Ground for Negroes* (ca. 1750-1816). It is our conclusion that the preponderance of evidence from available sources indicates that the *Burial Ground* and gallows are located under the north and south bound lanes of Interstate 95. Because no formal boundaries were recorded, or verbally described for the *Burial Ground*, the distribution limit for graves cannot be determined accurately. However, if the area enclosed by the historic verbal map marking approximates the actual size of the *Burial Ground*, then a very small portion of the *Burial Ground* may intrude upon the VCU parking lot. It is also the conclusion of the report, that the area likely to contain the *Burial Ground* has not been damaged by the recent construction of I-95 which deposited between 7-10 feet of fill on an area already covered with 8-10 feet of fill deposited since the middle 19th century. However, unknown 19th century disturbance could have occurred.

Research Investigations

The Department of Historic Resources' (DHR) investigation used published and unpublished primary historical map sources and written text, secondary media sources, informant interviews, engineering diagrams, soil boring reports, VDOT records, and GIS georeferencing tools to accomplish the following objectives:

- Verify the past presence of the *Burial Ground*;
- Locate the *Burial Ground* in relation to modern urban features; and
- Present findings and recommendations about the potential integrity and treatment of the *Burial Ground* in light of subsequent urban development.

In this brief report, we cite the most pertinent sources related to the investigation. All of the sources consulted and additional maps are housed in the DHR archives and are open to public inspection.

Verification

Media Reports

Reports in the published media were consulted for general information on proposed changes to the Shockoe Bottom area and the nature of the objections to these changes. Sources included the Richmond Times Dispatch (Feb 9, 2003; June 5, 2008; June 12, 2008) River District News (June 12, 2008), The Defenders for Freedom, Justice, and Equity (June 11, 2008), A.C.O.R.N. News and Events (June 12, 2008), Near West End News (June 12, 2008), MR Magazine (June 12, 2008), and WW News Service (June

11, 2008). These stories summarize the historical events that occurred at this location, specifically, the occurrence of the foiled slave uprising in 1800 known as Gabriel's Rebellion, the execution of participants in that rebellion, and the burial of these and other free persons of color on the property known as the *Burial Ground for Negroes*. Primary sources are not cited in these reports and information is derived from informants and reliance upon expert historians familiar with primary sources.

Map Records

Map research was conducted at the Library of Virginia, the Richmond History Center (Valentine Museum), the Department of Historic Resources, and the Virginia Historical Society. Original maps of the City of Richmond were consulted to document the location of the *Burial Ground*, its boundaries, and its time of appearance and disappearance in the cartographic record. Maps consulted included:

- 1) Thomas Proper, 1786: lots on Shockoe Hill
- 2) Young, 1787: Exact copy of the Plan of Richmond
- 3) Latrobe, 1798: City of Richmond, state capitol area
- 4) Bates, 1800: Byrd vs. Adams dispute in Shockoe Bottom
- 5) James, 1804: Plot of land in the City of Richmond, the road on Shockoe Hill
- 6) Young, 1810: City of Richmond
- 7) Richmond City, 1810: Engineer Architectural Drawing and Plans
- 8) Young 1817, City of Richmond
- 9) Bates, 1835: City of Richmond
- 10) Beers, 1877: Illustrated Atlas of the City of Richmond
- 11) Sandborn Maps, City of Richmond

The *Burial Ground* appears only on two maps; the Young map of 1810 (Figure 1) and the City of Richmond map from the same year. The maps are identical and the map crafted by the city surveyor, Young, was used by the engineering department. The *Burial Ground* and city gallows occur together at the same location. The gallows is marked by the symbol "N" and written to each side (E/W) is the phrase "Burial Ground for Negroes". There are no boundary indications on these maps that would indicate the size of the total area used for burial. An associated feature includes the powder magazine marked with an "M". Broad Street is marked on the map as a road in excess of 66 feet in width, however, at this time Broad Street is only a trail or dirt road that descends down the hills to each side of Shockoe Creek.

By 1817 the area containing the *Burial Ground* has been subdivided into lots (Figure 2) and the *Burial Ground itself* is not marked. Each side of the city block has been subdivided and the southwestern portion is owned by Rutherford. The central section shows no further subdivision and none of the subdivisions show buildings. The lack of documented buildings persists until 1835 (Figure 3) although construction most certainly took place at various locations. It is not until 1877 that numerous buildings appear and all of the structures are near the margin of the city block (Figure 4). It is likely that smaller outbuildings or sheds and privies would have been erected within the

interior. This lack of substantial construction suggests that only modest impacts were made to the area by later construction up to 1871 and the lack of development may reflect an oral history associated with the gallows and *Burial Ground*, or may reflect only the poor quality of the area around the creek for building.

Informant Interviews

Four experts on the history of Richmond were consulted regarding the location of the *Burial Ground* and any details they might have about its use and abandonment.

1) Gregg Kimball, Library of Virginia (June 12, 2008)

Information provide by Mr. Kimball suggests that several burial grounds may have been present in the Shockoe area, the one noted on the 1810 Young map and a later, newly founded *Burial Ground*, to the north of the Shockoe area.

"In digging foundation for old city jail, there were signs of a burial place, and the bones were so large they were classed giants'."

-- Ernest Taylor Walthall, *Hidden Things Brought to Light*, 1908, pp. 32-33.

The desire for a new black cemetery was made known to the city in 1812 and that is was granted in the year 1816.

"On a motion made and seconded. Ordered that the Order made on the 19th day of October 1812 relative to the memorial of sundry free people of colour praying that a grave yard may be granted to them be revived and that the same be referred to a committee consisting of Messrs Adams, Tompkins, and Brent to inquire and report on that subject."

