

Boundary Determination along the Western Side of Roswell Methodist Church (Old Roswell) Cemetery

Fulton County, Georgia



New South Associates, Inc.

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Report submitted to:

Arrowhead Real Estate Partners, LLC • 350 Research Court, Suite 100 •
Norcross, Georgia 30092

Report prepared by:

New South Associates • 6150 East Ponce de Leon Avenue • Stone Mountain, Georgia 30083



Hugh B. Matternes – Principal Investigator

Hugh B. Matternes – Mortuary Archaeologist and Author



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I. BACKGROUND TO INVESTIGATION

Mr. Bryan Flint of Arrowhead Real Estate Partners, LLC approached New South Associates, Inc. to determine whether graves from the Roswell Methodist Church (Old Roswell) Cemetery extended into an undeveloped lot along the western side of the cemetery. The Roswell Methodist Church Cemetery, also known as the Mount Carmel Methodist Church Cemetery, is located on the corner on the northern side of the intersection of Woodstock Street and Alpharetta Highway (GA 120). The boundary in question is roughly one block west on Woodstock Street. A Cemetery Conditions Assessment Report cited concern that unmarked graves may extend on to grounds outside of the legal boundary, currently defined by a fence line separating the cemetery from the undeveloped lot (The Jaeger Company 2008). To address this possibility, a mortuary archaeologist, Dr. Hugh B. Matternes from New South Associates, Inc., conducted systematic investigations of the boundary on May 13, 2014 in order to archaeologically determine whether previously unrecognized graves were present to the west of the established boundary fence. Arrowhead Real Estate Partners, LLC is planning on developing the lot next to the cemetery and wishes to avoid impacting any burials, if present. This report documents the findings of this investigation.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT AREA

Development is proposed on an undeveloped lot at 110 Woodstock Street near the summit of an unnamed ridge overlooking Big (Hog Wallow) Creek in the City of Roswell, Fulton County, Georgia (Figure 1). The lot spans approximately 2.42 acres; the eastern margin forms an irregular boundary with the Roswell Methodist Church Cemetery. Graves within the cemetery were observed to abut the wire livestock fence, denoting the burial ground's legal boundary (Figure 2a). The project area consisted of a 30-foot wide corridor extending westward from the fenceline and into the undeveloped lot. The fenceline was estimated to be approximately 480 feet (146 m) long.

Roots of the Roswell Methodist Church Cemetery are deeply intertwined with early development of the City of Roswell in the 1830s. The church began as the Mount Carmel Methodist Church, with the earliest recorded grave dating to the 1840s (Roswell Historic Society 2014). There are great number of graves marked with field stones monuments, some possibly dating to use of the burial ground as early as the 1830s. The cemetery is currently maintained by the City of Roswell, where it serves as an active public burial ground. While boundary in question is close to the cemetery's older section, marked graves along the boundary date only as early as

