

**THUNDERBIRD ARCHEOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATES, INCORPORATED**

126 EAST HIGH STREET
WOODSTOCK, VIRGINIA 22664

(540) 459-4017
(540) 459-4018

**ARCHEOLOGICAL MONITERING OF WALL
CONSTRUCTION AT CHRIST CHURCH, ALEXANDRIA,
VIRGINIA**

by

William M. Gardner and Michael Clem

March, 2000

Prepared By:
Thunderbird Archeological Associates, Inc.
126 East High Street
Woodstock, Virginia 22664

Prepared For:
Christ Church
118 N. Washington Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

Cameron St. Wall

THUNDERBIRD ARCHEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATES, INCORPORATED

126 EAST HIGH STREET
WOODSTOCK, VIRGINIA 22664

(540) 459-4017
(540) 459-4018

Introduction

During March and April of 2000, archeologists from Thunderbird Archeological Associates, Inc., were involved in monitoring construction activities at Christ Church in Alexandria, Virginia. Christ Church is located at 118 North Washington Street and has been recorded as 44AX88 and is listed as a National Historic Landmark. The location of Christ Church is seen on Figures 1 and 2.

The destruction and subsequent replacement of the churchyard wall bordering Cameron Street required the presence of archeologists to identify the presence of any graves that might have been covered by the original wall construction and to prevent any further disturbance to these burials. The preservation and recordation of previously undocumented graves were the primary objectives of the project.

Christ Church Background

Only a brief summary of the history of Christ Church is presented here. For details the reader is referred to Creveling 1987, De Rossi 1985, and John Milner Associates 1978 and 1979.

In 1765, the parcel of land on which Christ Church now stands was donated by John Alexander to the newly created Fairfax Parish for the construction of a church (John Milner Associates 1979: A.4). By 1766, building plans were underway and, in 1773, the "Church in Alexandria" or "lower church" (in relation to the falls of the Potomac), as it was then known, was completed (John Milner Associates 1979: A.2). The church has been the parish of many well known Alexandria residents over the past two centuries, the most famous of these being George Washington. While not actually a resident of Alexandria, it seems that Washington and the town were quite fond of one another and that he was a devoted member of Christ Church (ibid.: A.5). Many alterations have been made to the property over the years. These changes include the construction of several related structures to the south of the property as well as alterations to the church itself, including the construction of a gallery circa 1785 and the addition of a bell tower at the west end of the building in the early nineteenth century.

Burials in the church yard were conducted even before the church was complete. The first recorded burial is that of Elizabeth Young in November of 1766 (DeRossi 1985: Appendix II). A city ordinance halted burials at the site for most people by 1804, although occasional interments continued until 1809 (limited to those who could pay a twenty dollar fee). Since 1809 only three exceptions have been made to the ban on burials at Christ Church; these

were the 1839 burial of Charles Bennett, the 1879 re-interment of 34 Confederate soldiers, and the 1986 burial of a parishioner's cremated remains (Creveling 1987: 31-32). No plan or map is known to exist of the location of graves at Christ Church. Indeed construction and recent archeological investigations have provided evidence for the existence of graves well beyond the current church boundaries (Greenhorne & O'Mara Inc. 1999). It is believed that graves exist under all three streets that border the church property and that possibly hundreds of burials are unaccounted for (De Rossi 1985).

Walls or fences appear to have existed around the church from at least the early nineteenth century. In 1806, a "new" fence was installed along the south boundary of the church yard, signifying the probability that an "old" fence may have previously existed (John Milner Associates 1979: 5). In 1829, a brick and iron rail wall and gate were constructed at the east side of the church along Washington Street (ibid.: 6). A wooden fence existed along the north and west property boundaries until 1877, when a wall matching the 1829 construction was erected along Cameron and Columbus Streets (ibid.: 9). The Washington Street wall was demolished due to its poor condition and was subsequently reconstructed in 1998. The Cameron Street wall was demolished in April of 2000 and is currently being rebuilt. The original 1877 wall still exists along Columbus Street.