--Minutes of the Common Hall, Richmond, Vol. 5, p.23

"This is to inform the Inhabitants of the City of Richmond, That an Ordinance is past [sic] by the Corporation for a public burying ground--One here for the free people of colour, and one for slaves in the City, belonging to the Corporation, contiguous to the Poor-House."

--*Richmond Enquirer* 22 Feb. 1816

These citations refer to the large free black and slave cemetery that appears on maps near the Poor House (current City Home) and the Jewish Burying Ground on today's Hospital Street. It is the one that replaced the Shockoe Bottom *Burial Ground*. The granting of a new cemetery allowed the Shockoe Bottom property to be subdivided, a process that was documented by the 1817 map. The request for a new cemetery suggests that the existing *Burial Ground* may have been filling up, and by inference may have been quite large.

2) Elizabeth Kambourian (June 20, 2008; June 24, 2008)

Ms. Kambourian conducted a ground survey a number of years ago trying to link historical maps with modern urban features and existing historical architecture. Based upon her field measurements she concluded that part of the *Burial Ground* was under the VCU parking lot. It was her hypothesis that the boundary of the Burial Ground was correlated with the limits of the inscription on the 1810 Young map, and thus, placed a portion of the *Burial Ground* away from existing I-95. Her investigation into property transfers indicated that Rutherford was a land speculator who bought property in Shockoe Bottom in the vicinity of the *Burial Ground* in 1815, again suggesting that the *Burial Ground* was not highly active. She also referenced the general descriptions of Richmond City events compiled by Morticai who noted that the Shockoe area was unsuitable for building had portions infilled in the 1830s.

3) Veronica Davis (June 16, 2008)

Ms. Davis in her book on black cemeteries of Richmond (*Here I Lay My Burdens Down*) states that the *Burial Ground* was established in the middle 1700s on an acre of land between old 15th St. and Shockoe Creek. The entrance to the *Burial Ground* was reported to be off of H Street which is now Broad Street. She also states that the *Burial Ground* is likely to be under the existing I-95. An e-mail was sent to Ms. Davis asking about how she arrived at her conclusions but no response was received.

4) Jeff Ruggles, Virginia Historical Society (June 16, 2008)

Mr. Ruggles provided general background information on the Shockoe area and guided the investigation to potentially important resources such as the Young maps, the Latrobe map, and the Byrd vs. Adams lawsuit map. He also noted that Broad Street was not extended into the bottom until the 1840s and at that time the city built a ramp down to the creek from Church Street.

Current Location of the Burial Ground

To establish the present location of the *Burial Ground* in relation to contemporary urban features we conducted GIS georeferencing of historic and modern maps. The 1810 Young map was georeferenced to a 2002 air photo of Richmond (Figure 5). Each image had common features. On the Young map these features were the city blocks on the east side of 17th Street labeled “N, O, L, M” and the block to the north of Broad Street labeled “758, 752, 757, 751”. Aligning the scales of the two maps in this manner places the symbol for the gallows under the north bound lane of I-95. If defined by the limits of the writing on the 1810 Young map, the *Burial Ground* partially encroaches on the VCU parking lot by a distance of about 50’ along the south margin of I-95. All other areas are under I-95. It is important to note that since the Young map does not provide any boundaries for the Burial Ground, the actual boundaries be either larger or smaller than the area encompassed by his text labeling the *Burial Ground*.

The 1835 Bates map was also georeferenced (Figure 6) to demonstrate the relationship between Lumpkin's Jail and the VCU parking lot. The importance here is that both parcels are on the same landform and are likely to have experienced the same general transformations over time. Thus the observations made at Lumpkin's Jail (see below) are relevant to the VCU parking lot area.

Potential Integrity of the Burial Ground

Activities before I-95 Construction

Historic map research points to a location that was low lying and seasonally wet from flooding and unsuitable for major construction. In the late 1800's the land to the west of Shockoe Creek was raised with earth and construction fill. Two investigations demonstrate the deep deposition of fill in the area of the *Burial Ground*:

1) Archaeological investigations at Lumpkin's Jail located in the parking lot immediately to the west of Broad Street (Figure 6) revealed deep deposits of fill and building foundations that overlie an intact deposit of cultural features. These features include an artifact rich midden and an intact cobble pavement that dated to the mid 19th century (James River Archaeology 2006). The deposits covering this preserved site are approximately 9 feet thick. The deposits originated from activity in the 1890s when the Richmond Iron Works was constructed.

2) VCU hired Draper Aden Associates (2007) to conduct an environmental assessment of the parking lot area immediately to the northeast of Broad St. As part of this investigation, soil coring was conducted to look at the structure of the underlying deposits (Figure 7, Figure 8). Three cores were placed in Lot 1 (MW-1, MW-4, MW-5) of the parking lot at locations within 100-150 feet from the estimated location of the *Burial Ground*. MW-1 contained dark fill to 8 feet below the asphalt that capped a 1.5 foot thick clay lens. Beneath this was a one foot thick layer of black organic material and coal that rested on sand. The organic nature and presence of coal suggests a preserved historic layer. Map records from 1891 show the presence of a coal yard at this location, however, the age of the layer could not be determined independently. Test MW-4 and MW-5 also had fill deposits to 8-9 feet below asphalt before sand was encountered but they did not contain the lower organic and coal rich layer.