Figure 1.
Location of the 110 Woodstock Street Project Area

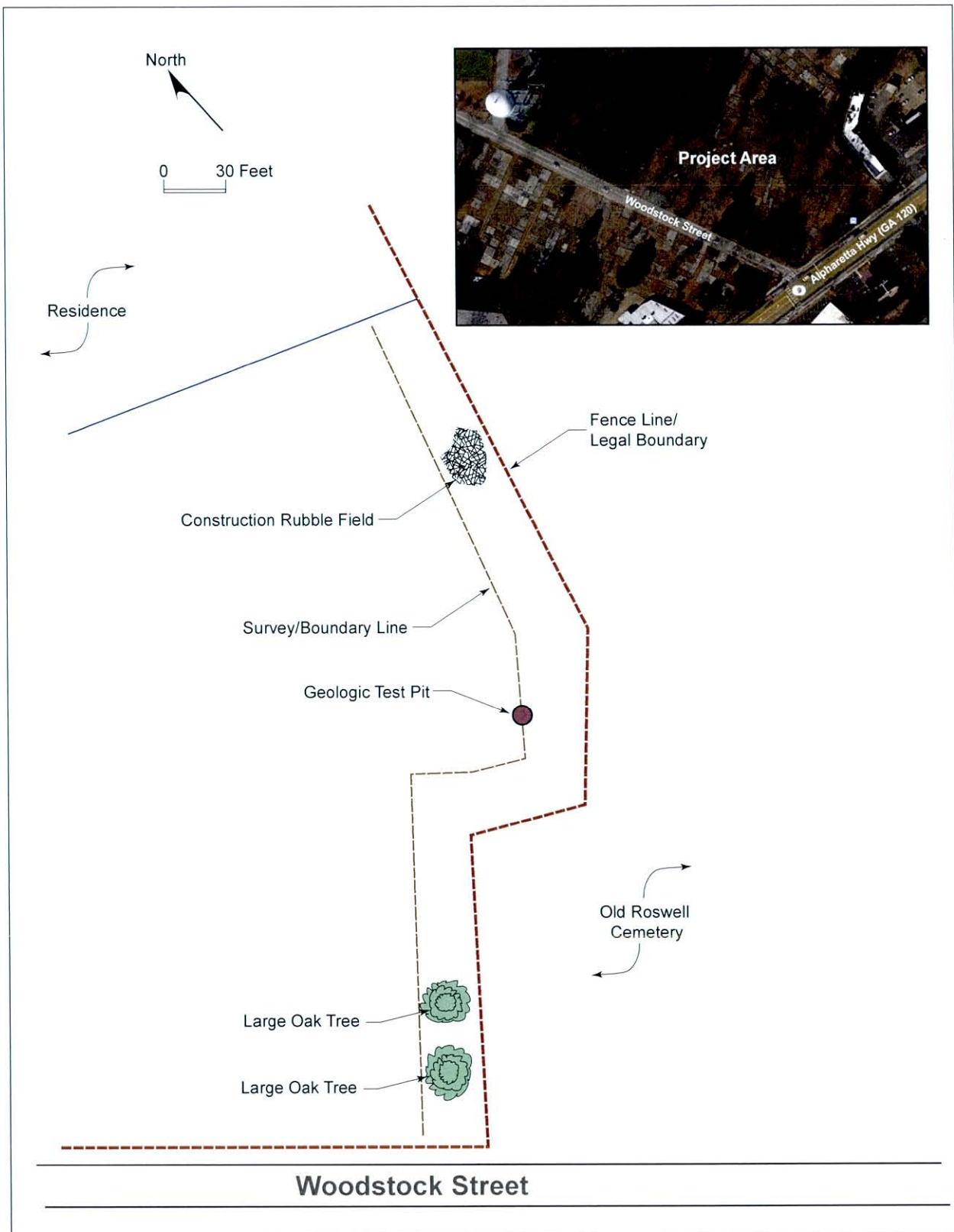
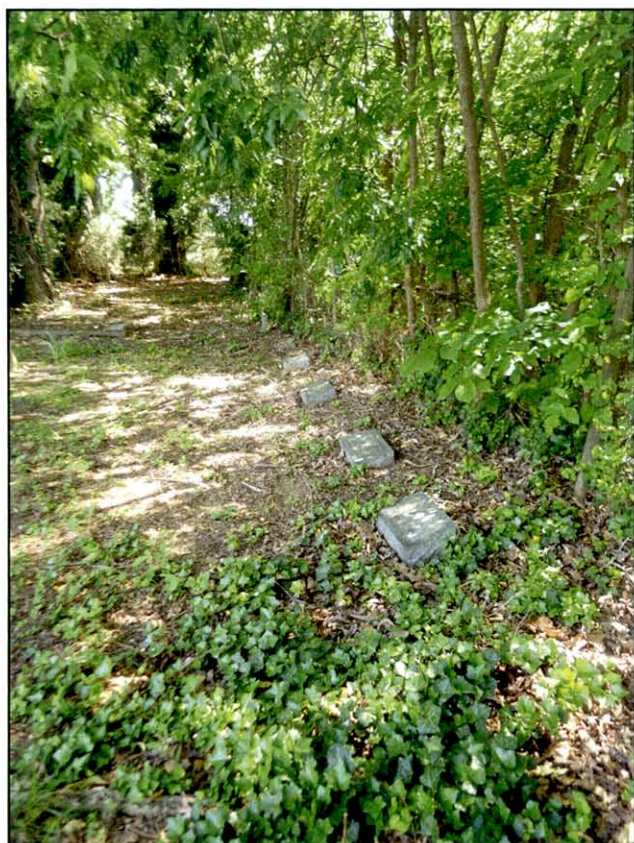


