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April 4, 2008

Bernard Nolan, Properties Committee
Christ Church
118 North Washington Street
Alexandria, VA 22314

Reference: Archaeological Monitoring of Handicap Ramp Installation
Historic Christ Church, Alexandria, Virginia

Dear Mr. Nolan:

The Louis Berger Group, Inc. has completed the first phase of archaeological monitoring of the construction of a handicap ramp at historic Christ Church. In brief, no archeological resources were encountered in the southern half of the project area, but the L-shaped trench cut through the concrete slab north of the entrance exposed a series of features that appear to be grave shafts.

Project Description

Christ Church is replacing a set of existing steps on the west face of the Parrish House with a wheelchair-accessible ramp. This undertaking requires the removal of the existing brick steps and the excavation of foundations that will support the new ramp (Figure 1). Because the area around Christ Church was used for burials, many of which have been lost, there was concern that excavation of the foundation for the new ramp could disturb graves.

Methods

A Berger archeologist monitored excavation carried out on the site by employees of the contractor. The contractor's workmen removed the brick pavement from the project area, exposing badly disturbed soil south of the entrance and an intact concrete slab to the north. They also removed the disturbed soil south of the entrance and the gravel that surrounded the footer of the existing steps. Once the contractor had removed the concrete from the L-shaped trench to the north, a Berger archaeologist excavated the fill underneath it with shovel and trowel, exposing the old ground surface (Plate 1).

Results

The archaeologically important part of the project was the L-shaped trench cut through the concrete slab north of the entrance (Figure 2). South of the entrance, nothing was observed but disturbed soil, recent fill, and gravel.

The trench north of the entrance is 2 feet wide. It measures 19.9 feet north to south. At the north end the trench turns east, extending 5.5 feet to an existing retaining wall. The concrete was about 0.5 foot thick. Beneath the concrete was about 0.5 foot of mixed fill. When this fill had been removed, natural subsoil was exposed. This subsoil, a yellowish brown clay loam, is about 1.3 feet below the top of the brick pavement. The historic topsoil was removed from this location before the fill and concrete were put down. It is not known how much soil was removed before the fill was placed, so it is not known how far below the historic ground surface the subsoil in the bottom of the trench once was. Based on its appearance, we surmise that no more than one foot of historic soil has been removed, and possibly only a few inches.

Several archaeological features are visible cutting into the natural subsoil. For convenience these have been numbered from north to south within the trench. Many are probably graves.

Feature 1

Feature 1 is partially visible along the north side of the east-west section of the trench (Plate 2). It consists of dark yellowish brown silt loam, with some admixture of darker and lighter soils. It is at least 4.3-foot long, and the visible edge runs 25 degrees off the east-west line. Feature 1 appears to be a grave shaft.

Feature 2

Feature 2 is a 2.0-foot wide stain running east-west across the trench. It appears to be a grave shaft. The soil is dark brown loam; this appears to be topsoil that slumped into the top of the grave shaft.

Feature 3

Feature 3 includes both an apparent grave shaft and another possible feature. The apparent grave shaft measures 2.0 feet north-south, and it contains dark yellowish brown silt loam soil. Adjacent to this shaft on the north side is a zone of mixed soil containing pieces of brick and bone. This soil does not appear to have been recently disturbed. It may represent an older grave that was disturbed when another grave was dug through it, or it could be some other kind of feature.

Feature 4

Feature 4 is a PVC pipe surrounded by concrete, apparently an electrical line. The concrete extends to a depth of about 0.3 foot below the bottom of the concrete slab. Beneath the concrete is mixed soil. This mixed soil may represent only the trench within which the modern utility was placed, but it resembles the probable grave shaft features, so the utility line may have cut through the top of a grave shaft.

PLATE 1. ARCHAEOLOGIST JASON SHELLENHAMER EXPOSING FEATURE 2

PLATE 2. FEATURES 1 (LOWER LEFT) AND 2 (UPPER RIGHT) WITHIN THE TRENCH.

Feature 5

Feature 5 is a 1.5-foot wide stain running east-west across the trench. It consists of dark yellowish brown silt loam, with some admixture of darker soils. Feature 5 appears to be a grave shaft.

Feature 6

Feature 6 is a narrow feature, only 1.0 wide, that otherwise closely resembles the grave shafts. It may be an infant burial.

Feature 7

Feature 7 is the largest feature observed in the trench. It resembles the grave shafts in color and texture, and it has a straight edge along its north side. However, it is at least 3.0-foot wide. It extends to the southern end of the L-shaped trench, where it was cut through by the foundation for the existing steps. Feature 7 may be two grave shafts dug side by side, it may be the shaft for a large, vault-style grave, or it may be some other kind of feature.