These thick fill deposits at two sites suggest that the 19th century land surface was covered to increase suitability for construction. In some cases the terrain appears to have been left intact and fill was simply added. Such appears to be the case at Lumpkin's Jail. However, the integrity of the coal yard area cannot be adequately assessed because of the limited size of the coring and the inability to look at the strata directly. In addition, the City of Richmond granted in 1924 a sewer easement along the western margin of the parking lot. The depth and extent of this disturbance cannot be determined from the documentary evidence. Nevertheless, under these circumstances we can expect that

burials would be present since they are estimated to be 3-4 feet below the pre-fill land surface.

The Construction of I-95

Tony Opperman, VDOT, provided the engineering plans (proposed and actual) for the I-95 highway constructed in the early 1950s. Prior to construction the surface of the area next to the parking lot was occupied by the jail, parking sheds, a city dog pound, and a u-shaped building (Figure 9). These structures were destroyed prior to construction.

An examination of the highway plans (not shown because of poor resolution) reveals that fill was simply added to the existing ground surface for all areas to the southeast of the west margin of the south bound lane. The plans show that the deposits range from 6-10 feet in thickness and increase in depth as one proceeds northeast. Thus the fill deposits from the 19th century and any exposed ground surfaces from that time are likely to be preserved under I-95.

A review of VDOT records since the construction of I-95 show that no transportation related projects have occurred in this area.

Summary

Historic maps georeferenced to the current Richmond city plan have provided an approximate location for the *Burial Ground for Negroes* that lies near the intersection of Broad St. and 15th Street in the Shockoe Bottom area. The *Burial Ground* did not appear on any maps except two related maps dating to 1810. Because the *Burial Ground* boundaries were not physically marked on the historic maps dating to 1810, uncertainty still remains as to the exact size and location. The center of the *Burial Ground* and the gallows are located with a reasonable degree of certainty under I-95. However, it is possible that the site is not completely buried by the interstate *if* the limits of the *Burial Ground* are defined by the area covered by the map text “Burial Ground for Negroes” written on the 1810 Young map. If so, then the *Burial Ground* would extend into the VCU parking lot by a distance of roughly 50 feet. However, the archaeological excavations at Lumpkins Jail and soil borings in the current parking lot show that the 19th century terrain surface is covered with 8-10 feet of historic fill that protects areas that have not been disturbed through development.

The deposits of deep fill at the location of the *Burial Ground* offer a degree of protection from modern development. However, should there be a decision in the future to modify the parking lot damage to any remaining burials may be avoided by restricting any digging or trenching to a depth of 3 feet below the asphalt within roughly 50 feet of the west edge of the parking lot within Lot 1. If there were to be any major subsurface changes on the property, it would be a good idea to hire a consultant to monitor any planned excavations.

Figure 2: Map of Shockoe Bottom area (1817) showing approximate location of the *Burial Ground* in red.

