ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVALUATION FOR THE PROPOSED NEW STUDENT HOUSING VIRGINIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

PUBLIC SUMMARY

The Virginia Theological Seminary is planning to construct new on-campus student housing units within an approximately 4.5-acre project area. The project area falls within Site 44AX173, which consists of the entire Seminary campus. Alexandria Archaeology reviewed the proposed undertaking and determined an archaeological evaluation was warranted due to the potential for the project area to contain historic cultural resources associated with the Union Army’s occupation of the Seminary during the Civil War. The project area may include a small portion of an approximately 3-acre cemetery documented in 19th-century sources where up to 500 Union soldiers were buried.

JMA, a CCRG Company, conducted an archaeological evaluation of the project area between October 2014 and May of 2015. The evaluation included documentary research, ground-penetrating radar (GPR), shovel test and metal detector surveys, and test unit excavation.

The Virginia Theological Seminary was approved by the general convention of the Episcopal Church in 1817. The Seminary was established in 1823 at St. Paul’s Church in Alexandria, but soon moved to a house at the corner of King and Washington Streets because of the increase in enrollment to 14 students. By 1827, the need for more space dictated a move to an area located approximately three miles west of what was Old Alexandria. At the time, Seminary staff referred to the area as “the Wilderness.” The Board of Trustees purchased approximately 59 acres of land on which to construct the new Seminary buildings from Jonah Thompson, a prominent citizen of Alexandria and a prosperous businessman and politician.

In the years between 1827 and the Civil War, the Seminary constructed and expanded school buildings, a chapel, and residences on the campus. One professor's residence, Maywood, was located north of the other Seminary buildings on the hill and faced the project area. The Seminary eventually purchased a 100-acre parcel of land where the Protestant Episcopal High School was built. The property contained the residence Hoxton House, first known as Mount Washington.

The Civil War had a tremendous impact on the Seminary largely because of its strategic location on a hilltop west of Alexandria and its proximity to Washington, D.C. The faculty was predominantly from the north, and financial support came from both the north and the south. During the 1860-1861 semesters, half of the student body was from the north; these students left the Seminary to return to their homes, some joining the Union Army. Only one professor and seven students remained. Finances became a serious problem and, with the Seminary in the path of the military occupation, the school session of 1860-61 was brought to an early close and professors and students began leaving the campus.
In June 1861, the campus and buildings of the Seminary and the High School were commandeered for a hospital and campground for Union troops. Tents were set up, and barracks and other buildings were erected on the Seminary grounds. After the war, many of the Seminary buildings were damaged, all the fences and most of the trees were gone, cut up for firewood, and the high school buildings were unusable.

During the occupancy, perhaps more than 500 soldiers were buried on the Seminary grounds. A Civil-war map shows that the cemetery was located to the northeast of Maywood and that the northern portion of the cemetery was within or near the eastern portion of the project area. This is currently the location of the residences at 3530 and 3540 Trotter Road and an existing sewer line. Documentary research indicated that the Union cemetery was likely removed during the winter of 1863-1864, and the operation was directed by Captain J.G.C. Lee, Assistant Quartermaster. However, as late as 1870 Reverend Packard recounts that some boys playing in Maywood’s garden fell through a hole in the ground and into a shallow grave. It's possible that this was a grave shaft from which the soldier's remains had been previously removed. The one map also shows that the project area was located mainly within a wooded area and was crisscrossed by several roads. An 1864 photograph was taken from the rear of Maywood and a view of a small portion of the project area can be seen beyond the house. It appears as a low-lying wooded area with higher ground to the south and northwest.
A December 1864 photograph taken from the rear of Maywood showing a small portion of the project area, facing northwest.

Shovel testing showed that soils varied across the project area, but for the most part consisted of a modern A horizon over natural subsoil. In some areas, fill deposits were located underneath modern topsoil. The project area was crisscrossed by many utilities including gas, cable, electrical, water, and sewer lines. Manmade drainage features also contributed to the disturbance caused by infilling. Impervious paved surfaces also composed part of the project area.