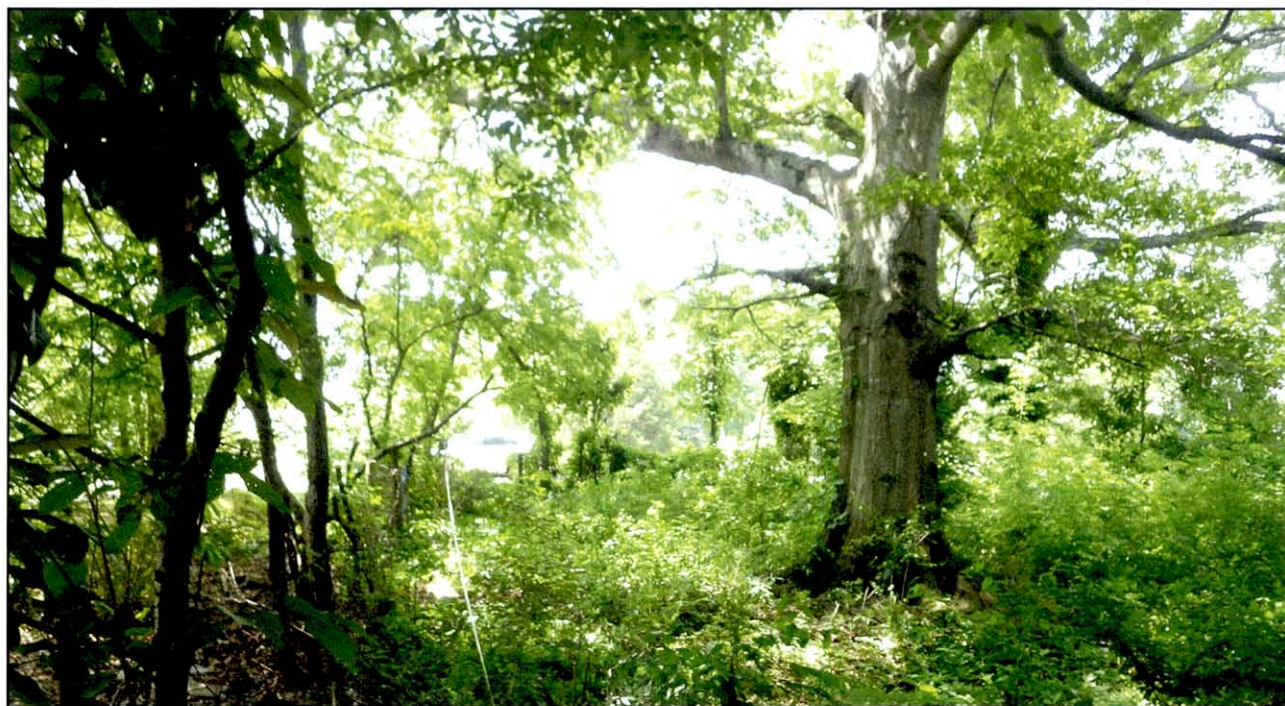
Figure 2.
General Views Around Project Area



a. Line of Markers along the Cemetery's Western Fence Line, Facing South



b. Brick, Mortar, and Cinderblock from Surface Scatter, Facing South



c. Large Oak and Vegetation in Project Area, Facing South

the 1920s. However, there are several unmarked and field stone-marked graves in this area, implying potentially earlier usage. While a legal boundary separates private and cemetery properties, it is likely that this boundary was established after the cemetery was in use.

The lot grades slightly to the northeast at a 1-2 percent slope. The lot currently lacks any structures but a driveway and mailbox along Woodstock Street suggest that a residence may have formerly been present. The eastern portion of the lot is vegetated in a mix of English ivy, poison oak and ivy, privet, and young trees, principally dogwood and oak. Three large, mature oaks are located within the southern third, near Woodstock Street (Figure 2c). There are numerous bottle dumps scattered throughout the grounds and discarded cemetery materials are lightly distributed on the lot side across the common fenceline. All of these objects appeared to be recently deposited and could not be linked to potential unmarked graves within the undeveloped lot (see Results Chapter).

Soils in the project areas were not specifically explored, but some general observations were made. USDA soil surveys revealed that the project area was entirely within the Urban land-Madison-Bethlehem Complex (Soil Survey Staff 2014). Organic surface soils were present across some of the project area, but when pioneer vegetation was swept aside, bare red clay surfaces were commonly observed. Where present, 0-1-inch thick layers of recently decayed plant matter, tending towards fine-grained dark brown loams were observed on the surface. An underlying subsoil of dense red to yellowish red clay underlay the entire project area. Very shallow (less than one inch thick) mixed organic and clay alluvial deposits were noted in the base of some shallow dry washes. In general, the project area's soils implied that the original surface soils had been removed at some point in the past.

II. METHODS

The survey of known and for potential burial deposits falls under the guidelines of Georgia Code 36-72. An underlying objective of these guidelines is to identify graves using the least destructive means possible. When circumstances permit, graves should be identified by visual examination of surface features. In many settings, however, unmarked graves are not visible on the ground surface. In accordance with Georgia Code 36-72-5, an acceptable, minimally invasive means of finding and verifying the locations of unmarked graves is through visual examination and systematic testing with a steel probe.

