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Now free, the work begins in earnest

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The site was ablaze with the light of 1,800 luminaria in memory of the freedmen who are buried there. Now, with the rededication of the Freedmen's Cemetery, the real work can begin.

On Tuesday, archaeologists came to the Freedmen's Cemetery site to oversee the removal of asphalt. "We are there to make certain that no graves are disturbed and that we mark sites where historic soil exists," said Pam Cressey, City Archaeologist in Alexandria. "This will help us to provide a road map for the design of the Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial Park."

The site encompasses 1.5 acres, bounded on the north by Church Street, the east by South Columbus Street if it were extended, the west by Washington Street and the south by the Capital Beltway. "Until mid-April, pieces of the site were privately owned. Now, with funds from the city's mitigation settlement with the federal government over construction of the new Woodrow Wilson Bridge, the city owns all of the property that is still available.

"We know that some graves were lost to the Beltway and some to Washington Street and Church Street," Cressey said. "We are hopeful that we may find fence posts marking the eastern boundary. At a minimum, we expect to find graves and walkways and get a clearer picture of just how the cemetery was laid out."

A designed plan

This is important because one of the principles that will guide the design of any memorial is not to disturb any graves and to retain the quality of a cemetery. "We don't want to construct anything on top of any grave and want to build a memorial that is in keeping with that and with the historic character of the George Washington Memorial Parkway and with the time when the cemetery was in



Alexandria Times Photos/Regan Kirellis

Tara Guiliano, an experienced archeologist contracted by the city, is carefully searching for evidence of grave shafts. Using a pointed trowel, she is scraping and spreading the top layers of soil that hadn't been removed by the back hoe.

use," Cressey said.

The foundation slabs for the gas station and the office building will remain. "If we try to remove them, we may disturb graves that are under them," Cressey said. "Because of their size, they make excellent places to construct monuments or to put gathering places where people can come."

The slabs are on what was a knoll overlooking Hunting Creek. "It's no more than a trickle now but it once was a real creek," Cressey said.

For free people

Freedmen's Cemetery was a burial site for free people of color who were living in Alexandria from 1864 to 1869. In 1869, the federal government abandoned the ceme-

tery. In the 1950s, the gas station was built and, subsequent to that, the office building. In the 1990s, archaeologists discovered the remains of the cemetery and Friends of Freedmen's Cemetery was born to advocate for its reclamation. The city got \$5.5 million from the federal government for that purpose.

Once the archaeological work is complete, there will be a design competition. In 2009, the city will select a final design and engineering work will begin. The Freedmen's Cemetery Memorial Park will open in 2010.

This summer, Cressey and her staff will conduct tours of the site one Saturday of each month. The first tour will be held on June 2, at 2 p.m.