

History of the 19th century Cemetery at the corner of Guinea Rd and Rt. 236

You may have noticed construction work – and some protest signs – on the southwest corner of the intersection of Guinea Road and Route 236 in the spring and summer of 2006. In the process of widening Guinea Road, the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) discovered an early 19th century cemetery at that site. As Washington Post reporter John Kelly wrote in an April 26, 2006 article:

“As I watched Mark Jacobs carefully scrape away at a patch of Fairfax County soil one afternoon this month, a question came to my mind.

What does he want done with his body after he has drawn his last breath?

He thought for a while and then said, "I want to be buried and dug up again."

That would be a fitting end for the 36-year-old archaeologist. He was in a hole six feet below the ground at Little River Turnpike and Guinea Road. The sides of the hole were terraced and ended at the bottom in a hexagon. Protruding from the dirt within that signature coffin shape was a human skeleton: rounded skull, unhinged lower jaw resting on neck bones, a xylophone of ribs, two arms folded low across the abdomen, long femurs that disappeared into the ground.

Traffic slugged along nearby, but all was very quiet just then. A tall, green privacy fence shielded us from view, and a cool calm seemed to emanate from the soil.

Mark works for the Louis Berger Group, the consulting firm charged with disinterring more than 30 bodies from the 19th-century Guinea Road cemetery before the Virginia Department of Transportation widens the intersection.

Mark switched between a trowel and a brush to clear away the dirt and used shears to snip at tree roots that embraced the skeleton. Nearby were other holes, some heartbreakingly small: the burial sites of babies. Archaeologists Zach Anderson and Paul Stanfield worked on their own skeleton. They lifted each bone from the grave, wrapped it in foil, then marked the foil with black ink: left tibia, fibula, patella .

The dirt that was trowled out of the graves was put into buckets, which were emptied atop a chicken-wire screen and sifted. Each bone fragment and coffin nail was retrieved.

"We're going at a slower pace, just to try and get everything," said Charlie Rinehart , the senior archaeologist.

The conditions of the skeletons varied. A few had clumps of hair. Others were crumbling into dust. All of the people were buried so the tops of their heads pointed west. Their sightless eyes faced east and the rising sun.

The archaeologists haven't found much in the way of personal adornment: one hairpin, one button -- two, if you count the button Mark could see peeking between the ribs of the skeleton he was working on.

No shoes, either. "If the wearers were poor, I'm sure the people who were left behind were going to take their shoes," Charlie said.

The archaeologists think the people buried at Guinea Road were poor. They think it is a slave or free black cemetery dating to at least 1851, possibly earlier.

Although the archaeologists and VDOT employees are incredibly respectful -- no one may eat, smoke or listen to the radio while working -- there is an unmistakable air of excitement at the site. A fascinating piece of Fairfax County history is being unearthed.

The locations of the bodies are meticulously recorded. Samples of coffin wood are saved to see if the tree species can be determined. Soil from the abdomen is bagged in case it sheds light on what the people ate. The skeletons are being sent to Radford University's osteology laboratory for study. They will be reinterred at a cemetery just down the Little River Turnpike.

Mark found himself pondering the thought that consumes every archaeologist: What were these long-dead people like when they were alive?

He brushed away some dirt from the skeleton. "The pelvis is too far gone to tell sex," he said. The distinctive brow ridge suggests it was a male -- a small male, but everybody was smaller then.

Only one engraved headstone has been found -- S.A. Williams, died 1851 -- a fact that puzzled Dave Mitchler, the VDOT backhoe operator who unearthed it.

"They were probably richer, or did something important in their life," Charlie said.

The graves of the others may have been marked with just a simple rock. As Charlie said, "They knew who was buried there."

As it turns out, knowledge of the Guinea Road cemetery wasn't really lost. Some people have always known about it. And one of them lives about eight miles away from where Mark scraped at the dirt."

Kelly followed up this article with a second set of interviews published April 27, 2006:

"What can the dead do for the living? And what should the living do for the dead?"

Dennis Howard Jr. has been asking himself these questions. So has Andy Williams.

The two men couldn't seem more different. Dennis is black, a tall man with the military bearing that comes from being a major in the Army Reserve and the flexibility that comes from being a District social worker.

Andy is white and a head shorter than Dennis. He works on right-of-way issues for the Virginia Department of Transportation.

They met about two years ago when Dennis said to Andy: "My ancestors are buried in the patch of ground you want to dig up and pave over."

The story of Fairfax County's Guinea Road cemetery that I've been telling the past two days could have had a horrible ending: the "surprise" unearthing of a backhoe bucket full of human bones.

That it didn't is because of Andy and Dennis.

"My family has known for years that there were graves there," said Dennis, 55. He's the great-great-grandson of Horace Gibson, who with partner Moses Parker moved from Culpeper, Va., after the Civil War and opened a blacksmith shop on Little River Turnpike. Their mothers had been slaves, their fathers probably the white men who owned the women.

A thriving community named Ilda grew up around their shop. Gibson and Parker couldn't bury their dead in white cemeteries, so they buried them in an existing graveyard that may first have been used by slaves on the sprawling Fitzhugh Plantation.

Eventually, all traces of the graveyard were lost.

In May 2004, a VDOT employee produced a document discounting earlier reports of a cemetery on the site. Andy could have sent in the backhoes. But he didn't. He called for more study -- study that led to Brian Conley, a county librarian and cemetery expert, putting him in touch with Dennis.

Dennis could have gone ballistic when he learned the bodies had to be removed. But he didn't. He realized that construction was inevitable but was adamant that the bodies be treated with dignity.

Andy, 63, estimates that VDOT has spent roughly \$300,000 to remove 33 sets of remains. "We want to make sure we do this as right and respectfully as we can," he said. (More bodies may be discovered when Guinea Road is pulled up in late fall.)

Dennis will soon publish a manuscript by his late cousin Hareem Badil-Abish, "Shades of Gray -- A Beginning: The Origin and Development of a Black Family in Fairfax, Va."

"I didn't see this as just African American history," Dennis said of the cemetery. "This is American history. This is Virginia history. This is Fairfax County history."

Why go to so much trouble to move a bunch of bones? "It is the history and tradition of civilized men to respect the dead," Dennis said.

That's what the living should do for the dead. What can the dead do for the living?

"If you don't know where you came from, you can't know where you are and where you're going," Dennis said. These men and women "laid the foundation for all that I've been able to achieve."

The remains will be reinterred in the nearby Pleasant Valley cemetery. A public memorial service Sept. 30 will also serve as a Gibson-Parker family reunion.

If Dennis could somehow talk to his ancestors, what would he say?

"I would let them know that I held the fort and did the best I could do in terms of preserving their memories and contributions."

I think they would agree. It's 1870 or 1880, and you are traveling in a horse-drawn carriage down Little River Turnpike toward Alexandria. The day is fine, and yours is the only cart on the road. And then: disaster. The iron rim of one wheel comes loose. You set the brake and hop from your seat. You are not superstitious, but you can't help but notice you have broken down next to a graveyard. It's a modest cemetery: no granite sarcophagi, no marble angels. But the fieldstones atop the mounded earth and the occasional carved headstone tell you that someone cares about it nonetheless.

The insects sing in the trees as you start walking east in search of help. Soon you detect the scent of a bellows-driven fire and hear the clang of metal on metal. A blacksmith!

Perhaps the graveyard was good luck."