Field Methodology

The scope of the project at Christ Church consisted of continuous monitoring of construction activities related to the circa 246 foot long north or Cameron Street wall. Archeologists were present throughout the destruction of the former wall and the debris resulting from the destruction of the old wall was scraped from the trench to assure that no excavation was performed beyond previously disturbed contexts. Once the rubble and debris related to the old wall was removed, archeologists troweled the trench walls and floor in order to determine if graves were present within the impact area. The identification of areas in which no graves were present allowed the construction crew to continue with planned excavation in these negative spaces. Further excavation was halted, if planned, where graves were present and Alexandria Archaeology and officials of Christ Church were notified so that any scheduled construction plans could be altered to allow preservation of the burials.

Measurements were taken using the U.S.G.S. marker at the northeast corner of Cameron and Washington Streets as a datum point. Field drawings and photographs were made of the four burials and one feature that were encountered.

No artifacts were recovered from the investigation beyond brick and mortar rubble associated with the demolition of the wall.

Results of the Field Investigations

Four graves were uncovered by the excavations associated with the replacement of the wall (Figure 3 and Plates 1-4)). The grave shaft and wooden planking observed in one grave (Grave 1) had been exposed, indeed partially removed, when the earlier wall which the current work replaces was built. The northeastern portion of Grave 1 was exposed in both profile and plan, directly behind where one of the earlier wall pillars had rested in an indentation. The grave was defined by the presence of wooden planks and by the vertical profile of the shaft. The wooden planks were not part of the coffin but wood which was placed on top of the coffin prior to backfilling (Creveling 1987: 35). This is interpreted as a method preventing coffin collapse from the weight of the backfill (ibid.). This practice has been observed in connection with earlier archeological work done on other parts of the wall as well as in other locations. Again, as this was not to be disturbed, no further work was done.

The remaining burials, Graves 2-4, were found on the floor of the excavation and are represented only by a plan of the grave shaft. As these were exposed at the base of the previously existing wall, current construction plans were changed so that no deeper excavations were necessary and the shafts were simply mapped and photographed.

None of the earlier or current construction had reached the coffins and the mortal remains. Whatever still exists remains intact. All shafts were visible as mottled soil fill intrusive into the underlying very old clays. The visibility of the shafts varied as most of the organics had been leached. Perception also varied with soil moisture and how long the grave shaft had been exposed to current conditions. In one case, Grave 2, tapping the soil over the grave produced a "hollow" sound while outside the grave, tapping produced no such sound and was evidently more compact.

Specifics for the individual graves are:

Grave 1

The planking appeared at 3.08 feet above datum and 11 inches below the sidewalk level. The shaft, which appeared at the base of post-interment organic fill, continued down another 1.25 feet to the base of previous and current excavations. Assuming an east-west orientation, only 2.5 feet of the northeast corner of the shaft and the plank covering was exposed.

Grave 2

This was the most fully exposed grave shaft. The shaft was 6.0 feet long and 3.0 feet wide. Orientation was roughly east-west. The grave lay just outside the brick wall of a cellar/coal chute entrance into the church. The shaft was defined at 3.5 feet above the U.S.G.S. datum and 2.2 feet below the level of the current sidewalk.

Grave 3

Part of the northern and northwestern edges of this grave were exposed after shovel scraping and troweling in the construction trench floor. Approximately 3.5 feet of the northern edge of the grave shaft was uncovered. Orientation was circa 25° north of east-west. The shaft was first discerned at 2.1 feet below the current Cameron Street sidewalk surface (3.4 feet above datum).

Grave 4

This grave shaft was also approximately 25° north of east-west. Only the northwest corner of the shaft was visible. The grave shaft was again at a depth of 2.1 feet below the Cameron Street sidewalk surface (3.4 above datum).

Other Features

Two other features were noted. One was a French drain which occurred at circa 2.3 feet below current surface (Plate 5). This was approximately 6.0 feet east of Grave 3. The second feature was the cellar wall mentioned previously that was associated with the coal chute-basement entrance into the church.

