

the many ways in which African Americans contributed to Philadelphia's history and society in general. Both projects highlighted the benefits of public outreach in mortuary archeology projects and underscored the potential to effectively engage the community in the various aspects of archeological excavation and analysis. They also emphatically demonstrated that involvement of the public in mortuary archeology projects has significant benefits for all, as long as archeologists are willing to recognize concerns of the interested or affected segments of the community and most importantly, respect those non-scientific values embodied by burial grounds and human remains that the community holds as important.

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* Quoted from an article by Meg Greenfield in *Newsweek*, April 22, 1996, p. 88.

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Combining Archival and Archeological Research

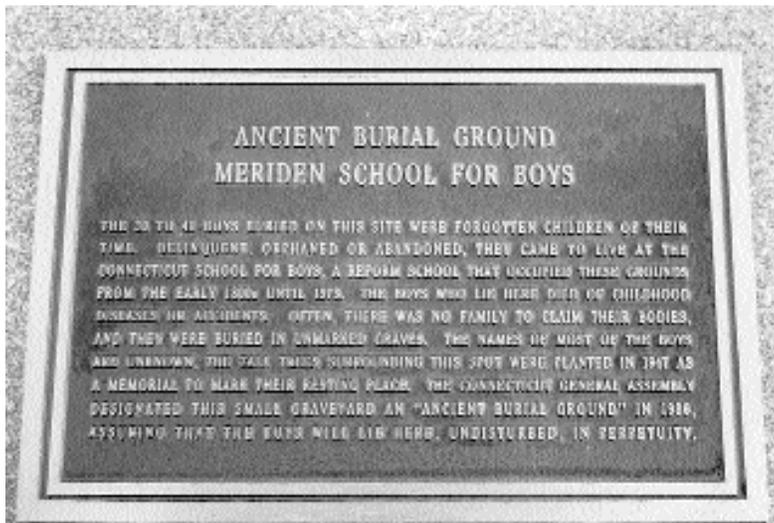
The Connecticut School for Boys Cemetery

When it was announced that state land which lies adjacent to the State Police Headquarters in Meriden, Connecticut would soon serve as grounds for a multi-million dollar hospital project, considerable public outrage ensued. Concerned citizens indicated that many adolescents were interred on the property when it was occupied by the Connecticut School for Boys, a reformatory and orphanage that operated between 1853 and 1973.

Also known as the Meriden School for Boys and the State Reform School, the facility housed up to several hundred juvenile males at any given time. Historic sources indicate that many of the boys who had died at the school were interred somewhere on the property. While none of the

available records suggest which portion of the grounds was used as a cemetery, word of mouth and local newspaper accounts indicated to many that a small hill represented the principal burial grounds at the facility. In 1986, a monument marking the site was installed.

Despite this information, local citizens were convinced that the boys had been buried throughout the 50-acre property. To support this contention, they contrasted the small size of the hill with a list of well over 100 names of boys who they had determined to be buried at the facility. To add confusion to the matter, community members were concerned about several depressions in the earth, which were later found to correspond to areas of previous geological testing. As a result of vague historic information and intense concern expressed by local citizens, the Connecticut



General Assembly enacted Special Act 95-25 which called for the Connecticut Department of Public Works to more thoroughly investigate the possibility for the existence of burials and their location on the property before its final transfer to the hospital development group.

The Public Archaeology Survey Team Inc. conducted a ground penetrating radar study of the small hill which was marked by the monument, as well as a similar hill located within 200 feet of the first. The first hill revealed a high density of both point and multiple anomalies as well as a scatter of shallow metal strikes, while the adjacent hill revealed a rather normal distribution and density of anomalies.

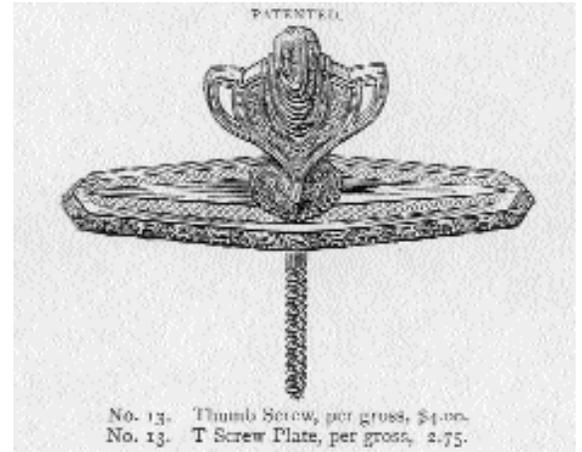
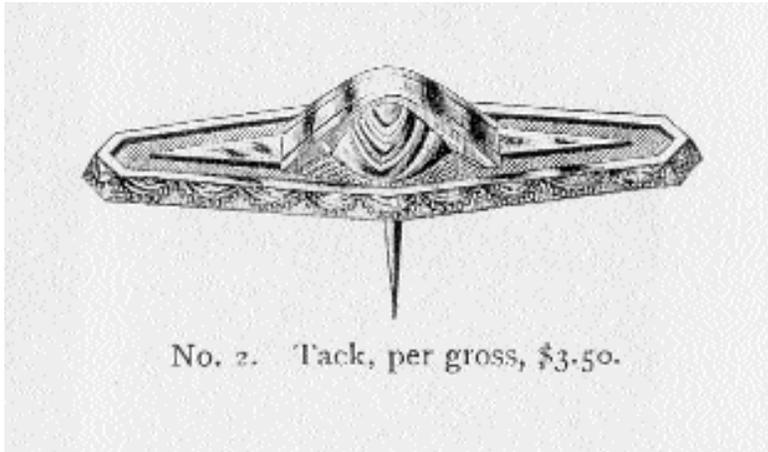
Armed with the citizens' list of names, death certificates for many of the boys who died at the school (provided by the Connecticut Office of State Archaeology), and the results of the remote sensing study, Archaeological Consulting Services conducted research using a combination of archival and archeological methods in order to determine the location of burials on the property, the probable number of interments, as well as any other cultural resources which might be present. Archaeological Consulting Services worked with the Connecticut Department of Public Works, the Office of the State Archaeologist, and the Connecticut Historical Commission (State Historic Preservation Office) in creating an appropriate research design.