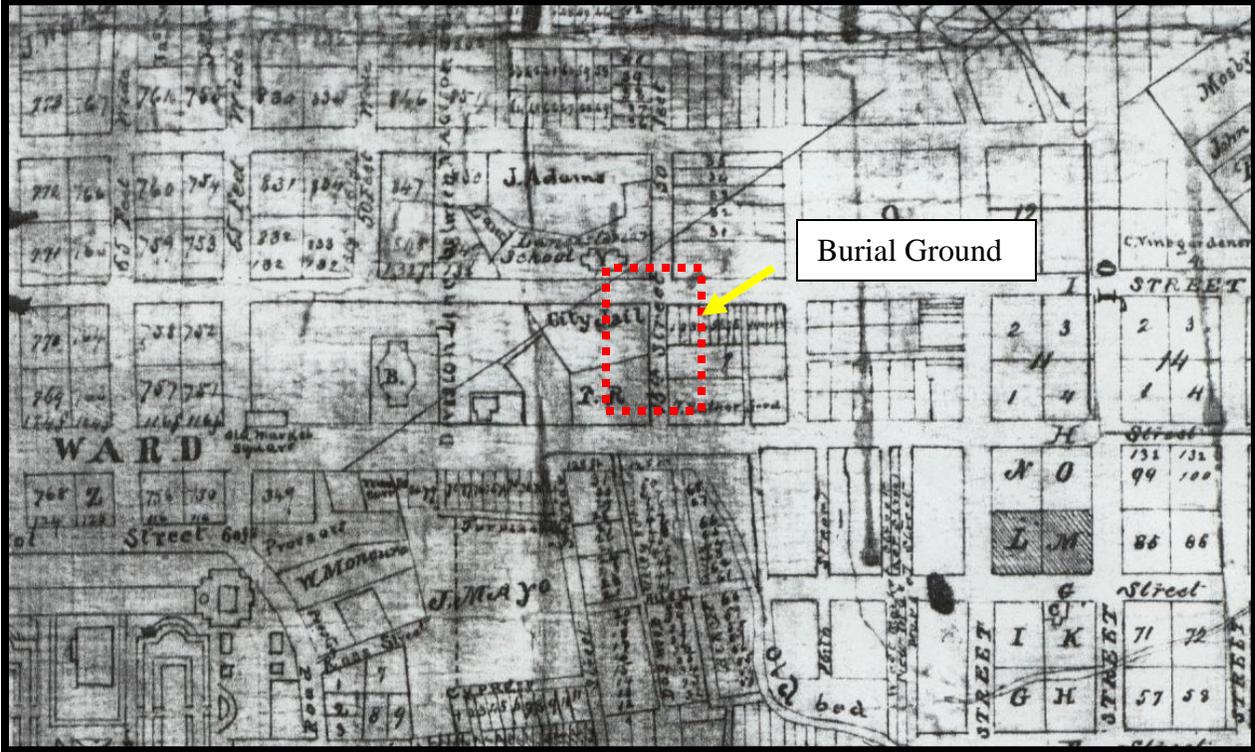


Figure 3: Bates map of 1835 showing approximate area of the burial ground in red

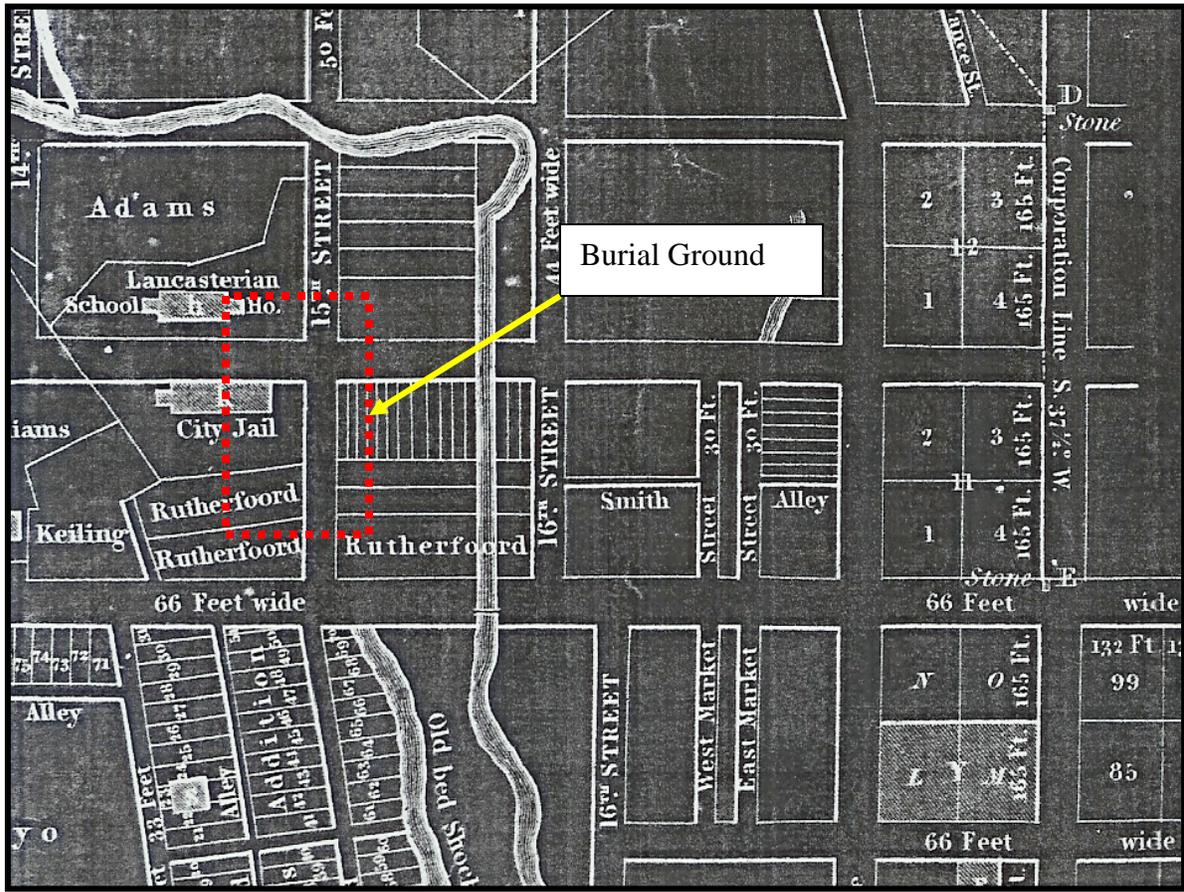


Figure 4: Map of Shockoe (1877) from the Beers Atlas of Richmond showing the approximate location of the *Burial Ground* in red.