A copy of the Scope of Work is included as an Appendix. The project was monitored throughout and all other requirements were completed.

Summary and Conclusions

Construction monitoring was undertaken in connection with the demolition of a brick wall associated with Christ Church along Cameron Street. After the initial removal of the wall by construction crews, the surface of the trench in which the wall was located was scraped and examined for grave stains. Four graves and one feature were found. With the exception of Grave 2, only a small portion of the grave shafts extended into the wall area. No excavations were undertaken in the grave shafts and a profile could not be obtained.

In summary, it should be reiterated that very little ground was disturbed during the current construction that had not been disturbed by the earlier nineteenth century wall construction. This, of course, was not the original construction plan but, since the previous construction grade closely matched the current desired construction grade, little additional soil disturbance was necessary. The work, however, did reveal the location of four unrecorded graves and two other features.

REFERENCES CITED

Creveling, Donald

1987 *Archaeological Investigations at Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia.* Alexandria History Vol. 7, pp. 31-37.

De Rossi, Lenora

1986 *Christ Church Yard Gravestones and Burial History.* Report prepared for Alexandria Archaeology, Office of Historic Alexandria, Virginia.

John Milner Associates, Inc.

1978 *Christ Church, Alexandria, Churchyard Wall.* Report prepared by John Milner Associates, Inc., West Chester, PA. for Christ Church.

John Milner Associates, Inc.

1979 *The Historic Structure Report for Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia.* Report prepared by John Milner Associates, Inc., West Chester, PA. for Christ Church.

