USF UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

Lost Graves, Newfound Dignity

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Oceanography student Kevin Bradley holds a backpack-mounted computer as geology grad students Koji Kiyosugi and Eric Stone use a magnetometer to determine soil properties at the cemetery.

TAMPA, Fla. (Sept. 23, 2009) -- They had names once.

They were poor. Some had family, many did not. They were immigrants and the descendents of some of Tampa's early settlers. Some lived troubled, short lives and some grew to be very old. Hundreds of them were babies.

Anthropology professor Lori Collins and grad student T.J. Strahan use a GPS system to gather coordinates along the cemetery property. "The coordinates provide a rough map of the overall site," said Collins.

The one thing they had in common was that in death, they had no other place to go. So for decades, behind a low-cinderblock wall just out of hearing distance of one of Tampa's busiest thoroughfares, they were laid to rest under a simple cast stone marker bearing not a name, but a number.

Over the years, their graves disappeared beneath a thick carpet of verdant grass or sunk into the soil under the canopy of old oak trees. The final resting place of at least 800 people and maybe as many as 2,000 is visited only by butterflies and dragonflies.

Houses and buildings sprouted around the two-acre site. Some of the records which matched numbers on the grave markers to a name burned in a shed fire. Their identities reduced to ashes, only the numbers remained.

Then over the years, dozens of stone markers were dislodged and broken, tossed aside in a pile or scattered about. Even the few ones shaped like crosses received no special respect.

Longtime residents might have known the lot as a potter's field, but just about everyone else thought it was just a vacant lot.

That was until Sept. 18, when a group of USF professors and their students took the first steps in bringing back a piece of Tampa history and restoring dignity to the hundreds – if not thousands of people – who have been buried in the old pauper's cemetery last used in the 1960s.

It is a massive task requiring some of the most advanced mapping and ground-exploration technology available, as well as students who gently search for the lost headstones by removing several inches of dirt with their bare hands. The goal is to map the site without disturbing anyone buried there.

Engineering grad student John Metz and geology grad student Mike Lucas carefully walk a ground penetrating radar across a grid at the Hillsborough County cemetery.

The project is seen by USF professors as an opportunity to incorporate a wide-range of disciplines in a community project. Archaeologists and anthropologists are joining with geophysicists and engineers in mapping the graveyard in hopes of identifying who is buried at the site off 22nd Street, just north of Hillsborough Avenue.

"These people died with just a number indicating who they were," said Lori Collins, co-director of USF's Alliance for Integrated Spatial Technologies, an interdisciplinary core facility in the College of Arts and Sciences that uses the latest technology to do archaeological work with minimal disruption to a site. "Hopefully, through our work we can bring a sense of who they were. We can restore their dignity."

Dozens of students from a variety of classes are now part of the project, eager to do field work and learn new skills and different perspectives without having to travel far from campus. No one is certain how long it will take to fully map and document the cemetery, but professors involved in the project expect the painstaking work to go on for semesters to come.

The project also has taken on a decidedly personal cause.

In the days before the group set out to start mapping the site, USF anthropology student Cailyn Arrington mentioned to her mother an exciting new class project at an old indigent cemetery.

Cailyn Arrington, an undergraduate student studying anthropology, holds a GPS wand and takes coordinates at the Hillsborough pauper cemetery. Just three days before the trip to the site, Arrignton learned that her great-grandfather was buried at marker 1164.

"She said: 'You mean the potter's field on 22nd Street? Your great-grandfather is buried there,'" Arrington recounted.

Joviana Arias had been an immigrant from Spain who came to Tampa, married and had children. After learning that his mother and siblings still in Spain had been slain in the country's civil war, Arrington said, Arias turned to drinking and soon abandoned his wife and children. He died on Oct. 30, 1962 at the age of 59 at the former Hillsborough County Hospital, which had sat due east of the pauper's cemetery.

He was buried under marker No. 1164 – a haunting figure in the family, but not completely forgotten.

Three generations later, his great granddaughter spent most of a hot, muggy day kneeling in the soft dirt and peeling back and dusting off layers of leaves and grass with her hands. With each new stone uncovered, a classmate would wash the dirt out of the engraved number hoping for a sign they were getting close.