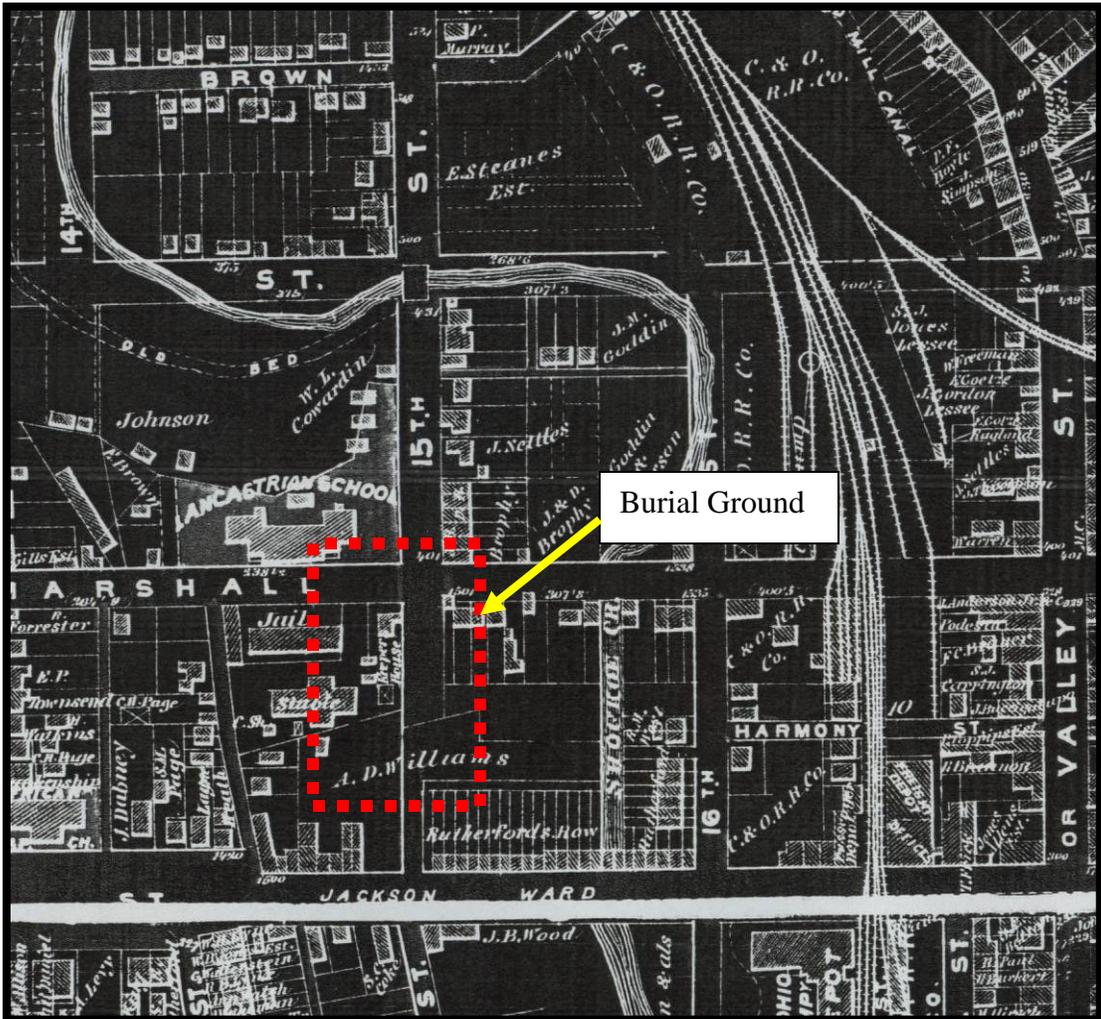
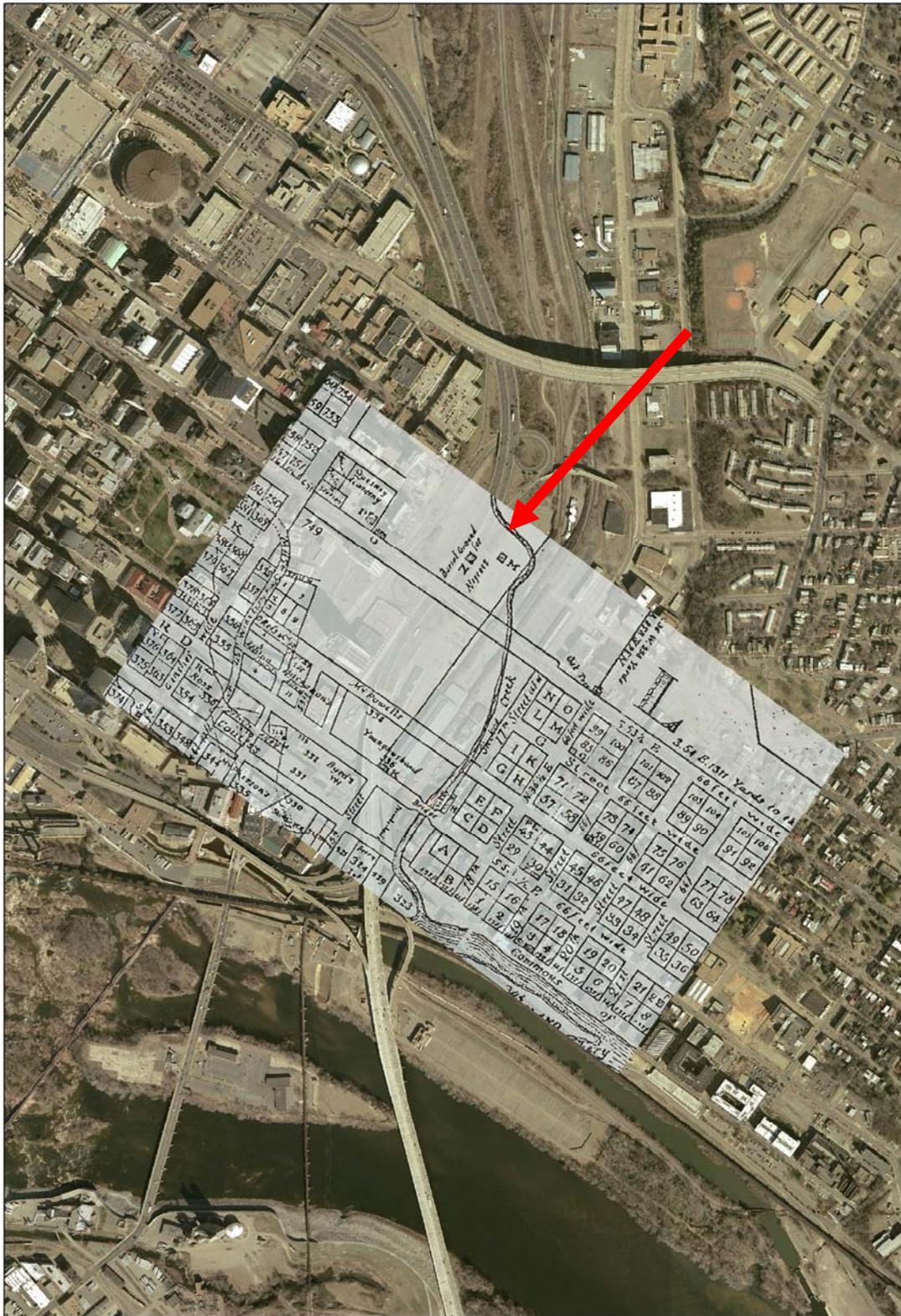


Figure 5: The 1810 Young map georeferenced to a 2002 air photo of Richmond.



