

Gaillard Performance Hall Investigations

On February 5, 2013, construction workers discovered human remains at the Gaillard Performance Hall construction site in downtown Charleston, SC. After coordination with the County Coroner, The City of Charleston Department of Parks Capital Projects Division enlisted Brockington to assist in the design of appropriate actions to deal with these remains. Using equipment and staff from SKANSKA-Trident and its subcontractors, Brockington archaeologist Dr. Eric Poplin determined that the remains were associated with one of two graves exposed in a proposed storm drain trench on February 6. Additional construction excavations were planned in this portion of the site so a plan to determine if additional graves were present was developed and, due to heavy rains, implemented on February 13-14, 2013. Twenty-nine graves were exposed over a 20 by 12 meter area near the intersection of today's Anson and George Streets. Construction activities were then rescheduled to avoid this portion of the site until the graves could be dealt with in concert with South Carolina abandoned cemeteries statutes.



SKANSKA-Trident staff inspect graves exposed on February 13, 2013.

Working closely with the Coroner's Office and the City's Legal Department, Capital Projects and Brockington developed a program to exhume the individuals as quickly as possible to ensure the proper and respectful treatment of the buried people. Working in concert with Bob Parks (licensed funeral director with Stuhr Funeral Chapels and Crematory), Brockington archaeologists exhumed the remains of 37 individuals between February 20 and March 1, 2013. Expansion of the area excavated on February 13-14 to expose completely several graves along

the margins of the initial excavation resulted in the discovery of eight additional graves. Frequent rain hampered continuous work but focused effort and extended work days ensured that the exhumations were completed as quickly as possible.



Brockington archaeologists excavating graves at the Gaillard Performance Hall site.

Limited background research conducted by Brockington historian Charlie Philips prior to the exhumation laid out the property ownership of this portion of the City of Charleston from the 1690s through 1968, when the City of Charleston acquired the lands and built the original Gaillard Auditorium. There is no indication in any of the deeds, grants, or maps reviewed to date that a cemetery was present in this portion of Charleston. The first house was constructed here soon after 1761, immediately after the purchase of these lands by William Ellis. Ellis' house stood approximately 20 meters south of the southernmost grave. During the 1780s-1810s, the Ellis land along Anson Street was subdivided into individual residential lots which were occupied until the late 1960s. Late eighteenth and nineteenth century house foundations were encountered on the margins of the area excavated around the graves and helped to define the limits of undisturbed burials. Many artifacts associated with the residential occupations were observed in fills above the graves, although all artifacts encountered in the grave shaft fill date from the first half of the eighteenth century. These pieces of historical and archaeological information indicate that these graves may be the earliest group of individuals exhumed in the City of Charleston, with interments occurring sometime between the 1690s and the 1730s.

With all of the remains removed, construction work resumed in the area of the graves and attention turned to the identification of the people who were buried in this portion of the City. Charleston City Council deferred selection of a location for the reburial of the exhumed individuals until more detailed historical research; analysis of buttons, coins, and other artifacts associated with individual graves; and skeletal analyses can provide information about the date and origin of the people interred at the Gaillard Performance Hall site. These investigations are ongoing and will continue through the remainder of the year. Once complete, we hope to have a good sketch of one portion of the people who lived in early Charleston.