FIGURES AND PLATES

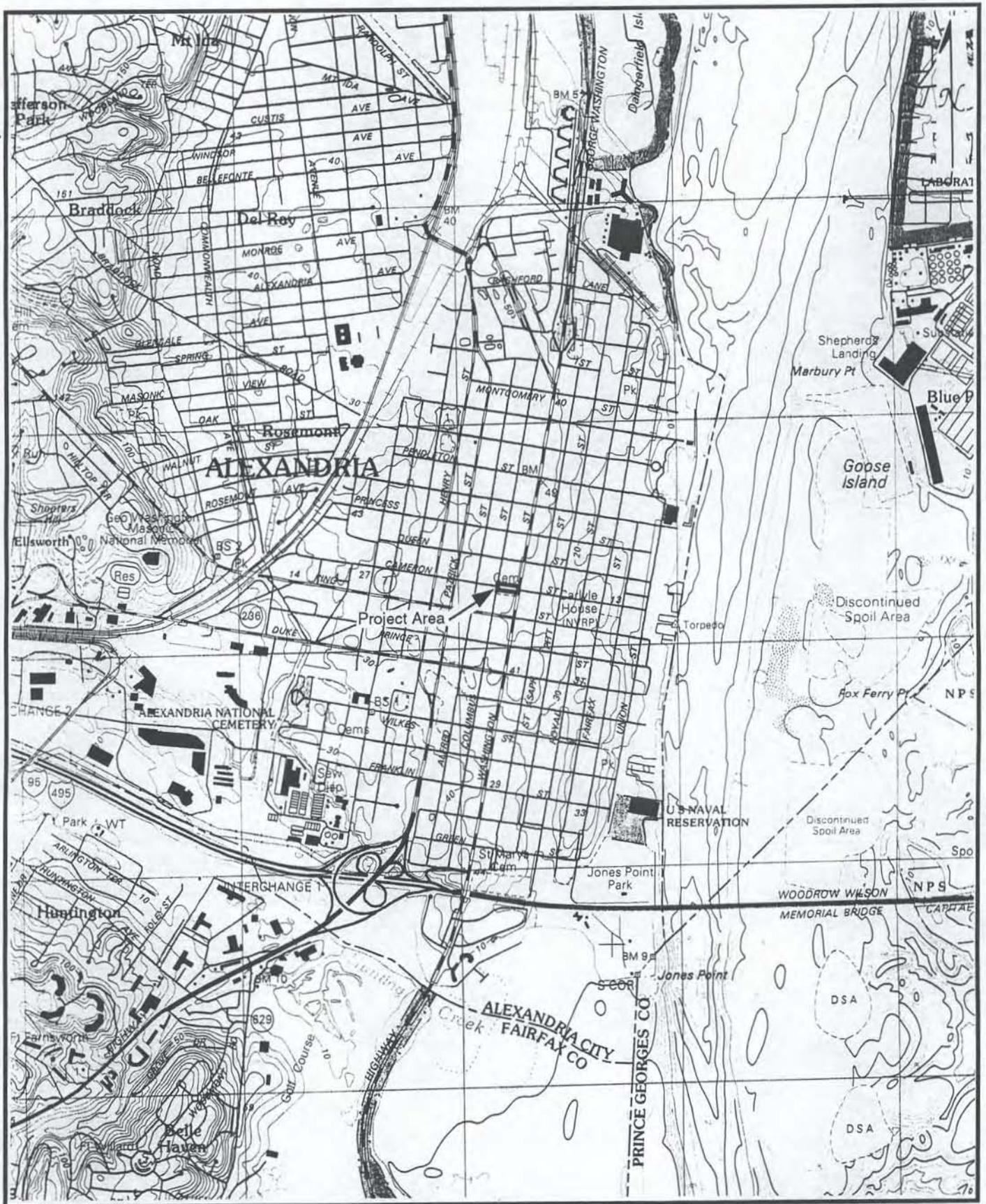


FIGURE 1
 Portion of U.S.G.S. 1994 Alexandria, VA-DC-MD 7.5' Quadrangle Showing
 Project Area
 Scale: 1" = 2000'

