

# 19th-Century Depredators in Brooklyn

## The Naval Hospital Cemetery Story

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S ometime during the late 1820s or early 1830s, the Navy established a small burial ground on property they owned next to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, an important 19th-century shipyard. For about 80 years, sailors, Marines, and a smaller number of civilians who died in the nearby Brooklyn Naval Hospital or aboard Navy ships were buried there. In 1910, with little room remaining for additional burials, the cemetery was closed, and in 1926 the Navy sought to remove all remains from the cemetery and reinter them at a nearby national cemetery. At that time, Commander Norman J. Blackwood, director of the hospital, wrote:

I feel very much gratified at the successful termination of the project and feel sure that no one in the future will ever be able to say that in this transfer the Nation's dead were not properly taken care of. Certainly, nothing was left undone in a military or forensic way...<sup>1</sup>

Extensive research conducted by the Navy as part of the closure and transfer of this property, recommended by the Base Closure and Realignment Commission in 1988, ultimately disproved Commander Blackwood's statement.

In 1869, Henry P. Stiles, a noted 19th-century Brooklyn historian, described the cemetery as "a small but tasteful graveyard [that] offers a quiet resting place to those who die in the hospital."<sup>2</sup> However, other references indicate overcrowding, uncertainty on the number and location of burials, and poorly marked or unmarked graves. The poor condition of the cemetery at one point prompted the following U.S. Surgeon General statement:

This is a deplorable condition. [The cemetery] is in low damp ground.... The ground was never properly graded.<sup>3</sup>

Research suggests uncertainty among Navy officials during the 19th century regarding the number of individuals buried at the cemetery, such as Medical Inspector Delavan Bloodgood's 1881 report to the Surgeon General indicating many undocumented burials:

since... [1831] more than 1,100 [burials] have been registered and it is estimated that about 2,000 corpses have been buried.... Nearly every available spot has been occupied; indeed, it has several times occurred that in digging a new grave an old one has been encroached upon and parts of skeletons exhumed.<sup>4</sup>

Expansions to the cemetery led to many additional burials between 1882 and 1910. It seems likely that the graves for a number of these additional burials also "encroached upon" earlier, undocumented, burials. Eight years later another account suggests that uncertainties persisted:

The names of 1,800 deceased are recorded as having died on the station [Naval Station Brooklyn] or its vicinity and brought here for interment.... Only about 700 graves can however be identified, and the inscriptions on many headboards are now illegible.<sup>5</sup>

The report continues, "depredators find access for stealing flowers and on election-night purloining wooden head-boards to feed their bonfires." This issue of unmarked graves is repeated in other documents, including a complaint by Medical Director Thomas M. Potter that "many of the headstones or rather boards have rotted off."<sup>6</sup>

Several documents reference the impending need to close the Naval Hospital Cemetery and the preparations made for the disinterments. In a March 1910 letter, Dr. Edward Green, then the hospital's medical director, noted that "[m]any of the graves would be difficult to locate."<sup>7</sup> A memorandum concerning exhumation procedures stressed "the importance of measures to maintain beyond question the identity of the remains as exhumed and reencased...there must be no basis for possible criticism."<sup>8</sup>

Attempts at accuracy in tracking disinterments from the Naval Hospital Cemetery were clearly made, but due to the magnitude of the effort (up to 40 exhumations daily for two months) and the poor state of existing documentation, only 987 burials were removed for rebur-

*Excavation unit showing in cross-section the burial shaft of a grave disinterred in 1926. The gutter spike is pointing at a coffin nail.*

ial, and the identity of many was unknown or incorrect.

After the 1926 disinterment process, the semi-forested plot was cleared and graded to create a playing field. In the ensuing 50 or so years the Navy re-used the grassy space of the “former” cemetery for a variety of primarily recreational purposes although some more significant ground surface disturbances took place. The perception that the grassy area was no longer a cemetery persisted into the mid-1990s.

During the environmental review process associated with closure and transfer activities begun in 1988, and in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act, the Navy conducted a number of cultural resource investigations on the station.