Various sources were consulted in an effort to independently document the location of the cemetery, the names of boys who had died at the school, and their final disposition. Local histories and historic maps revealed that the project area was initially open space, and subsequently used as an orchard by the late 18th century. For much of the school's history, the proposed project area, beyond the limits of the "recognized" cemetery

area, was used for agriculture that supported the school in its administrative goal of self-subsistence. Toward the middle of the 20th century, ball fields had replaced the agricultural fields. In 1973, the school closed and the project area served as a training ground for the State Police K-9 unit until construction began earlier this year. None of the historic sources yielded a clear indication of the cemetery's location.

The initial list of boys included those which had been found through research of the Town of Meriden's death indices by concerned local citizens. Some names also came from an 1899 ledger of a former school superintendent. Public records kept by the state provided a yearly account of how many had died at the school (121 deaths by 1940), but no specific names or information on burial location. Unfortunately, the state's accounting often conflicts with the yearly count of deaths from town hall records. In order to help resolve this problem, Archaeological Consulting Services independently reviewed all available death indices at the town hall. In many cases, the names provided on initial lists appear in the death indices and other sources with the place of death noted as the school (86 total), but without specific burial location information. In other cases, the entries did not give the school as the place of death and apparently had been included because of youthful age or lack of parents' names in the records (21 total), thus their affiliation with the school remains unsubstantiated.

Available death certificates, death indices from the town hall, and the 1899 ledger confirm that at least 23 boys were buried at the school, which still left a significant discrepancy with respect to the total number of boys known to have died at the school. Archaeological Consulting Services then consulted the Hale Index to headstone inscriptions in Connecticut. This mega-volume reference, a 1934 Works Progress Administration compilation, includes comprehensive indices of alphabetized names appearing on headstones within each town. Between death certificates indicating burial location and a search of the Hale Index corresponding to the known birth location or previous town of residence for each boy, 24 of the originally listed boys were found to be buried off-grounds. Others may have been buried in unmarked graves in their respective home towns; in other locations throughout Connecticut as families relocated; out of state as determined for a few of the boys; or in the several Town of Meriden cemeteries where there are many headstones with either initials or last names that correspond to the names of boys whose burial locations could not be further determined. Therefore, of the 86 boys who were confirmed as



Illustrations, from the Catalogue of Casket Trimmings Manufactured by the Meriden Britannia Company, West Meriden, Connecticut, USA (1880), of coffin hardware recovered from archeological testing at the Meriden School for Boys site.

having died at the school, the burial location of 39 remains unknown.

The 1899 ledger, a highly confidential document, indicates that 36 burials took place on the property by the turn of the 20th century. Improved medical techniques and conditions at the school by this time drastically reduced the mortality rate, as indicated by the seven burials and less than two dozen deaths known to have occurred after this time until the school closed. The long list of causes of death listed on the death certificates includes albuminuria, appendicitis, brain congestion, brain dropsy, cerebro-spinal congestion or meningitis, cholera, consumption, convulsions and paralysis, diabetes, diarrhea, drowning, dysentery, endocarditis, epistaxis, heart failure, influenza, internal hemorrhage, liver disease, malarial fever, membranous croup, nephritis, otitis media puruleuta, pericarditis, phthisis, pneumonia, renocardiovascular disease, rheumatism, scarlet fever, skull fracture, spinal cord apoplexy, suicide, sun-stroke, transverse myelitis, tuberculosis, tumor, and typhoid fever, some of which reflect the difficult working conditions and possible physical abuse at the school early in its history. While archival research indicates that as many as 100 boys could have been buried at the school, only 23 individuals could be confirmed as buried at the school, and best estimates indicate about 50 to 60 burials on the property.