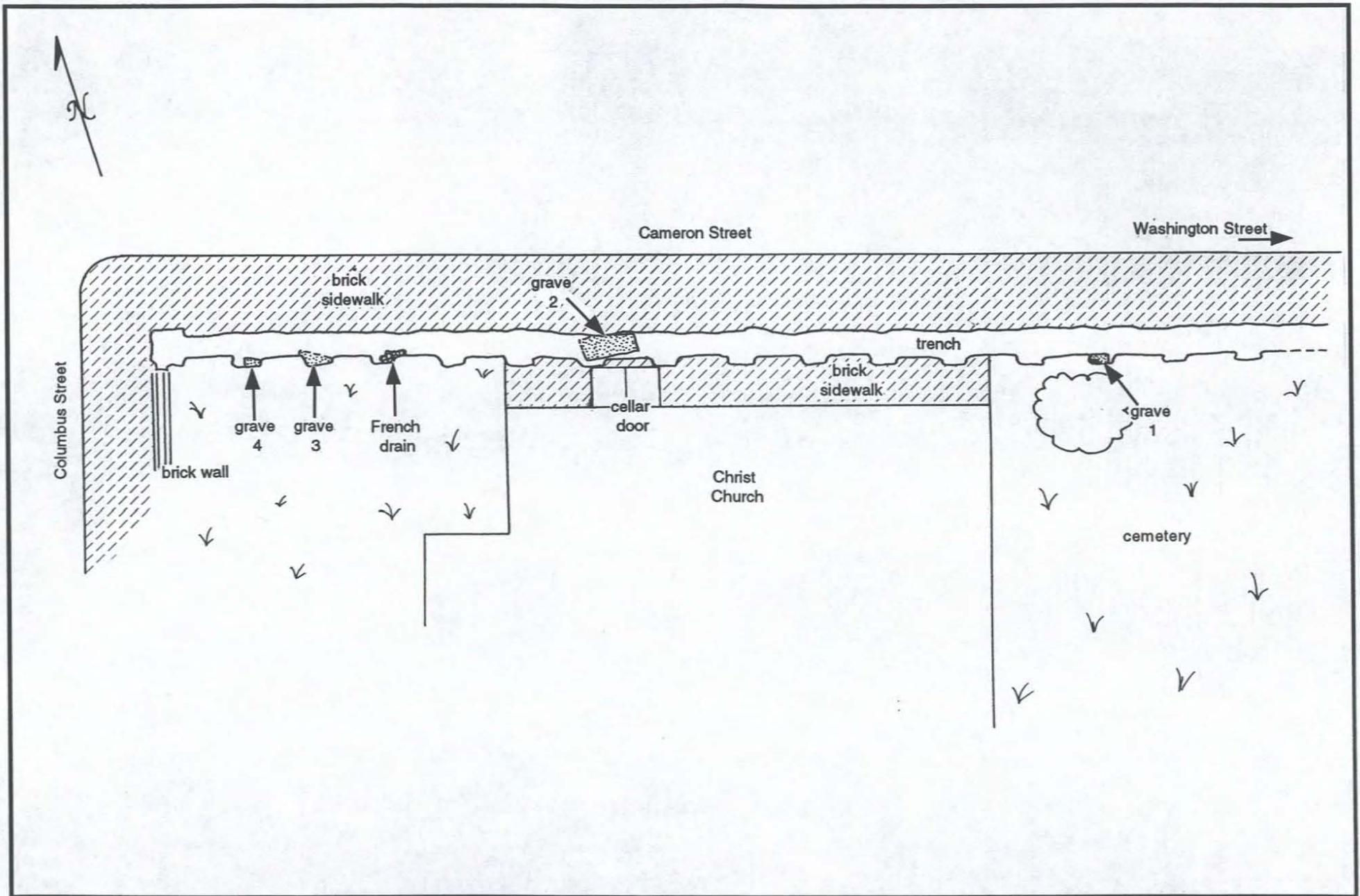


FIGURE 3
Plan Map of Project Area Showing Location of Graves 1, 2, 3 and 4 and a French Drain within the Trench Excavation



