CEMETERY DELINEATION GUIDELINES

Council of Virginia Archaeologists – Cemetery Committee

OVERVIEW

Draft guidelines for conducting archaeological delineations of cemeteries in Virginia to be included under "Evaluation of Human Remains and Cemeteries" in the *Guidelines for Conducting Historic Resources Survey in Virginia* (2017, in revision).

Cemetery delineations seek to compile and integrate diverse types of evidence from a variety of sources to establish spatial boundaries around places of human burial. Delineations can be undertaken to ensure the complete avoidance of burial grounds during land planning and development as well as a first step in a program of legal cemetery or burial relocation.

Types of Evidence Useful in Cemetery Delineation

- Documentary (e.g. plats, deeds, funeral home records, death certificates, census records)
- Informant Testimony & Oral History (interviews with former landowners, tenants, descendants, land surveyors, funeral home directors, and others with potential knowledge of burial locations and identities of those interred)
- Visible Surface Features (e.g. marker stones, depressions, plantings, fencing and other boundary markers, grave offerings)
    - Best practices for site clearing and mapping
- Subsurface Archaeological Features (e.g. most commonly grave shafts as exposed through shallow excavation (either manual or mechanical), but also post holes associated with boundary fencing or internal plots, sunken stone markers and memorials)
    - Methods
        - Shallow excavation, both manual and mechanical
        - Probing: variable soil density/compaction (tile probes, penetrometers) and coring for stratigraphic anomalies
- Remote Sensing for Detection of Subsurface Features/Anomalies
    - Geophysical (GPR, magnetometry, electroresistivity)
    - Sensate/Olfactory (human remains detection canines)

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DELINEATION GUIDELINES

The primary purpose of an Archaeological Delineation of a cemetery is to acquire physical evidence to establish boundaries around the extent of human burials, both marked and unmarked, within a cemetery or burial ground, through the identification of grave shafts as exposed by shallow excavation.

Background Research

Archaeological cemetery delineation should always be preceded by Background Research at a level consistent with a Phase II investigation. At a minimum this should include:

- chain-of-title research to establish property ownership history, to the time period of oldest known burial,
- in-depth community research utilizing local informants if appropriate,
- genealogical research,
- local archives and historical societies,
- historic map and aerial photography survey,
- utilization of funeral home records, probate records, and death certificates.

Background research should include an attempt to estimate a minimum number of burials prior to field work (using census data, records of enslaved people, genealogy, etc.). Best practices would include conducting oral histories and contacting descendants (if feasible) prior to any ground disturbance. For large, municipal cemeteries, include a general cemetery history while intensive research may be limited to the area being investigated.

It is highly recommended that an anticipatory burial permit be acquired from VDHR for any activity involving ground disturbance in or around a cemetery.

Methodology

The choice of field methods is to be based upon a research design and shall always reflect the current state of professional knowledge.

The cemetery should be visually inspected to record terrain changes, grave markers, vegetation, possible boundary markers, and other features of the cemetery. All visible surface features (including but not limited to depressions, marker stones, fences/walls,

significant vegetation) should be recorded on a scaled map. Photographs of existing conditions should be taken prior to vegetation clearing and excavation.

Prior to ground disturbance, the area should be cleared of vegetation, with the exemption of memorial plantings. Hand clearing should be conducted in a way to ensure minimal ground disturbance, and the disturbance of possible grave goods. This should include methods that do not remove vegetation by the root or involve chemical herbicides. Careful consideration when working within areas where marker stones are present is important to ensure activity does not damage grave markers. After clearing, photographs of the cemetery and of each marker should be taken. These photographs should be included as an appendix. For large, municipal cemeteries markers in the immediate area being investigated should be photographed.

Machine-assisted wide-area removal of soils, using a smooth bladed bucket, should work outward from the area of known/visible/suspected burials with the goal of defining a 25-foot-wide burial-free zone around all sides of the known/visible/suspected grave features. Removal of topsoil in broad blocks is preferable to intermittent, narrow trenches; however, if trenching is used it should always be oriented perpendicular to the suspect orientation of graves. Delineation should be conducted around all sides of the cemetery/burial area. If all sides are not delineated, refer to work as "partial delineation."

Mechanical removal of topsoil should be followed by shovel skimming and hand-troweling of the trench floor, and close inspection of the exposed subsoil surface for potential grave features as defined by differences in soil color, texture, inclusions, and/or compaction. Soil characteristics should be recorded in soil profile maps. Cleared and skimmed trench floors should be photographed to illustrate presence/absence of potential grave features.

The delineated cemetery perimeter boundary should be defined a minimum of 5 feet beyond the outermost confirmed burials. Areas bordering known or suspected graves that are not subjected to physical examination should be included within the delineated boundary as graves may be present in these locations. Iron pipe/ rebar should be set to mark the perimeter boundary. The cemetery boundary should be recorded using a survey grade GPS. If the delineated boundary is to be platted, recordation by a surveyor licensed in the State of Virginia will be necessary. The delineated perimeter boundary and associated cemetery data should be added to VCRIS, whether as a new record or an update to an existing record.

The burial feature map shall include:

- Delineated perimeter boundary of the cemetery
- Visible surface features (markers, depressions, vegetation, fences/walls etc.)
- Burial features identified through soil removal (grave shafts, buried markers, possible grave goods, etc.)
- Limits of machine clearing (including areas around vegetation not cleared)

If grave markers are inscribed, high resolution (minimum 300 dpi) digital photographs of the inscribed front as well as the back (if visible) should be taken, and a good effort should be made to transcribe the markers and record marker material. The transcription should include all relevant information (name, birth date, death date, etc..), any epitaph or iconography, and maker's marks if present. Cleaning of the headstones is not recommended during delineation unless addressed in the scope of work.

CEMETERY REMOTE SENSING GUIDELINES

To be drafted.