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Edward M. Morin

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Introduction: Archaeological and Forensic Investigations of an Abolitionist Church in New York City

Edward M. Morin

While excavating the foundations for a planned condominium hotel complex in Manhattan, construction crews discovered human remains. The construction staff subsequently ceased excavation and notified the New York City Police Department and the Medical Examiner's office. Project officials also notified the New York City Department of Buildings and the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission who requested all excavation be stopped in the vicinity of the remains. Ultimately, the Department of Buildings, the construction permitting agency, determined that all further construction activities be suspended pending the receipt and approval of an integrated work plan for the recovery, documentation and analysis of any human remains. This volume presents the results of the historical background research, archaeological investigation and forensic analysis.

Dans la ville de New York, des travailleurs de la construction ont découvert des restes humains en creusant les fondations d'un nouveau complexe hôtelier. Ils ont donc cessé les travaux et averti le New York City Police Department et le Bureau du médecin légiste. Les responsables du projet ont aussi contacté le New York City Department of Buildings et le New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission qui ont demandé l'arrêt immédiat de tous les travaux d'excavation dans le secteur de la découverte. Le Department of Buildings, l'agence responsable de l'émission des permis de construction, a décidé que toutes les prochaines activités de construction seraient suspendues en attendant la réception et l'approbation d'un plan de travail intégré pour la récupération, la documentation et l'analyse de restes humains. Ce volume présente les résultats de la recherche historique, des fouilles archéologiques, et de l'analyse médico-légale.

This volume presents the results of intensive background research, field excavations, and laboratory analyses associated with the recovery of human remains at a planned 45-story condominium/hotel complex located at 244-246 Spring Street in New York City (FIG. 1). Human remains were discovered at the project site by a construction crew while conducting foundation work on December 11, 2006. The construction staff subsequently ceased excavations and immediately notified both the New York City Police Department (NYPD) and the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) of the finds.

Christian Crowder, Ph.D., forensic anthropologist, and Jeannette Fridie, both from the OCME, visited the site. A thorough assessment of the scene could not be performed that day due to the lateness in the day and the loss of light. The area was demarcated with crime scene tape and an NYPD officer was posted at the site overnight until a proper evaluation could be performed during daylight hours. Dr. Crowder and Ms. Fridie, along with Megan Ingvaldstad, returned the next day to inspect the exposed remains (FIG. 2). It was determined that the scene was not forensically significant

since the remains were historic in nature and not associated with any recent homicide or related criminal activity. Dr. Crowder indicated that, although some of the skeletal material was partially impacted by the construction machinery, the majority of the remains along with associated decayed coffin wood appeared to be intact. Upon completion of the inspection, the skeletal remains visible on the surface were collected and transported to the OCME for storage. The find spot was then taped-off and covered with plastic sheeting.

In addition to the NYPD and the OCME, project officials also notified the New York City Department of Buildings (DOB), the construction permitting agency. The original development project did not involve any special permits or federal funds that would have triggered the Section 106 process or any of the New York City or State environmental and preservation laws requiring a Phase 1A/1B archaeological study. Since the DOB did not have an archaeologist on staff, the agency notified Amanda Sutphin, the Director of Archaeology from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC). The DOB requested that all excavation work in