New South's archaeological investigations were broken into two tasks. First, all landforms within the project area were examined for surface features identifying potential grave locations. This included both surface materials and grave structural features. The second task entailed a systematic subsurface examination of areas within the project area.

TASK I - SURFACE RECONNAISSANCE

Graves placed in rural southern environments, such as the original setting for the Roswell Methodist Church Cemetery, are less clearly defined than those generated in more modern urban settings. Therefore, they are frequently more difficult to detect. From the ground surface, potential rural mortuary deposits are identified by any of the following features:

1. Human-sized cigar-shaped depressions or mounds;
2. Presence of formal stone, metal, concrete, or wooden grave markers;
3. Presence of dressed or undressed fieldstones arranged as head and/or footstones;
4. Presence of concentrations of mortuary-associated ground covers, particularly vinca, narcissus (daffodils), cedar, hemlock, crepe myrtle, gardenia, spirea, roses, lilies, and/or irises;
5. Stone, metal, wood, or floral enclosures that restrict land use for other (particularly agricultural) purposes;

6. Oval or rectangular concentrations of stone, glass, wood, metal, seashells or plastic containers, used to outline a potential grave's dimensions;
7. Low oval or rectangular piles of stones;
8. Maintained areas evidenced by removal of vegetation and unwanted debris; and/or
9. Oval or human-sized color/plant differences in mowed areas.

All grounds within and around the project area were examined for the above outlined surface feature indicators. If found within the project area, they would have been marked with pin flags for additional examination and to help establish a visible margin for the cemetery. Relevant features within the project area were recorded on a sketch map. If present, graves within the project area would have been inventoried to provide a minimum number of individuals (MNI) who could potentially be impacted by construction activities and the examination area extended out (westward) to until the margin of graves within the 110 Woodstock Street property had been visually defined. Photographs of each general site area were made to document conditions at the time of the survey.

TASK II - SUBSURFACE EXAMINATION

The second task of this investigation focused on determining if unmarked graves were present. A reference grid was superimposed over the project area and soil compaction was examined. Steel tipped probes and penetrometers were used to assess soil compaction. Penetrometers were used to provide a value (expressed in pounds per square inch) that describes degrees of soil compaction. Technically, probes and penetrometers measure soil compaction density. Clay-based soil particles exhibit a plate-like structure. Left undisturbed, they tend to form highly compacted soils. When disturbed, however, the relationship of these particles to one another shifts, enabling space to form between particles and the disturbed soils become less dense. Under ideal conditions, grave shafts constructed up to 150 years prior to survey have been detected using soil compaction (Owsley 1995). Because the contents of graves decompose over time, grave fill sinks, forming depressions. This state of flux means that soil particles in a grave are in a near constant state of motion. While clay may be present in the grave fill, this shift in particle orientation inhibits compaction until the process of decomposition is more or less complete.

Penetrometers measure the amount of soil compaction within a given test site in pounds per square inch (psi); with measurements of 100 psi indicating extremely loose soil and those at or over 350 psi being too dense to penetrate. Grave pits would have represented less compacted tests that would have contrasted against more compacted undisturbed ground matrix readings. Testing known grave sites along the western margin of the cemetery resulted in readings ranging between 250 and 300 psi. Testing non-grave spaces between known graves provided non-disturbed soil readings of 300-350 psi, emphasizing that soil compaction could define graves in the survey environment. Probe and penetrometer depths did not exceed 18 inches (about 50 centimeters) for any given test. Given that historic rural graves in Georgia tend to be deposited between four and six feet (1.2-1.8 meters) below ground surface, it was very unlikely that these probe tests would have impacted any potential underlying human or funerary remains.

One advantage to examining soil compaction was that it only minimally disturbed the ground surface and subsurface. Following a strategy outlined by Killam (2004), transects spaced two feet (61 cm) apart were superimposed on the landscape. Each transect was systematically tested at two-foot (61-cm) intervals for the presence of subsurface features. This pattern placed a probe test in every area large enough to hold a human-sized grave pit. Transects extended westward (away from the fenceline/legal boundary) until a minimum 30-foot (9-m) grave-free buffer was established. If additional unmarked graves had been encountered during the subsurface reconnaissance, probing expanded transect lengths outward until a 30-foot grave-free buffer was established. All available ground surfaces within survey transects were tested using manually inserted probes or penetrometers.

