

Protecting hallowed ground

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Sometimes being environmental stewards means protecting hallowed ground – such as a recent success story by the Savannah District team during a relocation of 386 burial sites at Hunter Army Airfield, Ga.

While starting military construction on two separate areas of the installation a couple of years ago, workers found traces of human bones buried several feet under ground. The new discovery required a careful and responsible management plan from the Corps of Engineers’ Environmental International and Interagency Support Management Branch (PM-H), which conducted extensive surveying, investigation and relocation of the historic grave sites.

“The PM-H branch provides three types of services – environmental restoration projects (such as sediment clean-up and erosion control), Formerly Used Defense Sites (FUDS) remediation, and environmental quality programs,” said Juana Torres-Perez, chief of PM-H. “Being environmental stewards means that we need to be responsible managers of cultural resources. In this case, we needed to relocate the grave sites to a managed, formal cemetery and out of harms way.”

The project, contracted by the Corps to New South Associates, represents the largest single investigation approached by mortuary archaeologists in the Savannah-Chatham County area. Additionally, it provided the opportunity to investigate and address the post-Civil War world of African-Americans in the Deep South, as all remains were found to be of African descent.

During the analysis, researchers found that the first cemetery was a small area formed by either an extended family or church, while the second cemetery was considerably larger, representing an informal, community burial ground. Area I dates back to the 1870s through 1880s, while Area II dates to the Reconstruction Era, 1865 – 1877. Excavators also found personal artifacts such as jewelry, marbles and figurines buried with the graves. As of yet, there has not been a formal identification of the families associated with the grave sites, but the data collected during the excavation may one day lead to an ancestral discovery.

The project concluded last year with a formal reinterment ceremony at Belmont Cemetery on Hunter AAF, marking the final resting place for the historical graves.

“The effort provided mission support, allowing construction projects to move forward without delay while also complying with Cultural Resources policies and guidelines,” said Ana Vergara, Project Manger. “The project also represents an important contribution to Savannah’s history and is a noteworthy success story of responsible cultural resource management of federally maintained properties.” 

By Tracy Robillard



Corps of Engineers Environmental Operating Principles

- 1) Strive to achieve environmental sustainability. An environment maintained in a healthy, diverse and sustainable condition is necessary to support life.**
- 2) Recognize the interdependence of life and the physical environment. Proactively consider environmental consequences of Corps programs and act accordingly in all appropriate circumstances.**
- 3) Seek balance and synergy among human development activities and natural systems by designing economic and environmental solutions that support and reinforce one another.**
- 4) Continue to accept corporate responsibility and accountability under the law for activities and decisions under our control that impact human health and welfare and the continued viability of natural systems.**
- 5) Seek ways and means to assess and mitigate cumulative impacts to the environment; bring systems approaches to the full life cycle of our processes and work.**
- 6) Build and share an integrated scientific, economic and social knowledge base that supports a greater understanding of the environment and impacts of our work.**
- 7) Respect the views of individuals and groups interested in Corps activities; listen to them actively, and learn from their perspective in the search to find innovative win-win solutions to the nation’s problems that also protect and enhance the environment.**