

Identification of Historic Burials at The Nabors Family Cemetery,
Dade County, Georgia

By

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Introduction

As part of a Request for a Permit to Disinter/Reinter Human Remains at the Nabors family cemetery in Dade County, Georgia, the Stein Construction Company contracted with the author for archaeological services in order to identify the presence of historic burials. The cemetery is located off Old Wauhatchee Pike, just below the Hamilton County Tennessee/Dade County, Georgia state line (Figure 1). A parcel of land surrounding the cemetery area is currently being cleared and graded by Stein, and will be the site of a large warehouse complex. The project area is bounded on the north by Conagra Food Services property, on the east and south by the Louisville and Nashville rail line, and on the west by Old Wauhatchee Pike/US 11.

It will be necessary to relocate the family cemetery to allow completion of the construction project. At the time of the fieldwork two gravestones were situated in a highly overgrown "island" of trees and understory. The cemetery is in a small level area that falls off sharply to the north, south, and west; immediately to the east is a bulldozed roadbed that former landowner Jack Gill stated was constructed during the 1960s. A temporary construction road is east of and adjacent to the earlier road.

Archaeological fieldwork at the Nabors cemetery occurred during June 27 and 28, 2002, and resulted in the identification of two burials associated with extant headstones/footstones and an unmarked burial that closely corresponds to a third documented interment for which no marker was present. Along with analysis of materials recovered during the testing, this finding closely matches information provided by the Sue Forrester, the Project Genealogist hired by the sponsor, as well as oral history information from family descendents and Jack Gill.

Genealogical/Oral History Background

According to the Project Genealogist, three individuals were probably buried in the Nabors' cemetery: B.F. Nabors, his wife Harriet, and their son Benjamin. They died in 1888, 1909, and 1884, respectively. According to the Genealogist, B.F. Nabors' parents died between 1860 and 1870, and they also could conceivably have been buried there a generation earlier, although there was no collective family memory for this. Mr. Gill's statement that the parents were buried in Magill Cemetery provided additional negative evidence. Thus, the possibility that an earlier generation of family burials was present in the project areas was remote at best. However, a more plausible candidate for an unmarked grave was identified: according to the Genealogist, a descendent reported that an old black man named "Bunk" did blacksmith work on the family farm. Apparently there was a log cabin a short distance from the big house when the Gill family purchased the property, although Mr. Gill said that he was always told that it was the kitchen. However, according to family tradition, a small log house (known as "Bunk's house") sat behind the big house, and that was where the black man lived. "Bunk" is reported to have died sometime between 1925 and 1931. The Project Genealogist notes that she had found black help buried with the landowner's family--but on the outside of a family cemetery