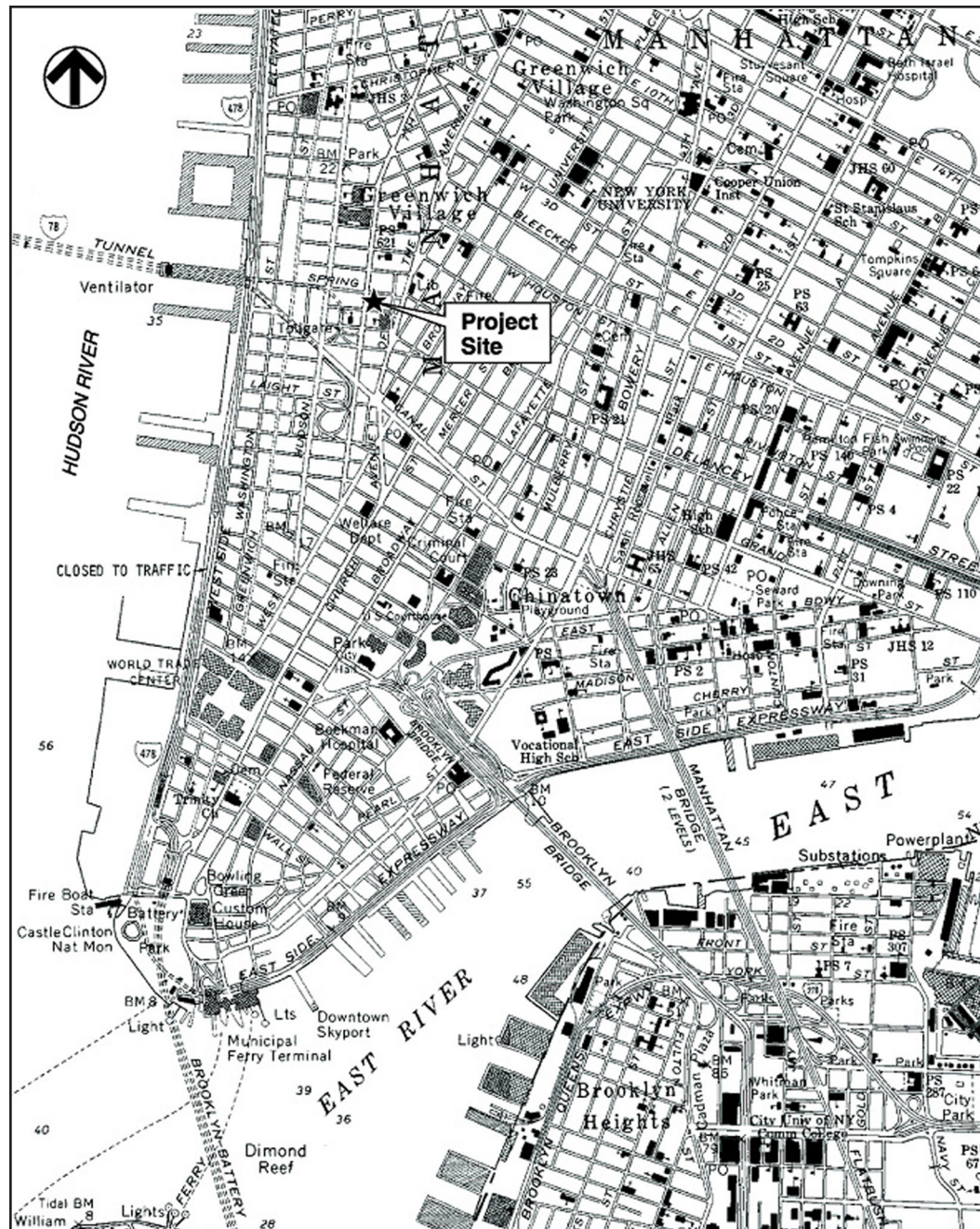


Figure 1. Project location. (USGS Map, Brooklyn and New Jersey Quadrangle. 2008 MyTopo.)

the vicinity of the remains be stopped pending further investigation by a qualified archaeologist hired by the developer.