Portion of Young 1810 for Richmond, VA
Base Imagery: VBMP 2002
Date: 20 June 2008

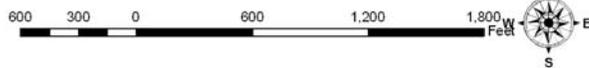


Figure 6: The 1835 Bates map georeferenced to a 2002 air photo of Richmond.

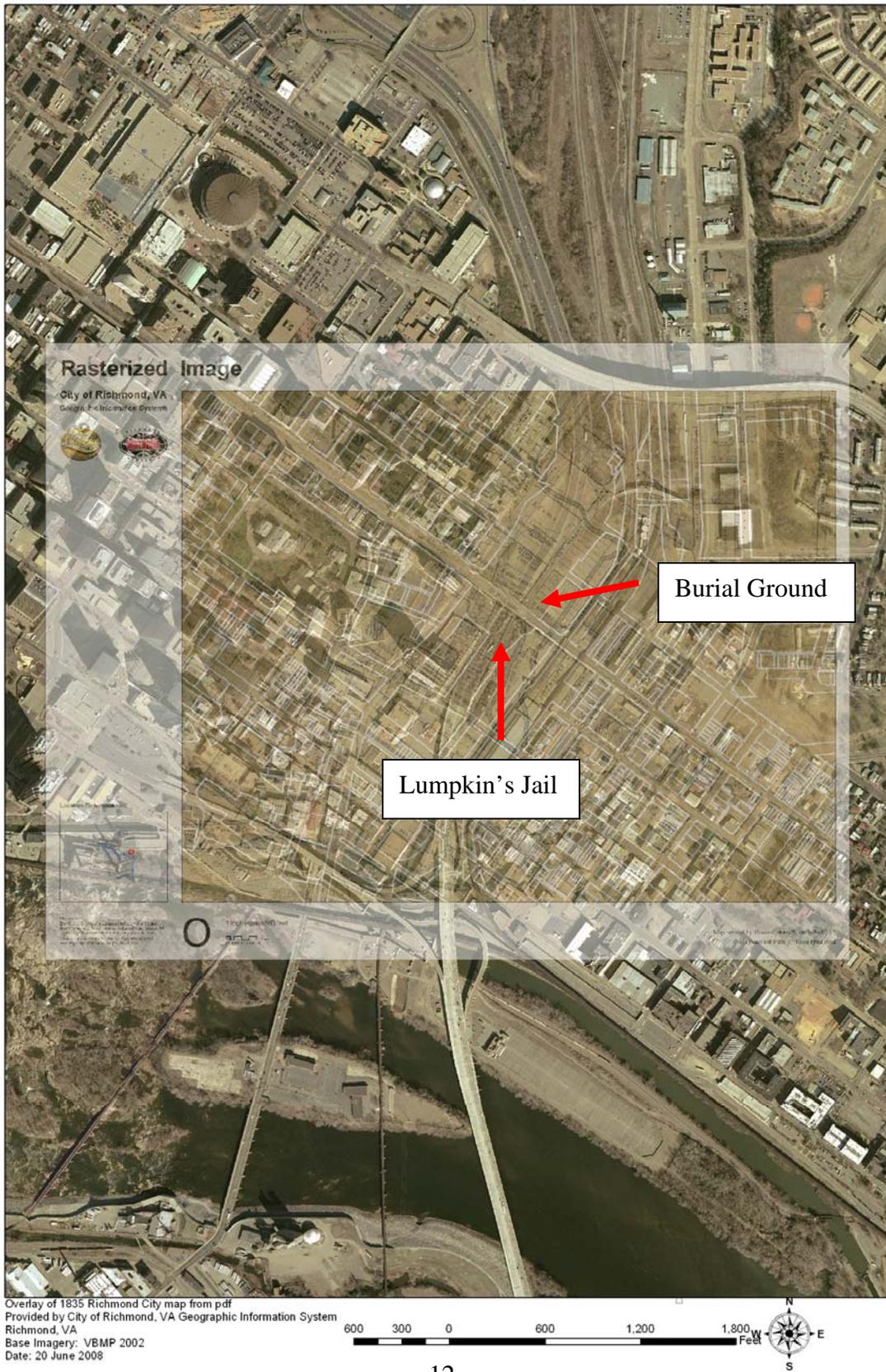


Figure 7: A schematic of the VCU parking lot showing test bore locations MW-1 to 5.