PLATE 1
Plan View of Grave 1

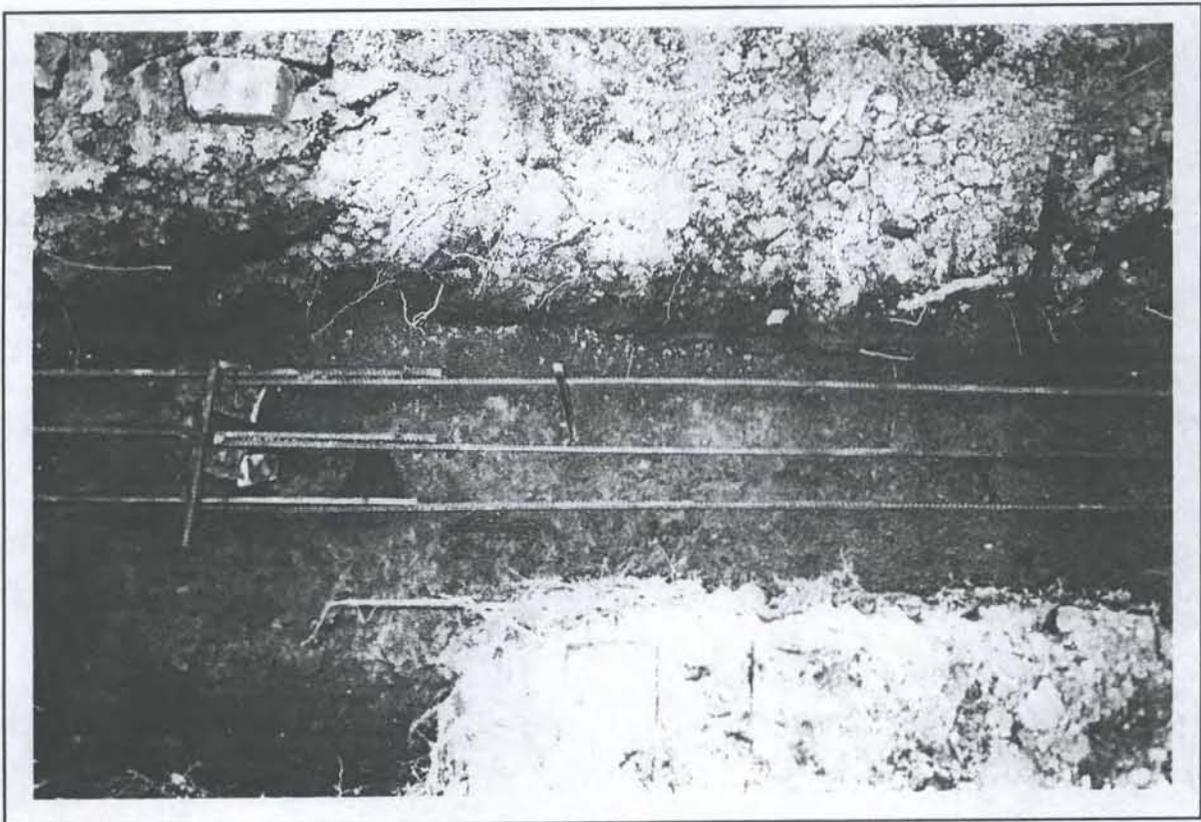


PLATE 2
Plan View of Grave 2

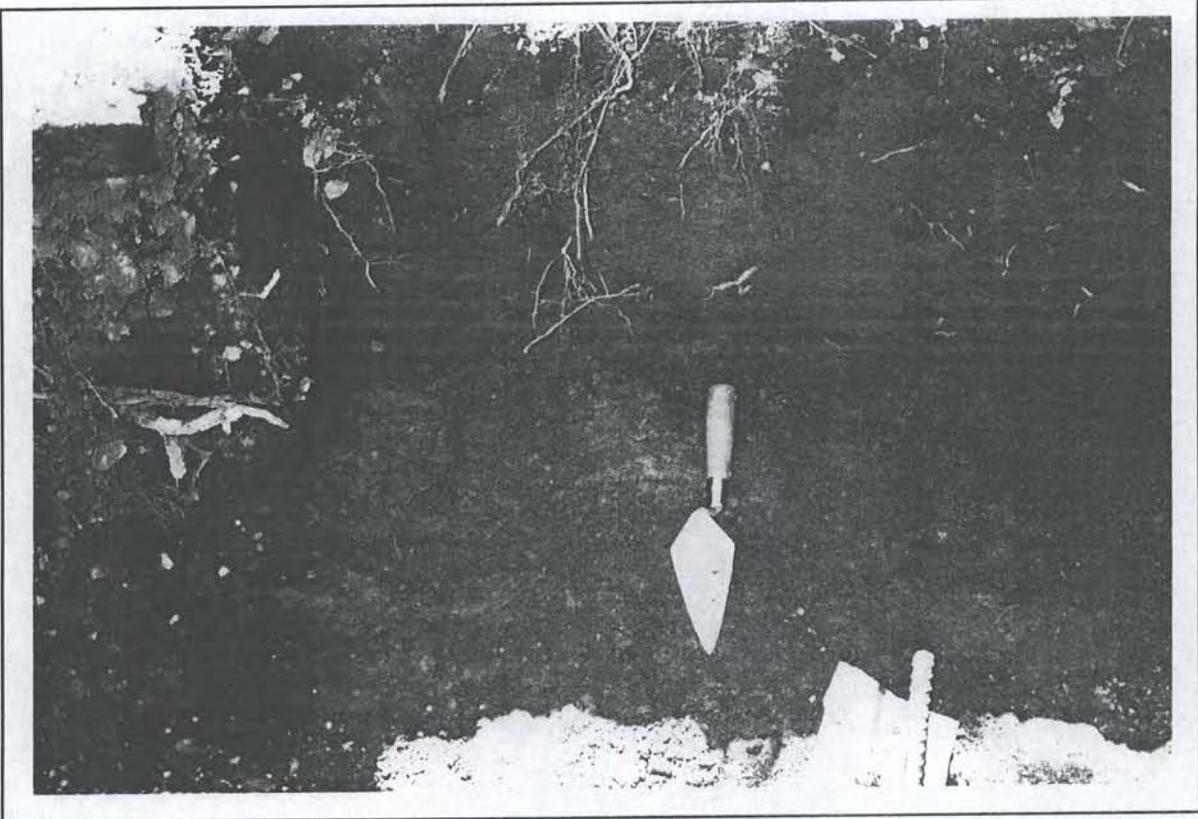


PLATE 3
Plan View of Grave 3

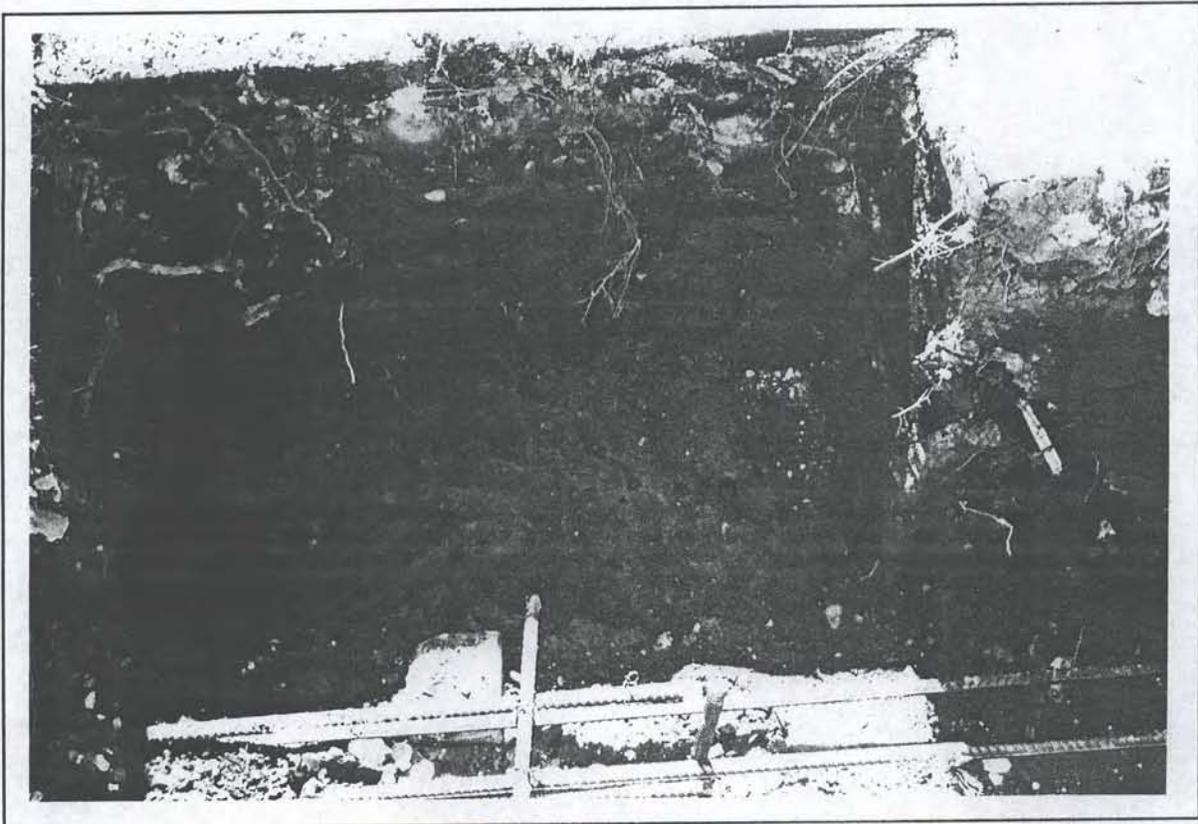


PLATE 4
Plan View of Grave 4



PLATE 5
View of French Drain

APPENDIX
Scope of Work

**Archaeological Scope of Work
Replacement of Church and Cemetery Wall
Christ Church, 118 N. Washington Street
Alexandria, Virginia**

This scope of work calls for an archaeological investigation related to the replacement of a brick wall surrounding the churchyard and cemetery at Christ Church on the southwest corner of North Washington and Cameron Streets in Old Town Alexandria, Virginia (Figure 1). Christ Church, along with the surrounding churchyard, is registered as an archaeological site (44AX88) with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and is listed as a National Historic Landmark. The church was constructed from 1767 to 1763, and burials began in the churchyard in the late 1760s.