At the request of the developer, an archaeological team from AKRF, Inc. and URS

Corporation visited the site the day after the investigation by the OCME. The team inspected the area where the remains were found and made preliminary observations regarding the nature and context of these

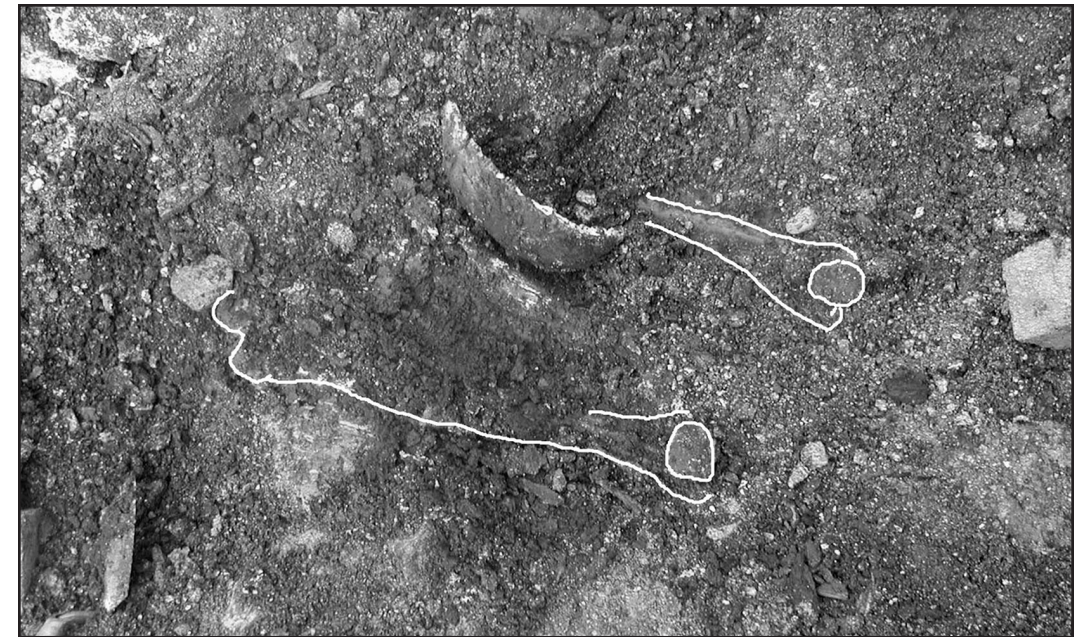


Figure 2. Inspection of the initial find spot by the New York City Medical Examiner's Office. (Photograph courtesy of URS Corporation.)

deposits. They noted that the remains were scattered over a sizable area, mixed with construction debris including broken brick and concrete, and consisted of skeletal fragments of both adults and children. The majority of the bones were fragmented, but, for the most part, the breaks did not appear fresh, suggesting that the remains had been broken prior to current construction activities.

While the archaeological team was conducting its site inspection, historians from AKRF, Inc. conducted a cursory examination of historic maps for information regarding the historical development of this location. This preliminary research indicated that the human remains appeared to be associated with the former Spring Street Presbyterian Church, which once existed within the north-central portion of the project site from circa 1810 to 1966; however, no burial ground or cemetery was illustrated at the church site on any of the maps examined.

Later that same day, the archaeological team met with the developer, the DOB, and the LPC to discuss the discovery and to determine future actions regarding required archaeological investigations of the project area. At the conclusion of the meeting, the DOB

decided, on the basis of existing information, that all further mechanized excavation within the project area be suspended pending the receipt and approval of an integrated work plan for archaeological investigations at the site and the recovery and documentation of any attendant human remains. Therefore, a stop-work order was issued until the archaeological testing and documentation was completed to the satisfaction of the DOB and the LPC.

The stop-work order ensured that these investigations became a high priority for the project developer. The archaeological investigations quickly became fast tracked and of utmost importance. An immediate benefit of this newly-acquired designation was that, for the most part, any machinery or equipment that was needed was placed at the archaeological team's disposal. Before the wrong impression is formed, the developer, other than the occasional "When are you going to be done?," "Are you done yet?," or "What can we do to help you to expedite the process?," was very supportive and committed to ensuring that the investigation was completed in a respectful and professional manner.