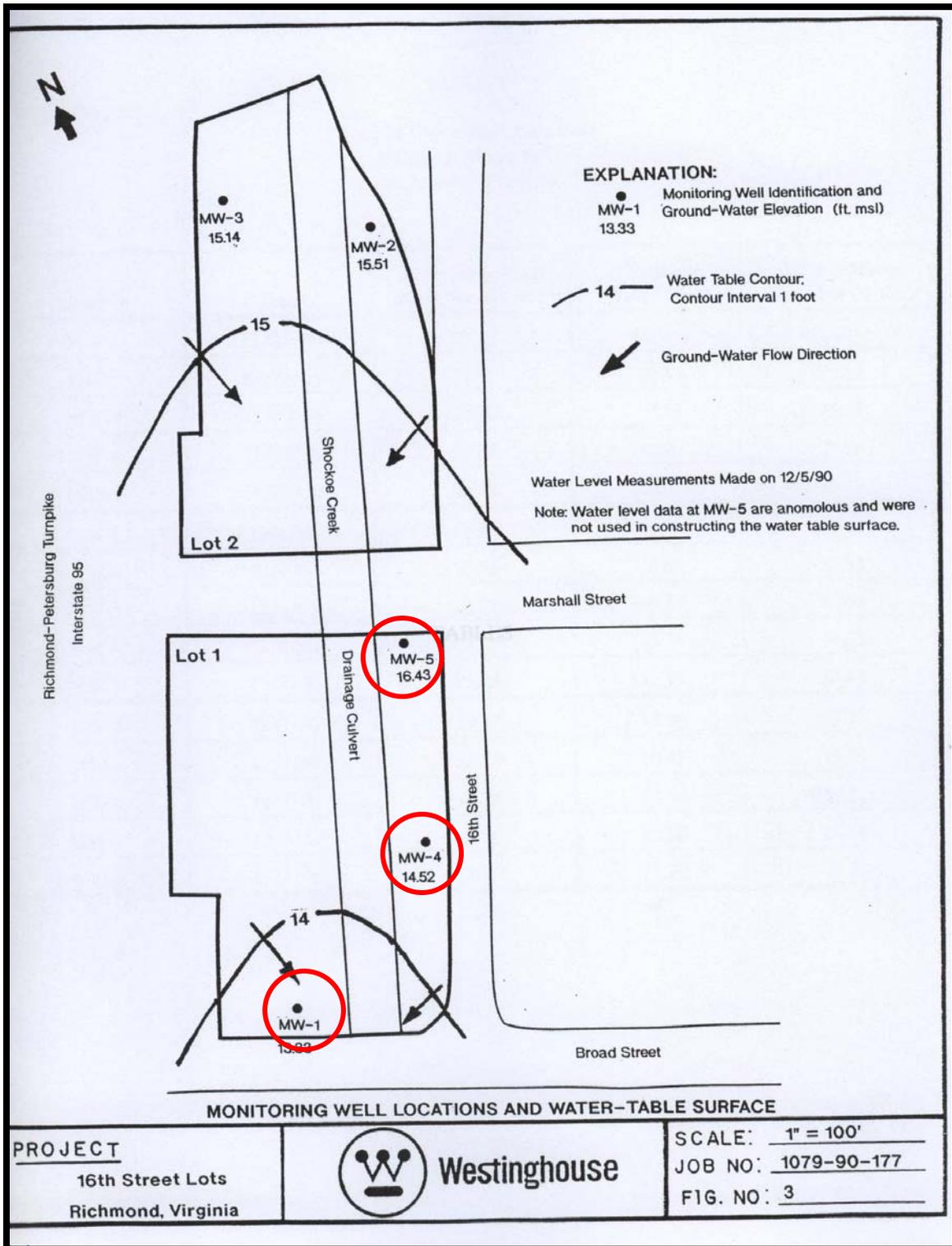


Figure 8: Air photograph of the VCU parking lot.

