

New Wheelchair Ramp for Historic Christ Church Exposes Grave Shafts March, 2008 The Louis Berger Group, Inc. and Alexandria Archaeology

The historic cemetery at Christ Church in Alexandria once extended beyond the well-tended landscape visitors can see today. The Parish Hall, built in the 1800s, is within the old burying ground. An old story has it that when the foundations of the Parrish Hall were dug, a man with a bell watched the excavation, ready to ring the bell should human bones be spotted. Cameron Street may have been built right across the cemetery, and some graves were found when the brick wall along North Washington, Cameron, and North Columbus Streets when the walls were replaced in 1998, 2000, and 2002.



Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia

So when Christ Church decided to replace the steps on the west side of the Parish Hall with a wheelchair-accessible ramp, Alexandria Archaeology and Christ Church were concerned that graves might be disturbed. An archaeologist from The Louis Berger Group was on hand to watch the excavation for the ramp's foundation. The ground along that side of the Parish Hall was covered with a brick pavement, and beneath the brick was a concrete slab. A trench for the foundation was cut through that concrete, exposing the ground underneath. This trench was about two feet wide and twenty feet long. The archaeologist cleaned off the exposed ground by hand. This cleaning exposed a series of seven dark stains in the soil, all running east to west across the trench. Since the trench was only two feet wide, we could not be certain that they were old grave shafts, but in all probability they are graves.



In order to avoid disturbing these probable graves, excavation of the foundation trench was halted at that depth. The trench was then filled in with gravel and reinforced concrete, so it will serve as the foundation of the ramp. The Parish Hall will become more accessible to the whole church community, and the historic graves have been preserved intact.

Left: Archaeologist Jason Shellenhamer inspects one of the possible grave shafts.