A detailed work plan was prepared and accepted by the DOB and the LPC within

seven days of the initial discovery. The accepted plan consisted of seven primary stages of work, including: 1) background research regarding the sequence of historical occupation of the site; 2) the identification of potential descendant populations; 3) the collection and documentation of known skeletal remains; 4) the controlled investigation of previously unexcavated or partially excavated portions of the site to verify the presence or absence of additional human remains or burials; 5) the exhumation and documentation of any intact burials that might be present; 6) the analysis and inventorying of all human remains recovered from the site (including materials previously collected by the staff of the OCME); and 7) the reburial of recovered skeletal remains in a manner to be determined in consultation with any identified descendant population and the Presbytery of New York.

Prior to the commencement of fieldwork, a construction fence was erected across the site to demarcate the archaeologically-sensitive zone to the north and to establish a safe work zone for the archaeological team. Construction work would continue in those areas determined to be archaeologically non-sensitive based on the historical background research. A temporary shelter was then erected over the area of the initial find. The shelter served two purposes; it protected any exposed remains from the elements and, most importantly, it preserved the privacy and dignity of the deceased. The shelter also shielded the skeletal remains from a "spy cam" mounted on an adjacent building overlooking the project site. The camera initially had been placed there by local opponents of the development to monitor the construction activities of the developer; now, the camera was monitoring the archaeological excavation activities to insure that the developer was complying with the archaeological work plan, a copy of which the group obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request. This community group was looking for additional information that they could use to stop the project.

Field investigations began with a more detailed examination of the initial find spot by clearing out a 15 x 15-ft. area. This work was carried out by hand, with limited use of mechanized assistance to remove construction debris from the immediate vicinity. Four other

skeletal deposits were uncovered in addition to a section of an east-west oriented brick wall. Additional controlled stripping and hand excavation to the north and south of the brick wall revealed several partially-intact, mortared stone and brick walls adjacent to the remains of what was once the church's east wall foundation. The northernmost "structure" consisted of mortared stone walls with the remnants of a brick wall dividing the structure in two rooms. Immediately adjacent to this structure were the remnants of brick walls forming a second structure, with the remains of a third structure located to its south. Human remains were found in all of the structures. Further hand clearing indicated that these structures appeared to be burial vaults. This interpretation was supported by the documentary evidence.

Oriented from south to north, the structures were designated as Burial Vaults 1 through 4 and measured 18 ft. wide by 55 ft. long (FIG. 3). Once the extent of these vaults was determined, a much-larger and more-substantial enclosure was erected over the vaults to protect potential skeletal remains and to preserve their privacy and dignity (FIG. 4); however, no good deed goes unpunished. The construction of this enclosure led to a rumor within the neighborhood that it was constructed so that the remains could be "scooped up" and disposed of more quickly, allowing the developer to get back to construction without anyone being able to monitor the excavations. This concern was brought to the attention of several members of the Professional Archaeologists of New York City (PANYC).

To dispel this rumor, arrangements were made to have Dr. Nan Rothschild, President of the organization at that time, visit the site and ascertain that the remains were being recovered in an archaeologically-appropriate and respectful manner. At the conclusion of her visit, Dr. Rothschild indicated that she was satisfied with the protocol being implemented at the site and with the treatment of the human remains. This information was then transmitted to the local neighborhood group that opposed the planned development of the site which put an end to the "scoop and dump" rumor. In addition, representatives of the Presbyterian Church descendant community