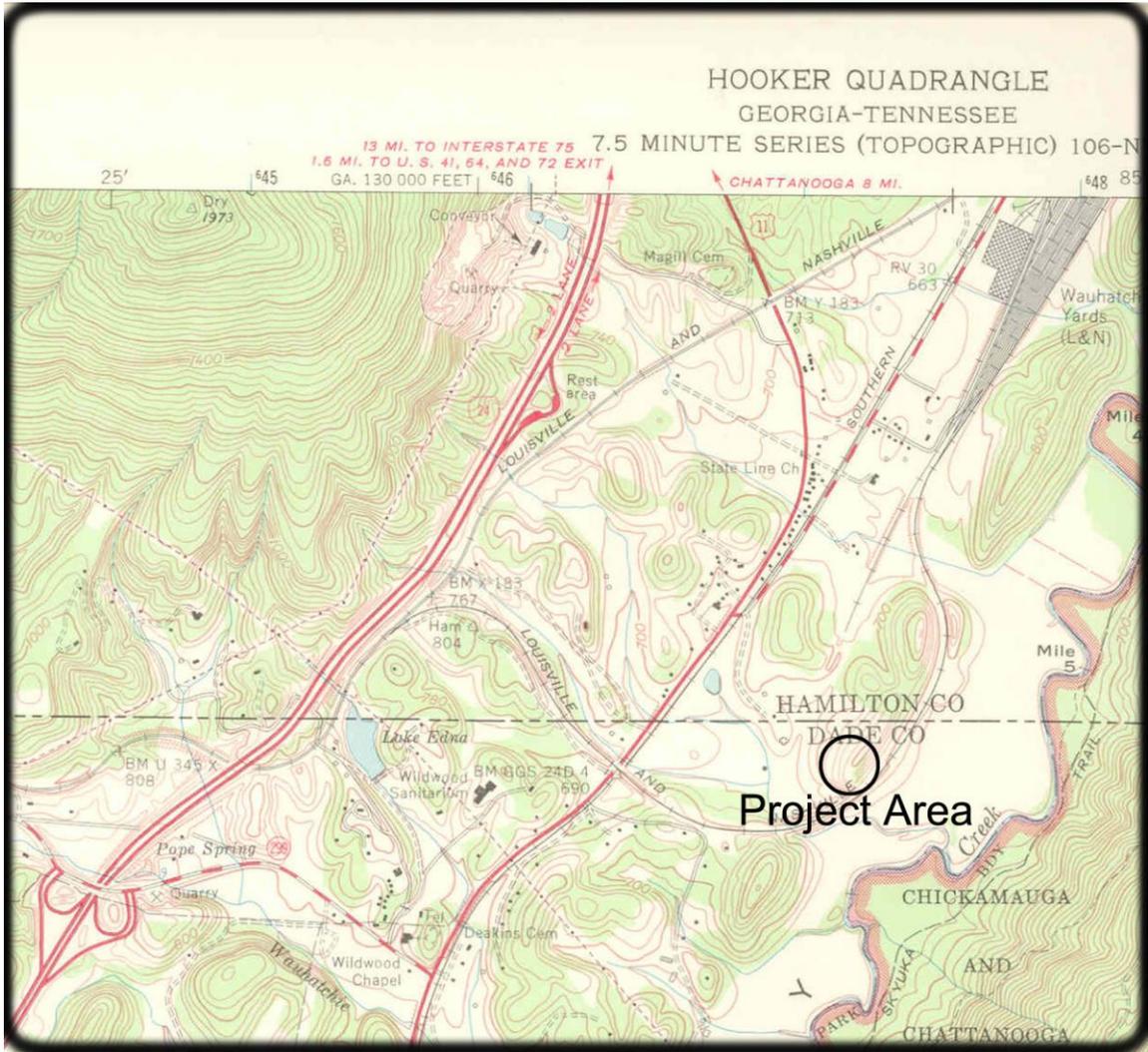


Figure 1. Project Vicinity Map. (From 1970 USGS Hooker 106 – NW Quadrangle)

fence or wall--in other family cemeteries in Dade County. Hence, "Bunk" may have been buried in the Nabors' family cemetery plot, and this burial would probably be unmarked.

Field Results

The goal of the fieldwork was to determine the presence of burials associated with the extant headstones, and to attempt to identify additional unmarked burials. The immediate area of the cemetery was first cleared by hand prior to testing with a backhoe. Mr. Gill stated that the cemetery had not been maintained for half a century. Two broken headstones, with accompanying footstones, were present. The stones were oriented west-east (headstones on the west) and the following inscriptions were recorded:

South headstone (see Figure 2):

Benj
Son of
F and Harriet
Nabors
Born {illegible; break in stone}
Died
June 5 1884

South footstone:

BN

North headstone:

B F Nabors
Bor {break in stone} Nov 6 1824
Died
Nov 10 1888

North Footstone:

BFN

Mr. Gill said that a small fence had at one time enclosed all three grave markers. He noted that both the marble headstones had both been broken when a large hickory tree fell on them; Harriet Nabors' stone was undamaged by the tree fall, but it had been stolen approximately 10 years earlier. Two large fieldstones were adjacent to the extant graves (Figure 3), and may have served as temporary markers until permanent headstones



Figure 2. Southern Headstone (Benj. Nabors, d. 1884), facing east.



Figure 3. Field Stone Found Adjacent to Headstones. 37 x 19 cm.



Figure 4. North Headstone and Footstone (B.F. Nabors, d. 1888).

were put in. Both headstones lacked any subsurface elements, and were simply resting on the surface. This may account for the slightly different orientations of the north headstone base and its companion footstone (see Figure 4). The base of the south headstone (“Benj Nabors”) measured 50 x 26 x 20 cm, with the top of the rounded headstone extending 58 cm high. The B. F. Nabors’ headstone base was larger, measuring 56 x 25 x 22, as was his more ornate headstone, which extending 92 cm above the top of the base. The centers of the headstone foundations were 2.0 m apart, while the footstone centers were 2.10 m

apart. The south footstone may have been displaced slightly by a tree that had grown onto it.

In order to maximize the chance of intersecting presumed east-west-oriented burials, three backhoe trenches were dug at right angles, that is, north-south, to the headstone-footstone orientations. Grid north was approximately 15 degrees west of magnetic north. A 30-inch toothed bucket was used, producing an 80-90 cm wide trench. An attempt was made to excavate with a smaller toothless bucket, but it was not efficient for digging in the hard clay and limestone matrix at the site. In profile, a thin "A" horizon of gray sandy modern duff and humus was present at the surface of each trench, followed by undifferentiated orange clay with small limestone fragments; trenching to the south of the graves encountered large limestone rocks in the orange clay.

Trench 1

The first of three trenches excavated at the site began at the approximate center of the presumed pit associated with the B. F. Nabors grave, and it extended 6.5 m north. It was dug in order to (1) provide evidence of the presence of this documented grave; (2) determine the stratigraphic appearance a marked grave pit in order to more easily identify any unmarked graves; and (3) search for unmarked graves. After going down 50 cm, the backhoe was replaced with hand shoveling and troweling in order to discern the grave pit in the floor of the trench and in profile. However, no pit was noted. Extending the trench deeper did not increase the visibility of the presumed burial pit, despite frequent cleaning of the trench walls and floor by hand. After a depth of 1.45 m was reached without encountering an obvious burial pit, the archaeologists began to suspect that the stones had been moved from their original locations. Finally, at 1.55 m below surface, a dark linear stain was noted that contained oxidized nails, lead coffin hardware, and partially disintegrated cloth fragments, possibly part of a coffin shroud or lining. Some of these artifacts were collected for analysis. The rectangular stain (probably disintegrated wood and cloth) measured 65 cm in width and extended across the test trench. No skeletal material was noted; apparently the stain represents the top of the coffin. Due to poor lighting, no photographs of this feature were attempted.