The GPR survey revealed evidence for a large amount of ground disturbance and filling across the GPR survey area, with many obvious utility lines supporting this evaluation. No anomalies interpreted as burials were identified. However, a linear anomaly was identified that may correspond with a former 19th-century road which ran through this portion of the Seminary grounds during the Civil War. The GPR survey also identified another anomaly in the southwest corner of Grid 4 in close proximity to Feature 1, which was identified during the metal detection survey and investigated with test unit excavation. Feature 1 was likely related to the former road. The anomaly in the southwest corner of Grid 4 is also likely associated with the former road and Feature 1.

The shovel test survey included the excavation of 127 shovel tests (STs) at 30-foot (ft) intervals, 3 radial STs, 7 judgmental STs which were offset to avoid buried utilities or to effectively test a portion of the project area, and 2 judgmental STs targeting an anomaly identified during the GPR survey. All together, 129 historic and 2 prehistoric artifacts were recovered from shovel testing.
Shovel testing in the portion of the project area adjacent to Trotter Road resulted in the recovery of 10 historic artifacts from 4 STs. Fifty-seven historic artifacts were recovered from 13 STs in the portion of the project area on the west side of Mission Lane. Two prehistoric and 165 historic artifacts were recovered from 18 STs in the project area on the east side of Mission Lane. Datable artifacts indicate that items were deposited at the site from the mid-19th century to the 20th century. Most of these artifacts are associated with post-Civil War occupations.

The metal detector survey resulted in the recovery of 147 artifacts from 142 metal detector locations or hits. The majority of these artifacts (96.6%) were recovered on the east side of Mission Lane, south of Trotter Road. At least 68 of the 147 artifacts recovered from metal detecting are military-related. Metal detecting led to the identification of Feature 1.

Feature 1 was an approximately 20-by-12-ft basin-shaped deposit with a maximum thickness of 0.35 ft. Two thousand two hundred eight (2,208) historic artifacts were recovered from the feature fill in 17 test units (TUs) and one judgmental ST. Feature 1 is interpreted as a roadside trash midden dating to the Civil War occupation of the Seminary by Union forces. It's contents were possibly deposited in an open drainage feature near the side of a road. A ca. 1862 map of the Seminary shows that the feature was located adjacent to a road that ran through this portion of the property. The GPR survey identified a linear anomaly directly west of the feature that appears to correlate with the location of this former road. Testing within the possible roadway and the feature showed that at least a portion of this area is underlain by dense cobbles which may provide more evidence that the anomaly and feature are related to a road. Artifacts recovered from the feature includes beer, wine, liquor, and medicine bottles (KK-TT), an ink well (JJ), ceramic sherds including one from a chamber pot (A-S), tobacco pipe fragments (BB-II), clothing-related items, and military ammunition (U-AA).
The shovel test and metal detector surveys showed that the majority of the project area has been disturbed by 20th-century construction. This is especially the case with the portion of the project area west of Mission Lane where many modern fill deposits were encountered. The extensive utility and water line trenching has disturbed the normal soil sequence in this area. The project area east of Mission Lane had not been as heavily impacted by 20th-century construction and a small area with an intact Civil War deposit (Feature 1) was identified and excavated. The remaining portion of the project area on the east side of Mission Lane did not contain archaeological deposits with information potential due to the destruction of the landscape by road and home construction and utility and drainage ditch installation.

Plan view of Feature 1.
The investigation has shown that remnants of the Civil War occupation have survived at the Seminary. Evidence of the Civil War occupation include artifacts scattered across the landscape and occasionally deposits containing evidence of the Union Army. The Virginia Theological Seminary takes the stewardship of the archaeological resources on their property seriously in all their undertakings. Because of their commitment to Alexandria's heritage, an important period in the city's history has been preserved.