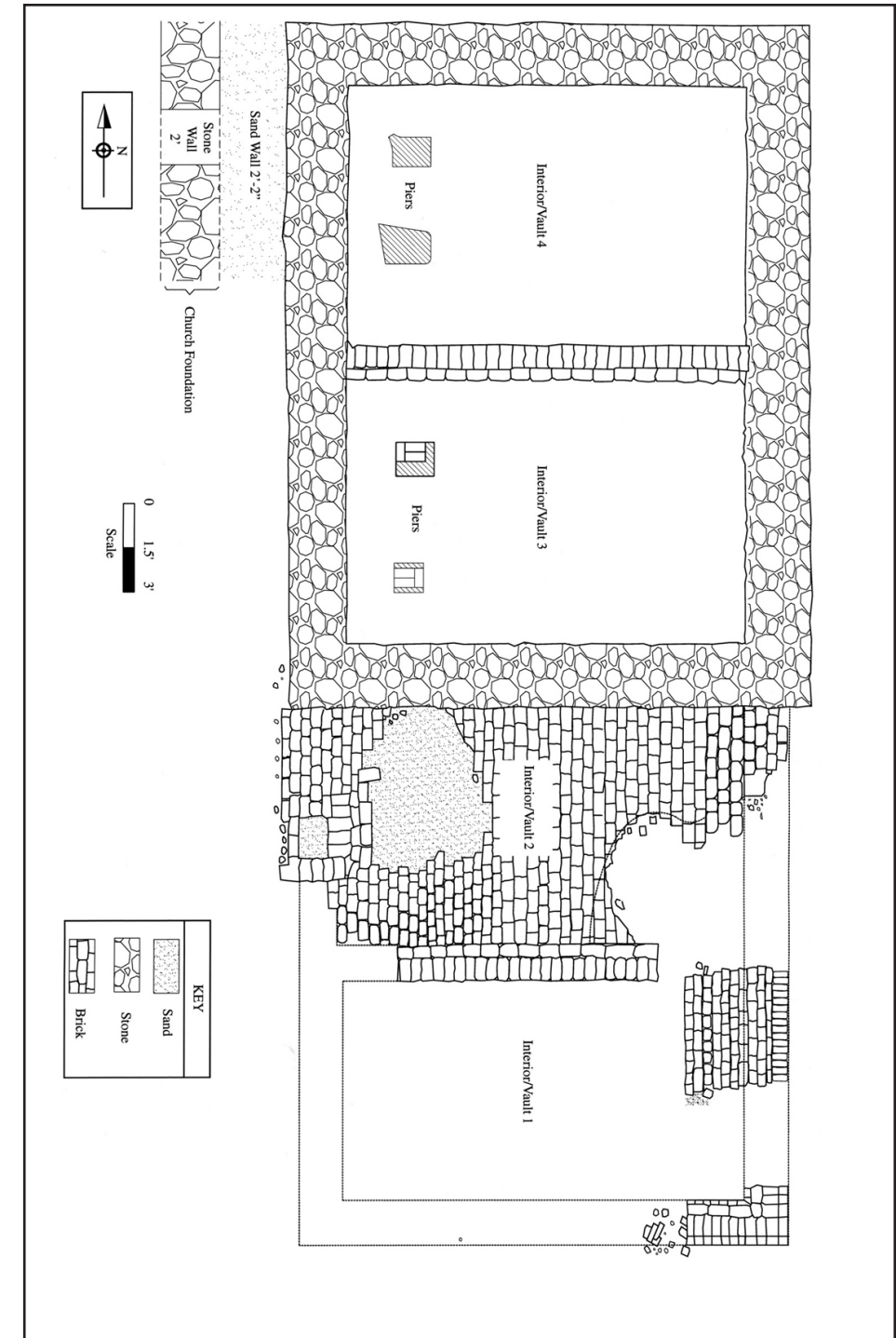


Figure 3. Plan view of the Spring Street Church burial vault structural remains. (Image courtesy of URS Corporation.)



Figure 4. View of work shelter erected over the vault area. (Photograph courtesy of URS Corporation.)

visited the site to review the work being done and to gather information that the organization could use in making decisions regarding the possible reburial of the remains within one of their existing properties. The archaeological team walked the representatives through the site, explained the status of the investigations and the number and condition of the human remains encountered, and answered their questions. The representatives were pleased with the care being taken with the remains.