Field testing included excavation units on the two hills, a stratified-systematic placement of shovel tests throughout the property, and the systematic placement of mechanically-assisted test trenches. The latter test units covered approximately 10% of the 11.5-acre impact area to the north of the two hills, and were excavated in approximately six-inch intervals in order to expose possible burial features. All test units were excavated to a depth which revealed undisturbed glacial gravel, so as to exhaust all possibilities of revealing interment features and/or their contents.

Two excavation units were placed on the hill marked by the monument, and situated so as to cover the greatest density of anomalies and metal strikes revealed by the remote sensing study. The first unit revealed an intricate network of holes or tunnels created by a burrowing animal, as indicated by a nest, at a depth of three feet, containing pine needles and modern debris. Several casket trimmings found in this test unit represent intrusive material as a result of the animal tunnels.

The second excavation unit revealed a significant feature which was detected at less than six inches below the surface. The feature turned out to represent the edge of two overlapping features which lacked the normal stratigraphy of the surrounding soil matrix. By a depth of approximately four feet, one part of the feature tapered into the side wall of the unit, while the main portion of the feature revealed a soft, brown stain in a corner of the unit. Further excavation in this area revealed the crumbled corner of a casket and a high density of casket trimmings.

Analysis of the features and recovered material produced interesting results. The overlapping of interment features is a good indication for the historic lack of headstones and the school's lack of precise record-keeping regarding prior burials. In addition, the burial orientations do not reflect a traditional facing to the west or nearest road; this situation is not unusual given the nature of this historic institutional setting. The wood species of the casket, however, was revealed to be *Liliodendron tulipifera*, or yellow poplar, which is a good quality soft-hardwood. The exterior of the wood exhibited a fine varnish coating. Most surprising, perhaps, was the inclusion of silver-plated casket trimmings. The ornate, zinc alloy coffin tacks and screws were determined to have originated from the Meriden Britannia Company, a large producer of fine household goods until well into the 20th century. The terminal date for the manufacture of the coffin hardware has not been determined, but they appear in an 1880 catalogue



Community activists protesting the presumed desecration of unmarked burials associated with the former Meriden School for Boys. Photo courtesy Archaeological Research Specialists.

of casket trimmings and do not appear in the 1869 catalogue. The fine crafting and expense devoted to at least two of the caskets is surprising given this institutional setting.

Three partial features were exposed in the 200 square feet of excavation. The demarcated bounds of the “cemetery” that correspond to the raised hill enclose an area that measures approximately 5,000 square feet. This suggests a density which could accommodate up to 75 burial features, taking into account the partial exposures and overlapping features. It was therefore

concluded that the cemetery area could very well contain all 50 to 60 suspected burials.

A single excavation unit was placed on the second hill in an area for which the remote sensing study revealed the highest number of point anomalies. Excavation to a depth of less than two feet revealed a glacial gravel substratum as predicted by surficial materials maps. In addition, small boulders were found throughout the unit, thus accounting for the anomalies which in the remote sensing study merely indicate notable changes in density beneath the surface. Several bones were found, but all were identified as belonging to domesticated animals which were known to have been raised at the school.

No other archeologically examined areas revealed any traces of burial features or remains of

a funerary nature. Information from shovel tests throughout the project area confirmed the presence of a plow zone that reaffirms the contention that the grounds outside of the cemetery area were used primarily for agriculture. This disturbed stratum contained a scatter of whiteware plates and chamber pot fragments whose density increased towards the school buildings which lie outside the project area.

Archaeological Consulting Services strongly recommended that the cemetery area be avoided and preserved; final design plans for the proposed hospital reserved the cemetery as open space. As a final protective measure, Archaeological Research Specialists monitored construction-related activities in order to ensure *in situ* conservation of the unmarked burials.

The Connecticut School for Boys Cemetery demonstrates the importance of using a combination of archival and archeological research to solve 20th-century problems. More significantly perhaps, research confirmed the cemetery area as the final resting place for those boys who had died at the school without violating the trust that they would remain “undisturbed, in perpetuity.” Likewise, archeological research ensured that an important 20th-century development project could proceed.

A highly vociferous handful of local residents, who strongly opposed the proposed hospital project based upon their fears that the new facility would in fact provide fewer medical services than the existing health care system, produced an interesting aside to this project—a different archeological consultant for each phase of the investigation. This group continually refused to accept the archeological results and even cast aspersions regarding the “independence” of the researchers. In contrast, the Office of the State Archaeologist, the Connecticut State Historic Preservation Office, the participating agencies, and the general public realized an unintentional extra benefit from this local controversy—the professionalism and integrity of three Connecticut-based archeological consulting organizations applied to a common purpose: the identification and protection of the school’s historic burying ground.

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Although 23 burials at the school were confirmed through historic documentation, public records of the State of Connecticut indicate 121 deaths at the school between 1853 and 1940. Only 86 individual deaths at the school were reported in the death indices at the Meriden Town Hall or other sources. At least 24 of these were found to be buried in their home towns or other Meriden cemeteries, thus accounting for 47 of the 86 confirmed deaths. The school cemetery contains an estimated 50 to 60 graves.