A metal tipped ceramic-steel alloy probe was inserted into the ground and soil compaction was assessed. Positive probe tests, indicative of natural or man-made features, are filled with comparatively soft soils (McLaughlin n.d.:20). These would have been marked with pink pin flags and plotted on a sketch map of the study area. These contrasted negative probe tests, where dense, more resistant to probe-penetration soils were evidence that the underlying soils had not been disturbed. Positive probes were normally deeper, relative to the overall soil structure for a given location in the study area. When a positive probe was encountered, several closer interval tests were applied to ascertain the subsurface feature's size and shape. Those approximating the dimensions of adult or subadult-sized grave shafts would have been recorded as potential gravesites. If encountered, places where graves were clearly marked would not have been probed.

III. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

An area covering no less than 17,000 square feet (0.39-ac.) in and around the project area was examined. Surface and subsurface examinations by New South Associates, Inc. were able to confirm the presence of mortuary deposits on the cemetery (eastern) side of the fenceline. The project area ground surfaces were visually examined for the presence of potential burial deposits. They were then systematically tested with steel probes to confirm these findings and to reveal other potential unmarked mortuary features, if they had been present. No surface or subsurface evidence of potential graves were found within the project area.

As noted earlier, soil conditions in the project area emphasized that much of the original ground surface has been lost at some point in the past. Without excavation, which was outside of the project's scope, it could not be determined if this loss was related to erosion, urban development, or past agricultural activities. In many places, the surface was composed of relatively dense red clay, interpreted as subsoil. Soil compaction frequently reached maximum readings (greater than 350 psi) within three or four inches of the surface.

Probing indicated the presence of a number of subsurface features that were too small to be graves. These probably represented decayed stumps, root molds, and/or rodent burrows. If subsurface features that were the appropriate dimensions to represent adult or subadult-sized graves shafts were encountered, they would have been treated as potential human interments. New South Associates recognizes that like all forms of remote sensing, probing is a probabilistic detection technique and that some false-positives (non-mortuary features that appear to be mortuary features) could have been recorded. Absolute clarification of the nature of these features would have required some form of invasive subsurface examination. In the interest of seeing poorly identified grave sites detected, New South Associates would have conservatively treated all appropriately sized subsurface anomalies and suspicious surface structures as potential graves and recorded them in the ground, on the map, and in an inventory. No features approximating the size of a human interment, however, were encountered.

Several features with potential mortuary ties were observed. As noted earlier, two distinct forms of surface debris were noted within the project area. Broken flower pots, floral wreath bases, bits of artificial flowers, and a floral marker saddle were among the mortuary-related artifacts observed on the surface in the project area. All objects were found on top of the leaf litter indicating that they were very recent deposits. Close surface and subsurface examination failed to find any evidence of corresponding grave sites. Many of these objects probably were discarded by cemetery visitors while others were likely deposited by the wind.

Particularly in the southern project area, numerous bottle dumps were noted. These consisted largely of spirit bottles (beer and wine bottles). Bottle concentrations are sometimes used to decorate or mark the location of African American and upland folk graves. Placement underneath large trees, near low points in the fence line, and the lack of corresponding subsurface deposits implied that they may represent trash disposal or drinking activity areas and not grave surface decorations.

Throughout much of the lot west of the project area, heavy machinery had been used to clear access ways through the undergrowth. One of these corresponded with an area of low (less than 200 psi) soil compaction. The surface of an area, roughly six feet (two m) in diameter, had recently been disturbed, and probing indicated this disturbance extended deeper than 18 inches (about 50 cm). The disturbance clearly post-dated those of the most recent graves in the area and exhibited soil compaction far below that of graves within the cemetery. Soil compaction implied that the soil was highly disorganized and that the disturbance was extremely recent. These features were inconsistent with a historic unmarked grave. The disturbance was interpreted as a non-mortuary feature, probably the result of recent environmental testing.

In the northern third of the project area, a concentration of broken brick, mortar, and cinderblock was encountered underneath a dense layer of English ivy (Figure 2b). One large granite fieldstone was also observed. Analogous materials were observed in the cemetery, where they were used to construct markers, coping, and plot boundaries. Judicious probing around these objects clarified that there were no corresponding subsurface features associated with them. These materials may have been discarded from maintenance in the cemetery or have been deposited as riprap for erosion control. No evidence was found that they were associated with previously unrecorded graves.

New South Associates' archaeological interpretation of the cemetery's boundaries concurred with the current legal boundary, as defined by a standing fence line. No visual or subsurface evidence was found to indicate that unmarked, unrecorded graves or the cemetery extended west into the lot at 110 Woodstock Street. A 30-foot grave-free buffer extending westward into the undeveloped lot was established, providing ample room between the cemetery and any proposed construction activities. While due caution is recommended to avoid any possibility of impacting this cemetery, the burial ground does not appear to be in any immediate threat by proposed development of the lot on 110 Woodstock Street.

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