Concurrent with the investigation of the vaults, stockpiled soils located in the north-central section of the site were mechanically removed at this time under the supervision of an archaeologist. These deposits were previously excavated from along the extreme north-eastern margins of the site, from depths of up to 20 ft. below grade, and consisted almost entirely of clean sands with a small amount of brick and stone building rubble. The majority of these soils were devoid of any skeletal remains or burial-related artifacts; however,

human remains were recovered from a small portion of the stockpile that was located adjacent to the initial find spot. Archaeological monitoring also was conducted during soil removal for the central, northwestern, and southern sections of the project area. This monitoring ensured that any additional deposits of human remains were recovered and allowed for the identification of any additional subterranean burial vaults located within the west yard area of the former church building. The completion of monitoring activities revealed that no additional vault were present. No other pockets of human remains, disturbed or intact, were identified.

The funerary artifacts were transported to and analyzed at the URS laboratory in Burlington, New Jersey, while bioarchaeological analyses of the skeletal remains were conducted at Utica College's Osteology Laboratory and Syracuse University. The results of these analyses are presented in the articles in this volume. As a group, the skeletal remains from

the church burial vaults are historically significant because they represent people about which little or no documentary information exists for the time period covering circa 1820 to 1846. While not of the same quantity and date range as the individuals from the African Burial Ground, there are no other New York City skeletal collections comparable to this group given its presumed collective European-American demography, association with the Presbyterian Church, and dates of burial in the early 19th century. The archaeological investigation, intensive background research, analyses of the associated funerary artifacts, and the bioarchaeological analyses of the skeletal remains have led to the rediscovery of a forgotten congregation and provide important data about the operation of early- to mid-19th-century burial vaults as well as detailed information on the health and diseases of a specific community from the circa 1820 to 1846 time period.

Acknowledgements

I would like to recognize those individuals and organizations that provided invaluable assistance in the conduct of the Spring Street Church investigation. Key among these was Mr. John Lawrence and the staff of the Bayrock/Sapir Organization LLC, as well as the management and staff of Bovis Lend Lease LMB, Inc. I would especially like to extend my thanks to those individuals with AKRF, Inc. who provided much thoughtful guidance and project coordination, and who identified, compiled, and synthesized critical background information pertaining to the historical development of the Spring Street Presbyterian Church, its congregation, and the burial vaults. Specifically, I would like to recognize AKRF Vice President Claudia Cooney, Director of Archaeology Diane Dallal, and Archaeologist Elizabeth Meade. Without the help of all these persons and organizations the investigation could not have been completed successfully.

I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of the URS contributing staff on the project. Field recovery of human remains from the Spring Street Presbyterian Church burial vaults was directed by Senior Archaeologist Douglas B. Mooney, M.A. The field crew for

the project consisted of Project Archaeologists Tony McNichols and Eileen Krall, along with Patience Freeman, Drew Oberholtzer, Scott Hood, Drew Stanzas, Matt Olsen, Ada Prieto, and Kate Carlson. All field photo documentation was performed by Messrs. Mooney, McNichols, and Oberholtzer.

The osteological analysis of all recovered human remains for the project was directed by URS Principal Physical Anthropologist Thomas A. Crist, Ph.D. (Utica College, NY). Documentation of the remains was performed by Dr. Crist, Molly H. Crist, P.T., D.P.T. (Utica College, NY), and Shannon A. Novak, Ph.D. (Syracuse University, NY). Photodocumentation of the remains was performed by Thomas A. Crist, Dana Kollmann, and Shannon Novak.

Finally, I would like to thank the contributing authors, the editors, and the reviewers for all their efforts in making this volume possible.

Edward M. Morin, M.A., RPA is a Principal Archaeologist with the URS Corporation in Burlington, New Jersey. He served as the Project Manager for the Spring Street Church investigations. His research interests include urban and industrial sites archaeology.

Edward M. Morin, RPA
Principal Archaeologist
URS Corporation
437 High Street
Burlington, NJ 08016
ed.morin@urs.com