Soon after preparation of an initial cultural resource survey in 1994, community questions regarding the state of the cemetery began to arise, and undocumented burials became a central issue in the closure process. The Navy’s first step was to begin piecing together the disparate primary sources available on the Naval Hospital Cemetery. That research led to the conclusions that not all burials were disinterred in 1926, that disturbed burials and fragmentary human bone may be present, and that ground-penetrating radar [GPR] may assist in determining the state of the cemetery.<sup>9</sup>

A 1997 ground-proofing effort conducted on the site in association with the GPR survey provided conclusive evidence of the presence of burials.<sup>10</sup> The limited excavations exposed filled shaft features, small quantities of fragmentary human bone, and evidence of decayed coffins, and led to the discovery of a possibly intact human skeleton buried at a shallow depth.

These findings, particularly the possibly intact skeleton, demonstrated that the documentary record concerning interments at the cemetery needed to be better understood in order to manage this resource. This led to a final study, an intensive analysis of hospital and burial registers, to collect information regarding burials at the cemetery that are not documented as being removed.<sup>11</sup>



Analysis of hundreds of pages of primary source documents at over a dozen state and national repositories revealed that no documentation exists for the removal of at least 500 burials. Research encountered discrepancies in the number of burials and disinterments that took place at the cemetery, as well as missing, incomplete, and contradictory information.

Although the record-keeping problems uncovered at the circa 1830 Naval Hospital Cemetery are not historically unique, Commander Blackwood’s initial optimism might have proven embarrassing had he observed the Navy’s research effort. He would, however, be heartened to know that “nothing was left undone” in the Navy’s recent efforts to ensure the future protection of this significant cultural resource. The Navy ultimately determined the cemetery to be a contributing component to the surrounding National Register-eligible historic district.

#### Notes

- 1 Blackwood, Norman J. October 18, 1926a. Commanding Officer, US Naval Hospital, New York. Letter to “My Dear Dunbar.” Subject: transfer of remains. RG52 Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. Correspondence 1842-1941, General Correspondence February 1885-April 1912. NH4/Personal.
- 2 Stiles, Henry R. 1884. *The Civil, Political, Professional and Ecclesiastical History and Commercial and Industrial Record of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, New York from 1683-1884*. Vols. I & II. W. W. Munsell & Co., New York.

Example of print-out from GPR conducted at the Naval Hospital Cemetery. Operator is indicating a subsurface anomaly likely caused by a burial shaft containing compact fill.

- 3 US Navy. 1994. *Cultural Resources Survey for Base Closure and Realignment Redevelopment and Reuse of Excess Property at Naval Station New York*. Prepared for Northern Division, Naval Facilities Engineering Command (NAVFACENGCOM) by Baystate Environmental Consultants, Inc.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Annual Reports. 1890 (for 1889). Report of the Chief of the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery to the Secretary of the Navy in *Hygienic and Medical Reports By Medical Officers of the US Navy*. Prepared for publication, under the direction of the Surgeon General of the Navy. Navy Department. Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. Washington, DC.
- 6 Potter, 1875. Cited in Patton, George. 1940. Brooklyn Naval Hospital, Notes of History. Ms. on file, Office of Naval History, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Washington, DC.
- 7 Green, Edward H. April 21, 1910. Medical Director of Naval Hospital New York Letter to Surgeon General US Navy. RG52 Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. General Correspondence February 1885-April 1912 Box 297 No. 119569. NARA, Washington, DC.
- 8 Stitt, E.R. June 4, 1926. Memo to Naval Hospital New York, New York. Subject: removal of hospital cemetery. RG 53 NH4-P6-6 (053). NARA, Washington, DC.
- 9 US Navy. 1997. *Archaeological Evaluation (Stage 1A Documentary Study), Former Naval Station (NAVSTA) New York, Navy Yard Annex Site Brooklyn, New York*. Prepared for Northern Division, NAVFACENGCOM by Joan H. Geismar, Ph.D.
- 10 US Navy. 1997. *Ground-Penetrating Radar Evaluation, Navy-Retained Section (former) Brooklyn*



- Navy Yard, Brooklyn, New York*. Prepared for Northern Division, NAVFACENGCOM by TAMS Consultants, Inc. and Joan H. Geismar, Ph.D.
- 11 US Navy. 1999. *State of the Research, Naval Hospital Cemetery, Historical Documentation, Naval Station Brooklyn, New York*. Prepared for Northern Division, NAVFACENGCOM by TAMS Consultants, Inc. and Joan H. Geismar, Ph.D.

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