Recommendations

Ideally, the grave shafts would be avoided by construction. But this would require a complete redesign of the ramp, so some excavation within the grave shafts may be necessary. It is not known how far below the exposed ground surface the tops of the coffins or any human remains might be. To place footers 30 inches below the ground surface, as required by the Building Code, would require digging about 1.2 feet deeper than the based of the present level of the trench.

Based on the February 21 on-site meeting with Alexandria Archaeology staff, any excavation within the grave shafts should be carried out by qualified archaeologists. As long as human remains or coffins are not encountered, digging could proceed without a state permit for moving human remains. However, if such remains were encountered, digging would have to stop. As per the current scope of work, any excavation between the grave shafts could be done by the contractor, but it would have to be monitored by a qualified archaeologist.

Please do not hesitate to contact me directly (202.303.2667 or cleedecker@louisberger.com) if any additional information is required.

Sincerely yours,
THE LOUIS BERGER GROUP, INC.

Charles LeeDecker
Assistant Director, Cultural Resources

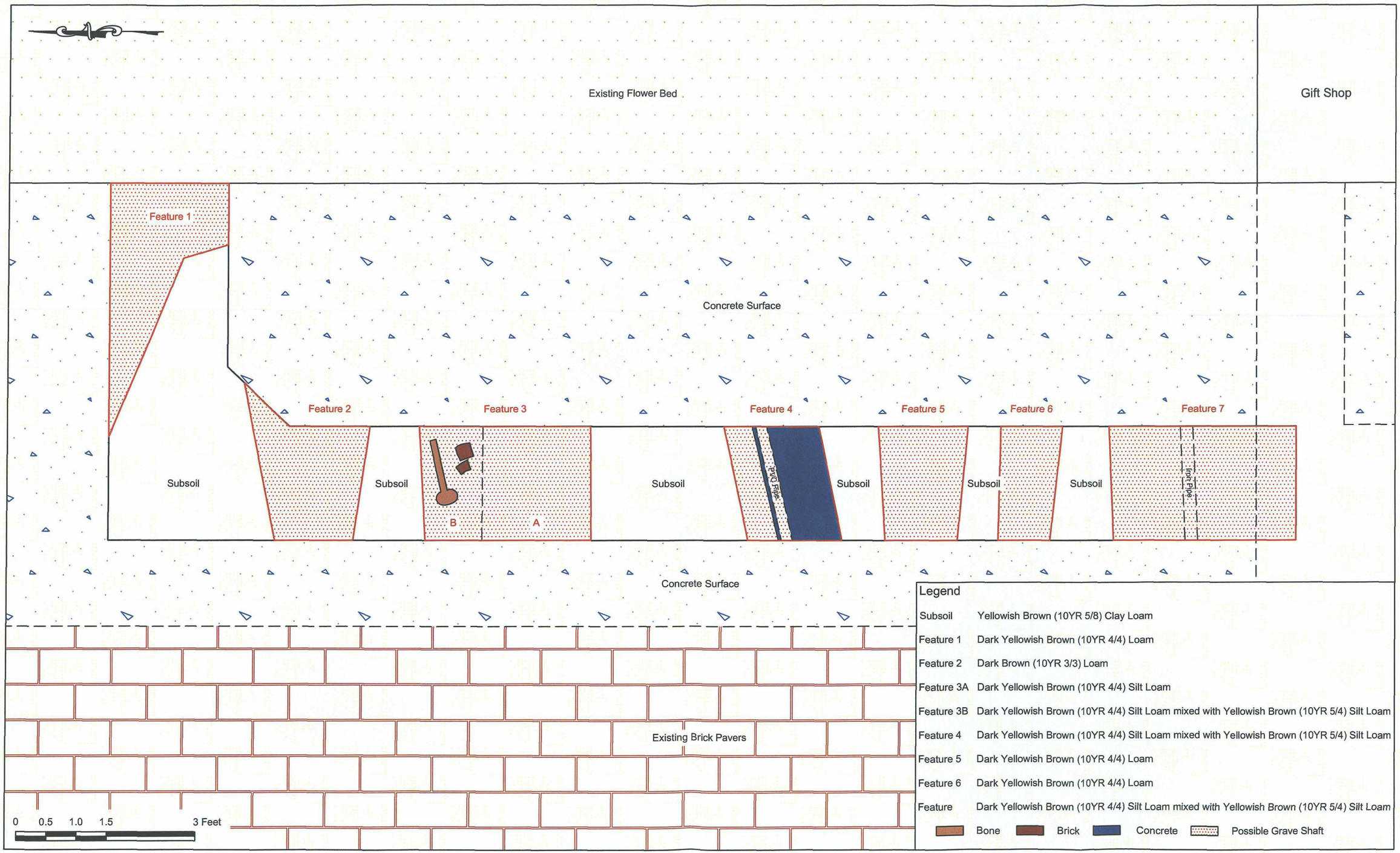

FIGURE 2: Plan of Excavation Trench

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 was 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.