"This is very intense," she said, as her classmates and fellow students she never met, probed around her for other stone markers, all looking for the same number.

"Archaeology Without Digging"

Collins has joined with USF assistant professor Travis Doering, an anthropologist and co-director for the Alliance for Integrated Spatial Technologies; assistant professor Erin Kimmerle, a forensic anthropologist; and Sarah Kruse, an associate professor in geology. Using technologies ranging from ground-penetrating radar to global positioning systems to a magnetometer and laser scanning, the researchers are able to explore above and below ground while disturbing as little as possible.

Collins and Doering have used their technology to explore ancient ruins in Mexico and Central America, and Kimmerle has developed identification techniques used to document genocide victims in Kosovo and Nigeria and to help train American law enforcement offices in locating clandestine graves. Kruse has explored and mapped terrain both nationally and internationally to teach her students how to use the cutting-edge technology and look for the tell-tale signs of changes in soil structure that shows where the ground has been moved.

A USF student continues digging along a line of brick headstones.

The work is painstaking, exhausting and takes hours later in the laboratory to analyze results. “It’s not like CSI at all,” Kruse remarked.

In one section of the graveyard, Kruse’s students took turns dragging the ground-penetrating radar device slowly across sections about two-feet across at a time. The radar searched for anomalies underground, which could be tree roots or coffins. It takes lab analysis of the patterns to begin to distinguish what might be underground. The magnetometer further helps by searching for metal far underground, such as old coffins or clothing snaps.

“It’s much better not to have to disturb the surface,” said Thomas Strahan, a graduate student in geology. “Which is pretty incredible when you think the ultimate goal is to see underground.”

What’s important, the professors note, is to build a bridge the natural and social sciences to complete the work but leave the graveyard as intact as possible. Digging is inherently destructive.

“Not every student gets to go to Guatemala or Mexico,” Collins said. “With this project, it’s in their backyard. Grad students get to work with undergraduate students. Professors who don’t normally get to work together will be collaborating. This becomes a real case study for students rather just expounding on a text book.”

History Lessons

The challenge for the USF students and professors isn’t limited to who is there, but how far the cemetery extends and how many people might have been buried there.

The number etched into brick headstones at the Hillsborough County cemetery correlate to numbers on a spreadsheet containing the names of the bodies buried beneath.

The county has owned the land since 1903, when it bought 125-acre farm. Collins said there is reason to believe that the county might have used it as an indigent burial site as far back as 1906 – meaning that the 800 people known to have been buried there in the 1950s and 1960s might be joined by hundreds more from earlier decades.

It is, in many ways, a very complicated puzzle. After students located several dozen grave markers, the numerical order of the graves was inconsistent – raising even more questions about the layout of the graves, whether infants were buried in a separate section or if there was any pattern at all to how people were placed.

Also unknown is whether bodies were buried on top of each other to save space as was common in Potter's fields.

After taking GPS coordinates for each of the markers, students will start linking the numbered markers back to the records which still exist and look for patterns in where the graves were placed. Sure enough, the first graves found appeared to be scattered randomly. But as students uncovered more headstones, the long, neat rows typical of cemeteries emerged.

It will take many trips back to finish the massive project depending on how far the county wants to go in restoring the site. At the very least, the search for Joviana Arias' grave will continue now that his great granddaughter's new interest in her family's history has inspired her classmates.

"Everyone has forgotten about them,' said Rebecca O'Sullivan, a graduate student in public archaeology. "We're trying to give them back their names."

The University of South Florida System is one of the nation's top 63 public research universities and one of 39 community-engaged, four-year public universities as designated by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. USF was awarded $380.4 million in research contracts and grants in FY 2008/2009. The system offers 232 degree programs at the undergraduate, graduate, specialist and doctoral levels, including the doctor of medicine. It has a $1.8 billion annual budget, an annual economic impact of $3.2 billion, and serves more than 47,000 students on institutions/campuses in Tampa, St. Petersburg, Sarasota-Manatee and Lakeland. USF is a member of the Big East Athletic Conference.

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