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Artifacts and Commingled Skeletal Remains from a Well on the Medical College of Virginia Campus

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Commonwealth University

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Introduction and Background

In April 1994, archaeologists from Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Sociology and Anthropology Department assisted with the recovery of bones and artifacts from a nineteenth century well (44HE814) on the VCU Medical College of Virginia campus in Richmond. The well was discovered during construction. The unexpected discovery led to partial removal of the well and its contents. This report describes the artifact and bone assemblages from the well and discusses their significance in relation to activities associated with the Medical Department of Hampden-Sydney College - one of the oldest medical education edifices in the South.

The circumstances of this salvage project must be described to qualify the level of detail afforded the identification and analysis of the recovered artifact and bone assemblages. Normally, archaeologists carefully excavate each soil stratum by hand and in sequence, bagging and numbering the content of each layer separately so that a chronology and characterization (e.g., domestic trash, architectural renovation) of the depositional episodes can be recorded. For this project, however, what is likely the accumulation of material from a series of discards over a span of many years - construction, use, filling - is combined in a single assemblage due to the recovery process.

The well was discovered during the construction of a new building in the northeast corner of Academy Square. VCU archaeologists participated in initial site clean-up and photography. They excavated about one foot into the well fill, at which point they paused their investigation after encountering possible skin, hair, and human bone, and an odor reminiscent of formalin (Figure 1). The archaeologists were then ordered to stand outside the barricaded well area while the feature was excavated by construction employees using a backhoe. The archaeologists were given one weekend to recover artifacts and bones from the disturbed soil deposited outside the barricade.¹

¹ Dr. Daniel L. Mouer, personal communication, 2011.

Chief Archaeologist Dr. Daniel L. Mouer recalls that the feature was machine dug to a depth of 30', at which point the soil was waterlogged. He estimates that it probably extended for another ten feet. It was an unremarkable nineteenth century brick-lined well, slightly larger than normal domestic wells. The archaeologists were unable to make measured drawings of the feature due to limitations in time. Photographs show a large circular shaft lined with mortared bricks laid end to end. An unusual white clay pipe stem was found between two bricks in the well ring, but it is without parallel and does not provide a construction date.² Analysis of other materials recovered from the well dates the feature to the mid 19th century (Outlaw, this report).

[Photo redacted]

Figure 1. View of well excavation with human skulls in the foreground as a VCU archaeologist looks on. Since it is now understood that the date of the deposit predates the synthesis of formaldehyde, the odor reported from the well was due to decomposition-related volatile organic compounds. Photo courtesy of Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Richmond, Virginia.

The objectives of this analysis included identification and documentation of the bones and artifacts from the well, establishing the temporal context, and interpreting the relationship of the materials to the site's use and history as an early medical school in the city of Richmond. This report has three main sections: a review of the archival history of the school as it related to the use of the well, a description of the artifact assemblage, and documentation of the human remains, including craniometric and postcraniometric analyses. Researchers with differing areas of expertise contributed to this report.

In addition to the report, the materials from the well have been labeled and repacked to improve the collection's storage and curation status. Collection-enhancement steps included labeling with inventory identification codes to insure accurate tracking during examinations and maintenance of accurate records. The collection was re-housed in acid-free boxes with microfoam supports.

² J. Byron Sudbury, personal communication, 2012. The pipe stem is cataloged as 44HE814/022 (Appendix II: Artifact Catalog).