The section of the wall to be replaced at this time forms the north wall of the churchyard along Cameron Street and was probably constructed in 1898 (Milner 1979). It is currently unstable and measures approximately 240 feet in length. A construction crew will dismantle the existing wall and remove the brick footings prior to the archaeological investigation. It is anticipated that the replacement wall foundations will extend to a depth of about two feet below the adjacent sidewalk surface, about a foot deeper than those for the existing structure. In addition, the new wall construction may require slightly wider excavations than the old footings to allow for drainage along the interior edge at the base of the wall foundation (Figure 2).

The goal of the archaeological work will be to identify the locations of grave shafts and coffins to insure that human burials are not disturbed during the wall replacement. If necessary, once the burial locations are identified, the footings for the replacement wall will be redesigned to avoid disturbing human remains.

Previous archaeological work has already demonstrated that burials are likely to be present. In the 1980s, archaeologists from Alexandria Archaeology conducted excavations in the churchyard prior to an expansion of the parish house and identified over 30 grave locations (Crevling 1987). In 1998, an additional 12 burials were discovered during the replacement of the east section of the church wall along Washington Street (Ward and McCarthy 1999). The burials were encountered from 2 to 4 ½ feet below the ground surface of the cemetery. Some extended under the sidewalk of Washington Street where they were found at even shallower depths, since elevations for the sidewalk are a foot or more below those of the cemetery ground surface. It is anticipated that a similar situation will exist along the Cameron Street side of the property.

The project includes the following tasks:

1. Meet with Alexandria Archaeology to review the previous archaeological work and the procedures for the current project.
2. Field Investigation
 - a. Archaeologists will hand-excavate the builder's trench which was dug for the placement of the existing wall footings and will trowel scrape the sub-soil surface at the sides and bottom of the trench. This will allow for the identification of grave shafts or burials

disturbed by the previous construction of the churchyard wall in 1898 as well as those which will be affected by the wall replacement. Archaeologists will also remove the topsoil and any fill in the expanded area of ground disturbance needed for the placement of the drain, and then will trowel the sub-soil surface exposed in order to identify additional grave shafts which will be affected by the current construction project. Consultant archaeologists will notify Alexandria Archaeology when areas have been scraped so that City archaeologists can check the site. All grave shaft or coffin locations identified will be photographed and drawn in plan. Profiles of any trench walls showing coffins or grave shafts cut through or disturbed by previous construction will also be drawn and photographed. The depth below the adjacent sidewalk surface and the elevation above sea level of the top edge of any coffin located will be noted.

b. If the archaeologists identify grave shafts which will be affected by the wall replacement, they will hand excavate the shafts either to the top of the coffin or to the depth of the proposed disturbance, whichever is shallower. Any coffins discovered will be drawn in plan, and the depth below sidewalk surface as well as absolute sea level elevations of top coffin edges will be noted.

c. An archaeologist will be present on site to monitor the remaining excavation by the construction crew for the new wall footings to insure that burials remain protected. Dirt and/or plywood buffers may be needed to protect the identified coffins.

3. Reporting

a. Field drawings will be immediately submitted to Christ Church for use by the architect in redesigning the wall, if necessary.

b. A letter report summarizing the work, including the plan and profile drawings, will be submitted to Alexandria Archaeology upon completion of the project.

NOTE: This Scope of Work does not include the excavation of any human remains. All digging is to stop at the top edges of any coffins identified or upon the discovery of human remains. It is not anticipated that significant numbers of artifacts will be recovered during this work, and no screening for artifacts is required. If some artifacts (*e.g.*, gravestones, displaced coffin hardware) are recovered, their handling and disposition will be determined by Christ Church and Alexandria Archaeology. The field supervisor for this project must have demonstrated experience in the recognition of grave shafts and in the excavation of human burials and must be on-site at all times. All work, including the proposal, must comply with the *City of Alexandria Archaeological Standards*.