While extending the trench further north, the disintegrated remains of a second wooden coffin were discovered, although no grave pit was seen in profile. Encountered at the same depth as Burial 1, Burial 2 did not extend across the test trench, but rather ended 25 cm west of the eastern trench wall. The nearest edges of Burial 1 and Burial 2 were 70 cm apart. Burial 2 was 50 cm wide, indicating a smaller coffin. Assuming an east-facing interment, this represents the foot of the burial, with the head extending farther west. This feature was similar to Burial 1 in that it consisted of a dark linear stain, and additional lead coffin hardware, coffin nails, and cloth fragments were collected for analysis. Literally verifying that this was the foot of the burial, fragments of a woman's Victorian-period high-heel shoe were pulled up by the backhoe. Both right and left shoes were represented, but no bone fragments accompanied this unexpected find. Until this burial is fully excavated, the appearance of these shoes remains somewhat enigmatic. However, the presence of female-related footwear, the more diminutive size of the coffin, and the

location of this grave directly adjacent to the 1884 B.F. Nabors grave strongly suggest that this feature represents the grave of Harriet Nabors.

Following the discovery of Burial 2, Trench 1 was extended north approximately 5 meters. Once this was done, the trench profiles were carefully examined for evidence of the burial pits. Eventually a subtle difference in texture extending from the surface to the coffin remains was recognized that represented the pit fills for Burials 1 and 2. Both pit profiles were sloping, which is characteristic of hand-dug burial pits and contrasts with straight-sided backhoe pits. No color differences between these burial pits and the surrounding matrix could be discerned. Expecting a color distinction to be associated with the filled pits, the archaeologists had initially not recognized the slight textural difference between pit fill and surrounding matrix. Once this pit “signature” was noted, it was possible to examine the remaining portion of the trench profile for evidence of additional unmarked burials. None were noted.

Trench 2

A second trench was excavated 2.20 m east and a parallel to Trench 1. The north end of Trench 2 began on the same east-west line as the south end of the first trench and extended south for 5 meters; it was a meter deep. No burial pits were detected.

At this point it was decided to extend Trench 1 further south in order to verify the presence of the remaining marked burial (Benj Nabors) and to search for outlying unmarked burials. The Trench 1 extension was 8.5 m, for a total trench length of 15 m. The remaining burial pit was immediately noted in the profile, and at approximately the same depth as Burials 1 and 2, the backhoe encountered coffin remains: a dark stain, nails, and a fragment of an apparent glass faceplate were collected from the west wall of the trench. Several more faceplate fragments and a lead coffin hardware fragment were recovered when this trench was backfilled, indicating that a small part of the Burial 3 coffin had been scooped up by the backhoe. Although evidence of the burial pit was noted on the east wall of the trench, no evidence of a coffin was apparent in the wall or on the trench floor. Hence, we apparently encountered the east end of this coffin. Since Benjamin was a child when he died, his coffin would be expected to be shorter than the other two burials. However, the presence of faceplate fragments indicates that this was the head of the coffin, which would mean that this burial is facing west, not east, and that the accompanying footstone was in an incorrect location. Disinterment of this burial will be able to clear up this enigma.

No other burials were visible in the southern extension of Trench 1.

Trench 3

The final test trench was parallel to Trenches 1 and 2 and was 2.30 m west of Trench 1. It extended 11.75 meters and was 1.25 m deep. In the southernmost 3 meters of the test the backhoe encountered numerous large limestone fragments, making this location an unlikely site for hand-dug burials. At the approximate center of Trench 3, on the west wall, a 1.30 m-wide by .70 m-deep disturbance was identified. Backhoe excavation of

this pit produced negative results. No other natural or human-made disturbances were noted.

Trenches 2 and 3 and the north and south sections of Trench 1 would have been outside the small fence surrounding the three Nabors burials reported by the former landowner. These trench locations also correspond to the more or less level part of the rise that the family plot was located on. Additional unmarked graves—including the “Bunk” burial—are not likely to be present at this location.

Artifact Inventory

The following items were recovered from the three burials. They will be returned during the reinterment process.

Artifacts recovered from the Burials 1 and 2 consist of:

- 3 lead coffin handle fragments
- 5 miscellaneous oxidized iron fragments
- 6 coffin nails
- several disintegrated fragments of dark cloth
- 1 shoe nail
- 5 bone shoe lacing rings
- 25 fragments of shoe leather (representing a right and left shoe)

Burial 3 items consist of:

- 15 fragments of glass
- 1 lead coffin escutcheon
- 2 coffin nails