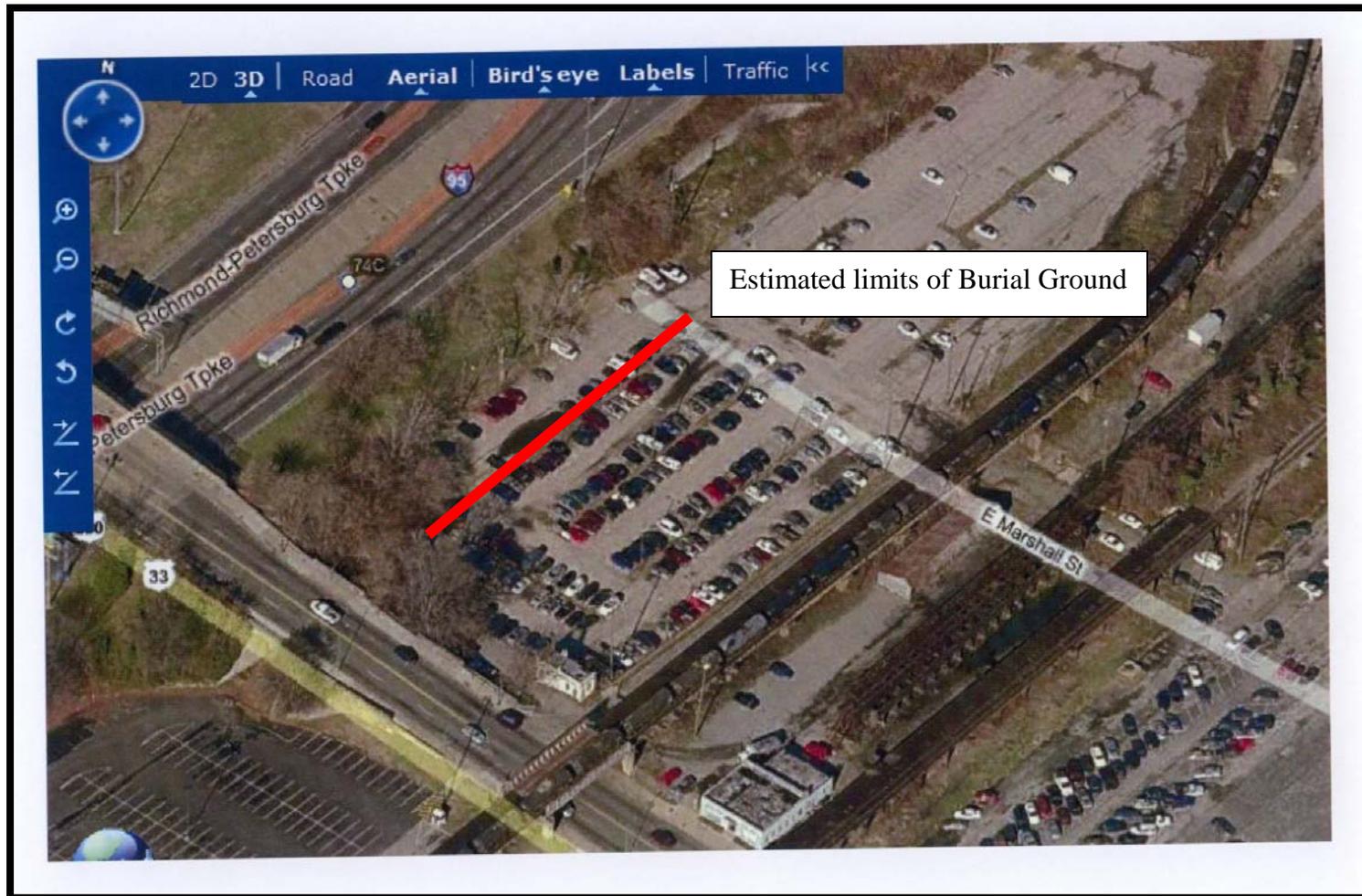
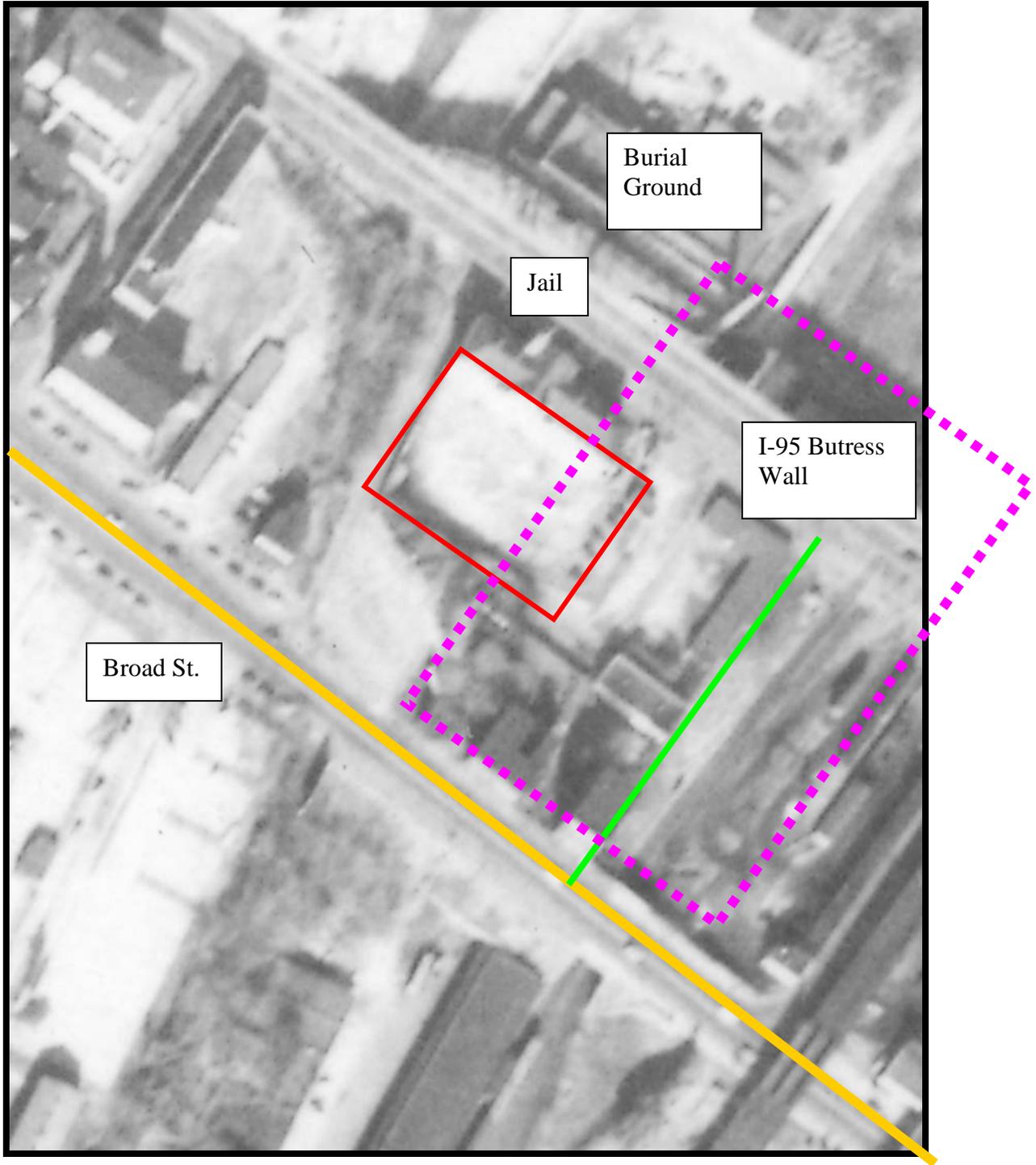


Figure 9: Air photograph of the 1953 ground surface prior to construction of I-95 with estimated limits of the burial ground



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